

# FORUM

Submitted 01-31-2021. Approved 09-20-2021

Evaluated through double-blind review process. Guest Editors: Adriana Vinholi Rampazo, Luiz Alex Silva Saraiva, Eloisio Moulin de Souza, Jo Brewis and Saoirse Catlin O'Shea

Translated version | DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0034-759020220404x>

## BDSM: BODIES AND POWER GAMES

*BDSM: Corpos e jogos de poder*

*BDSM: Cuerpos y juegos de poder*

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze how the power relations that govern bodies and conduct among erotic BDSM practitioners are configured. It adopts a Foucauldian perspective in that it seeks to link its analysis of fetishistic practices to Foucault's theories of power relations. Methodologically, field observation and interviews were carried out and a field diary was kept. The analysis of the research corpus was based on Foucault's enunciative analysis, and it shows a set of statements, practices and rules of conduct that connect to a dense web of power relations between practicing subjects. By way of conclusion, their degree of rupture with and reproduction of the hegemonic sexual matrix is discussed. Finally, we emphasize the importance of Organizational Studies taking on further research into the multiplicity of dissident sexualities, in their process of struggle and resistance.

**Keywords:** BDSM, bodies, power, Organizational Studies, Foucauldian discourse analysis.

### RESUMO

*Este trabalho tem por objetivo analisar como se configuram as relações de poder que regem corpos e condutas entre praticantes do BDSM erótico. Adota uma perspectiva foucaultiana, buscando ancorar a análise das práticas fetichistas sob o fulcro dos jogos e relações de poder. Metodologicamente, foram realizadas observações, entrevistas e diário de campo. A análise do corpus de pesquisa baseou-se na análise enunciativa foucaultiana, evidenciando o rol de enunciados, práticas e regras de conduta que se articulam a uma densa trama de relações de poder entre os sujeitos praticantes. À guisa de conclusão, problematiza-se o grau de ruptura e reprodução da matriz sexual hegemônica vivenciado pelos praticantes. Além disso, destaca-se a importância para os Estudos Organizacionais de abarcar estudos sobre a multiplicidade das sexualidades dissidentes, em seu processo de luta e resistência.*

**Palavras-chaves:** BDSM, corpos, poder, Estudos Organizacionais, análise do discurso foucaultiana.

### RESUMEN

*Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar cómo se configuran las relaciones de poder que rigen los cuerpos y comportamientos entre los practicantes del BDSM erótico. Adopta una perspectiva foucaultiana, buscando anclar el análisis de las prácticas fetichistas bajo el fulcro de los juegos y las relaciones de poder. Metodológicamente, se realizaron observaciones, entrevistas y un diario de campo. El análisis del corpus de investigación se basó en el análisis enunciativo foucaultiano, mostrando un listado de enunciados, prácticas y reglas de conducta que se articulan en una densa red de relaciones de poder entre sujetos practicantes. A modo de conclusión, se discute el grado de ruptura y reproducción de la matriz sexual hegemónica que experimentan los practicantes. Además, destaca la importancia de que los Estudios Organizacionales abarquen estudios sobre la multiplicidad de sexualidades disidentes, en su proceso de lucha y resistencia.*

**Palabras clave:** BDSM, cuerpos, poder, Estudios Organizacionales, análisis del discurso foucaultiana.

## INTRODUCTION

In the field of Applied Social Sciences, particularly in Organizational Studies, the topic of sexuality is often addressed from the perspective of relations of discrimination and harassment in the workplace, as shown in the works of Souza and Pereira (2013) and of Pompeu and Souza (2018). Such perspectives are valuable and necessary in drawing attention to certain oppressive practices which may exist in organizational environments. As such, it is evident that there is plenty of opportunities for further exploration of the topic of sexuality.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the power relations that govern bodies and behaviors are configured in the context of erotic BDSM as practiced in the city of Belo Horizonte. The acronym BDSM should be read in pairs, which may be interpreted as follows: (BD) Bondage and Discipline; (DS) Domination and Submission; (SM) Sadism and Masochism (Silva, 2018).

It is worth noting that erotic BDSM will be understood herein as a set of principles and practices within the contexts of sadomasochism and fetishism. Although not necessarily sexual in nature, BDSM practices are commonly associated with eroticization and the attainment of pleasure through the use of accessories and consensual engagement in erotic role-playing. BDSM is not a solitary endeavor, but a practice which requires social spaces and individuals properly initiated in the set of rules and behaviors that sustain it (Simula, 2019). According to Silva, Paiva and Moura (2013), adherents of such practices comprise a community, in which they identify with and share similar sexual preferences and attitudes towards the world. This community interacts in private spaces with access restricted to members, who exchange, in addition to pleasures, information and techniques on how to improve and make their practices safer (Weiss, 2011).

By analyzing the set of statements, conduct and experiences of the individuals who occupy these spaces, this research seeks to contribute to the study of new loci at the core of Organizational Studies, where the unmistakable interface of sexuality and organizations might be made evident. Simultaneously, by questioning the power relations present in such spaces, we seek to contribute to the discussion of practices related to the rupture with the hegemonic matrix of sexuality, its actions on the bodies that it regulates, and their actions of resistance.

## BDSM AND POWER RELATIONS

According to Simula (2019), in recent years, there has been a proliferation of references to BDSM in the media, accompanied by a growing interest in the subject on the part of national (Barp, 2019; Grunvald, 2021; Nunes & Pereira, 2017; Silva, 2018) and international academia (Fanghanel, 2020; Lawson & Langdridge, 2020; Thomas, 2020). Therefore, in relation to the historical trajectory of BDSM, rather than investigating any alleged origin, we will shift our focus to identifying a variety of trends in studies on the subject.

Since the 18th century, a process of medicalization of desire can be observed, where studies conducted during this period would identify BDSM primarily as "abnormal and deviant", and

would seek to “explain sadomasochistic etymology and establish ‘cures’” (Simula, 2019, p. 4). Only from the 1940s onwards, the inclusion of BDSM practices in the catalogs of human sexual behavior began to replace the former pathologizing perspective with a view to considering BDSM a personal interest and a lifestyle (Simula, 2019). In the 1980s, Simula (2019) identifies a shift in studies of the *leather movement* (or gay BDSM) towards the inclusion of heterosexual participants. In turn, during the 1990s, studies began to consider the social collective, and to explore the organization of BDSM practicing subcultures and communities. Our study is linked to this last trend of work, in line with research by Weiss (2011), Facchini (2013), Silva (2018) as well as Lawson and Langdridge (2020), among others.

More than just physical stimuli, BDSM relations include situations of domination and submission in consensual contexts, practiced by adults and governed by a set of rules related to sanity, safety and consent, represented by the acronym "SSC" (Sane, Safe, Consensual) (Facchini, 2013; Silva, 2018). As the possibilities for practicing BDSM are wide-ranging, anything from light erotic games to intense participation and engagement in the SM environment – which can involve presence in demonstrations and events (Simula, 2019) – may be included under the term.

In these relations, erotic scripts are negotiated between two main roles: Top / Sadistic / Dominant and bottom / masochistic / submissive (Freitas, 2010), commonly styled with a capitalized word for dominants and a non-capitalized word for submissives, in a clear allusion to their engagement in power dynamics. A third role that can also be inhabited is that of the Switcher, an individual who moves freely between roles depending on the partner, the situation or preference (Simula, 2019). While the adjective "sadistic" emphasizes aspects related to physical stimulation and testing the limits of the body, the term "dominator" refers to the psychological character of relationships, the exercise of control over the other, psychological torture, as well as deliberate and consented humiliation (Freitas, 2010). In the words of Foucault (2004),

I think that S&M is much more than that; it's the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously. The idea that S&M is related to a deep violence, that S&M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. (pp. 263-264)

According to Foucault, the notion that practitioners are aggressive toward each other would be wrong, since, from his perspective, they create new experiences using the most unusual objects to stimulate any part of the body in the most unusual situations in order to produce pleasure (Foucault, 2004a). In short, the aim is to eroticize bodies by shifting the idea of genital pleasure to a more diffuse set of pleasures, capable of assigning new meanings to bodies, sensations and objects.

Although references to physical pain are abundant in discussions related to BDSM practices, Freitas (2010) argues that “what unites the letters and gives meaning to the practices are the power relations” (p. 4). Foucault (2004a) already pointed in the same direction when asserting that the game proposed by S/M

(...) is very interesting as a source of bodily pleasure. But I wouldn't say that it is a reproduction, inside the erotic relationship, of the structures of power. It is an acting-out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure. (p. 271).

In this respect, it is opportune to succinctly revisit Foucault's concept of power relations. The primary point is that there is no predominant, single theory about power in Foucault, and therefore the most sensible step forward is to allude to a Foucauldian analysis of power, because, for the thinker, what matters is the uncovering of the mechanisms, devices and effects that evolve from the exercise of power (Foucault, 1998). Another fundamental point is that, in Foucault, power has a relational character, functioning in the shape of a network or mutual entanglement. In other words, according to Foucault, power is a general matrix of force relations in a society, at a specific time. Power relations are deeply rooted in the nexus of the social network, where power-plays substantiate and become evident in the organizational apparatus, in the production of knowledge, in the formulation of laws and in social hegemonies (Alcadipani, 2008).

Another fundamental point concerns the negative and positive dimensions of power, which can be understood based on the meanings of their effectiveness, such as repression versus education or, still, punitive versus productive. Thus, insofar as power not only represses but also impresses reality, the individual represents one of the most important consequences of the exercise of power, as they constitute themselves as a subject within the arena of power relations. However, it is worth noting that for Foucault there is no power without resistance:

If there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience. [...] So resistance comes first and resistance remains superior to all forces of the process, power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that resistance is the main word, the key word, in this dynamic. (Foucault, 2004b, pp. 9-10).

In summary, Foucault considers that, historically, individuals constitute themselves based on power relations, regimes of truth, practices of the self and discourse which supports these relations, intimately linked to the power and knowledge arrangements of their own time (Foucault, 1998, p. XIX).

## **BODIES, FREEDOM AND DISSIDENT SEXUALITIES**

According to Foucault (2006), during the 1960s we began to discover how sexuality, among a number of other topics that were previously considered marginal, occupies a central place in the political domain. Foucault (2006) asserts that “power does not operate in a single place, but in multiple places: family life, sex life, the way in which mentally ill people are treated, the exclusion of homosexuals, the relationships between men and women [...] all these relations are political relations” (p. 262). Thereby, Foucault considers sexuality to be pervaded with power, through

which relationships between individuals are part of the social domain and evidence a political investment of bodies. Furthermore, Foucault sees in sexuality a way of creating new modes of existence, through the work that subjects carry out on themselves. In the words of Foucault:

When analyzing the experience of sexuality [...] I became increasingly aware that, in all societies, there are other types of techniques that allow individuals to carry out a certain number of operations on their bodies, on their souls, about their own thinking, about their own conduct, and that in such a way as to transform themselves [...]. Let's call these types of techniques of the self or technologies of the self. (Foucault, 1993, p. 207).

In her seminal text, *“Thinking sex”*, Rubin (1984) starts from a historical review of interventions in sexuality, stating that “the realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behavior, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuver, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. But there are also historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated” (Rubin, 1984, p. 143).

It is important to reflect on the exclusions that befall social groups and bodies that are out of alignment with certain pre-established social standards, such as: male, white, heteronormative, youthful, slim, non-disabled and "Western" (Souza & Pereira, 2013). This observation is especially pertinent to groups representing “dissident sexualities”, a term adopted by Rubin (1984) meaning sexualities that exist on the fringe, outside standards considered socially legitimate and acceptable: The “non-reproductive, homosexual, extramarital, outdoor, intergenerational, pornographic, sadomasochistic sexualities” (Freitas, 2011, p. 2). In other words, sexualities which differ from the binary heteronormative model that divides men and women, organizing and controlling social life, equate sex with reproduction, and institutionalize heterosexuality as a compulsory lifestyle (Souza & Carrieri, 2010).

It is worth pointing out that the device of sexuality, according to Foucault (2011), is constituted by mechanisms of power which not only interrogate sex about the truth of its pleasures and the truth about the individual, but which also inscribed in bodies the sexuality that is revealed, diagnosed and normalized by discourses of psychiatry and medicine, thus multiplying existing sexualities and labeling “perversions”. In other words, the hunt for peripheral sexualities by producing truths about sex in scientific discourse, has intensified the effects that these mechanisms of power have on sexual bodies. As such, separation, moral classification and spatial organization are instrument-effects of this new power device operating on sexuality, and are part of the dynamics expressed in Foucauldian power-resistance theory.

As observed by Weiss (2011), the BDSM scene is formed by a community of subjects that share desires, pleasures and techniques, maintaining an economy based on the purchase of props, gadgets and admission to themed events. In other words, it provides a space in which not

only dissident sexuality is acted out, but also a whole economy of bodies and sex is supported, thus enabling its analysis from the perspective of Organizational Studies. A set of “erogenous organizations” (Pereira, 2016) emerge, spaces whose organizational aspects are directly connected to the phenomenon of sexuality. Under the broad spectrum of this concept, a plethora of spaces and experiences involving sexuality may be grouped, including brothels, motels, swing clubs, gay saunas, erotic film producers, porno theaters, strip clubs, massage parlors and spaces dedicated to the practice of BDSM.

Thus, such spaces can be understood as “concrete-symbolic appendages of our society, whose reserved place on the fringe is accompanied by a set of possibilities of resignification or rupture that allow the subjects who populate them to transform, create or recreate their ways of life” (Pereira, 2016, p. 16), and whose places can be clearly observed in BDSM practice spaces. Such a view is linked to the notion of freedom present in the works of Foucault, since his thought, according to authors such as Orellana (2008), may be considered a “philosophy of freedom”, in which freedom is not opposite to power. From this perspective, power can only exist where there is freedom, since, according to Foucault, power is a mode of action carried out upon the action of another. Therefore, it is necessary for the other to be free to act, as otherwise it would not be possible to think of a relationship of power, but one of violence, domination or repression (Foucault, 1998).

My role - and that is too emphatic a word - is to show people that they are much freer than they feel; that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people - that's the role of an intellectual. (Foucault, 2004b, p. 52).

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In this study, we adopted a qualitative research approach supported by critical theory, primarily due to its potential for questioning hegemonic science. As Gamson (2006) points out, it is crucial to maintain awareness of the political use of positivist sciences against the interests of individuals who declare themselves as belonging to sexual and gender minorities. Therefore, adherence to the qualitative research model herein represents both a political and an academic choice, given the possibility of approaching (previously considered) marginal themes.

Employing a qualitative research model also means unifying, under the umbrella of the term, a set of research practices which enable the proposed methodological coupling, and facilitate approaching a theme that is both complex and opportune as it pertains to Organizational Studies. For this study, we highlight non-participant observation, use of a field diary and semi-structured interviews as a means to collect information and build the research *corpus*.

Non-participant observation involved the recording of observations within the researched group, by researchers who were not part of the group prior to the research, and were not familiar

with the BDSM universe. During a period of 10 months in the field, observations were carried out in 12 different events that took place within the BDSM community of Belo Horizonte.

In turn, a field diary was kept, in which entries were made after attending each of the 12 events, and following each interview. During the events, our intention was to observe the spaces, the dynamics between participants, their rules of conduct and how they behaved in their respective positions and relations of power. Contact was made with the organizer(s) prior to each event, in order to present the research and request access to community spaces, obtaining positive responses from everyone involved.

A series of semi-structured interviews were held and audio recordings of spoken reports of BDSM practitioners were made. A total of 7 interview sessions with 9 practitioners (two were held with pairs) were recorded, resulting in approximately 16 hours of audio and 173 pages of transcript. A total of 37 questions were prepared in a semi-structured script, which guided the approach to discussing aspects of the subjects' paths of discovery, insertion and interaction with the BDSM environment.

The selection criteria for the interviewed subjects considered the roles they occupied in the BDSM environment and their availability for interview participation. Guarantee of anonymity and security in obtaining the subjects' statements was transmitted to them through the presentation and signing of a "Free and Informed Consent" form, concurrent with the observation of ethical parameters for Human and Social Sciences, as established by resolution 510 of the National Health Council, of 4/7/2016.

Exhibit 1 below shows the demographic profiles of respondents, along with their chosen names/nicknames as used throughout the research:

**Exhibit 1.** Demographic data of respondents

Identification	BDSM role	Gender <sup>1</sup>	Color <sup>2</sup>	Sexual orientation	Social class <sup>3</sup>
Carlos	Podolatry	Male	White	Heterosexual	Middle
Ariel	Dominator	Fluid <sup>4</sup>	White	Pansexual	Middle
Baboshka	submissive	Female	White	Heterosexual	Middle
Mr. Green	Dominator	Male	Black	Heterosexual	Middle
Jhuh Sjofn	Dominator	Female	White	Heterosexual	Middle
Iggdrasil de Jhuh	submissive	Male	Black	Heterosexual	Middle
Ares	Switcher	Male	White	Heterosexual	Middle
Natasha	Switcher	Female	White	Pansexual	Middle
Dom L	Dominator	Male	White	Heterosexual	Middle

1: Perceived.

2: Perceived

3: Perceived.

4: Switches between male and female gender expressions.

The method of analysis proposed for this study is based on some aspects and elements of both the archeology and the genealogy of Foucault (1998, 2008), being tentatively developed in order to enable an analytical construct focused on the appreciation of power relations, statements, subject positions and roles occupied by BDSM practitioners. This approach is not unprecedented, considering that authors such as Araújo (2008) argue that the genealogical approach does not replace the archaeological approach, but that on the contrary, both are directly articulated in the works of Foucault.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the analysis of statements goes beyond formal or grammatical analysis, linking itself to the examination of the relationships between discourses, statements and the production of effects of truth in a given context. According to Foucault (1998), each society sustains certain regimes of truth, evoked in order to differentiate discourses held as true from those disqualified as false, giving the former their specific power effects.

The affirmation that the earth is round or that species evolve does not constitute the same statement before and after Copernicus, before and after Darwin; it is not, for such simple formulations, that the meaning of the words have changed; what has changed was the relation of these affirmations to other propositions, their conditions of use and reinvestment, the field of experience, of possible verifications, of problems to be resolved, to which they can be referred. (Foucault, 2008, p. 116).

Thus, the statement represents a rare resource, which appears to be a useful and desirable asset for dispute, “[...] that has its own rules of appearance, but also its conditions of appropriation and operation; an asset that consequently, from the moment of its appearance [...] poses the question of power; an asset that is, by nature, the object of a struggle, a political struggle” (Foucault, 2008, pp. 136-137). For this reason, Foucault emphasizes the importance of regimes of appropriation and position of the subject. In other words, not everyone is free to state anything, anywhere, as “[...] none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements, or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so” (Foucault, 1996, p. 10).

Furthermore, it is from certain foundations of knowledge that some subjects assume a position to speak about the objects that populate their discourse. Such foundations can refer, for example, to the discourse of the sciences; for Foucault (2008), we can name a system of dispersion and regularities, which articulates certain sets of statements, as a discursive formation, “thus avoiding words that are already overlaid with conditions and consequences, and in any case inadequate to the task of designating such a dispersion, such as 'science', or 'ideology', 'theory', or 'domain of objectivity’” (Foucault, 2008, p. 44).

Based on the concepts presented, the enunciative analysis will be structured in three principles, presented separately herein for methodological purposes only, namely: 1 - the discourses and foundations of knowledge which affect BDSM practitioner-subjects and the emerging counter-discourses; 2 - the power relations between practicing subjects; 3 - the staging of the power games within BDSM practices.

## BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOW: BODIES, PLEASURE AND POWER RELATIONS

Analyzing the events held in the BDSM community as spaces where multiple erotic possibilities are explored also means deciphering the statements linked to the rules of conduct which govern these spaces, regulate bodies, organize interactions and connect with the strategic games of power-resistance taking place therein. We begin at one of its most valued pillars, represented by the acronym “SSC” - Safe, Sane and Consensual. The SSC is commonly presented as the guiding principle of contemporary BDSM, reinforced by practitioners in order to guarantee the legitimacy of the practices carried out through the requirement of a minimum criteria of safety, sanity and consent between partners.

**Ariel:** The SSC is a foundation, a pillar of BDSM, I always say that. It's what keeps us out of the asylum, it's the only thing, the SSC. If you violate the SSC and I want to commit you, I'll find a way. If you constantly violate [...] you will end up in an asylum or in jail - you're committing a crime.

The SSC can be interpreted as a statement of lawfulness, seeking to protect and legitimize contemporary BDSM, acting as a filter separating it from crime and sexual paraphilias classified in Psychiatry manuals, such as the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders \[DSM- 5\] \(2014\)](#). Thus, from an enunciative point of view, the SSC principle represents more than a rule of conduct in the BDSM community, it is an essential statement to feed counter-discourses ([Foucault, 2008](#)) at the heart of the practicing community, and use them to counter, for example, the normalizing discourses of Medicine and Law. The statement of lawfulness generates and substantiates a different relationship with the truth for the practicing subjects, weaponizing their resistance practices in relation to the normalization of their sexuality. Thus, once covered by the SSC, BDSM practices detach themselves from the criminal conduct as found in [Brazilian Penal Code \(Código Penal\) \(2017\)](#) and from the sexual pathologies already referenced.

Inherent to the SSC, there are also recurring references to the “safe-word” or “safe gesture” mechanism – a signal agreed upon between the practicing parties and activated, through a spoken word or gesture performed by the submissive, in order to interrupt the practice performed in case the submissive participant reaches their physical or psychological limit or feels uncomfortable. In this sense, the word or gesture emerge as a strategic element employed in the power relations established between BDSM practitioners, since the submissive is empowered as a subject by means of this mechanism, as they hold the final word and control of the acceptable limits for each session. This makes it possible for the scene performed by the subjects to remain at the level of an enactment of a power play, as pointed out by [Foucault \(2004a\)](#).

Another mechanism connected to the SSC principle is the aftercare – characterized by physical and emotional care provided to the submissive after a scene or session - which is also seen as an important part of the dynamics between the dominant and the submissive participant, and a standard of conduct.

**Ares:** Aftercare is very important, it's the basis of "Consensual". If you take a person and [...] mistreat them, treat them badly, humiliate them - beat them to the point of hurting, and then don't take care of them, maybe you won't see them again. So, aftercare is a way to keep a partner with you. Why? The sub acknowledges that they are part of a game, the sub belongs to the dom, they give the dom the right. But the dom should recognize the value of this surrender. So, after the session they might say: "look, we had the session, it was very good. Now I'm going to be good to you, because I want to play with you like that again". Which is not the same as apologizing, see? The dom doesn't regret what he's done. But he takes care of the consequences of what he did.

Considered the final element of the scene/session, aftercare represents retribution for and recognition of the surrender of the bottom/submissive; but it is also observed as a rule of conduct for the dominant part, who must assume responsibility for their performed practices. Also worth mentioning are the dynamics of power established between bodies during and following fetishistic practices, which may oscillate in a regime of appropriation, from the dominator's possession of - and infliction of pain upon - the body of the other, to the marked body of the submissive, at the end of the session, as a signatory of care of the self and of the other (Foucault, 1993). In the previous excerpt, it is possible to observe the link between aftercare and SSC, in which the dimension of "Consensual" is transmuted into a statement of communion, translated by the reciprocity between practitioners and contributing to reinforce the effect of truth and substantiality of the principles of "Safe, Sane, Consensual" in the practices of erotic BDSM.

On the regime of bodies in the context of BDSM, it is worth highlighting the play of light and shadow, the concealment and exhibition which delineates spaces and regulates bodies in these environments. This regime is justified in the fact that most practitioners transit between everyday "vanilla" life and a hidden BDSM persona. According to Foucault, this duality makes way for the complex web of power relations in which practitioners' subject positions (for example: professional, Christian, father, mother, fetishist) demand the satisfaction of a diffuse and conflicting set of conditions and requirements to enunciate themselves. Thus, there is a strategic shift towards taking up a position as a fetishistic subject, in order, as far as possible, to temporarily keep such position distant from other dimensions of the subject's life. This directly reflects on the nature of the venues of the events, whose organizers prioritize holding in anonymous spaces of less visibility, away from the city center, in order to obtain a maximum of discretion, and to keep the bodies that inhabit them hidden.

The place of the party was not even identified by a sign or poster to begin with, there was a simple storefront door - the metal ones that slide up - hiding another door, this one made of wood, opening to the inside environment; I believe this demonstrates the discrete and secretive nature of the community in general. (Field diary – 1st visit).

Inside, the spaces dedicated to BDSM allow bodies to carry out their transmutations and engage in dissident practices, where subjects in their various roles may make use of a number of props, accessories and clothing, as well as varying techniques. In general, a majority of white, heterosexual bodies visibly in line with societal aesthetic standards is observed. To conduct the shift from their everyday to their fetishistic position, subjects resort to face masks (gas masks, cat masks, dog masks, leather masks, etc.); clothing such as the catsuit/full bodysuit (covering the entire body in leather or latex); the whole dressing up in women's clothing, wigs, boots, etc., in the case of the so-called Sissies (men who usually dress as women); or the use of a number of other outfits, all of which facilitate the transition of bodies from their socially established position in everyday “vanilla” life, to the position they take on as subjects in BDSM life.

I have only recently noticed the division between exhibitionists and voyeurs. There are people who really enjoy showing off and showing off their subs at parties, but this doesn't apply to everyone. Soon, several practitioners were doing various things in open spaces, or in the dark room, or on the “edges” of the party, such as a Dom teaching tying techniques, Jhuh and Igg performing their usual practices (I've seen him naked so many times it's no different from seeing him fully clothed, to be honest) even with the iron cage that was there, using it as a component of their scene [...] Other people used the spanking bench and yet others, like Domme Leona and another Domme, whom I don't know personally, played with their subs, as they normally do. Moreover, I noticed that the discreet nature of the *mineiro* [person native to the state of Minas Gerais] – if such discretion can be attributed just to *mineirice* [behavior of a *mineiro*] – is deep-rooted in these show/hide dynamics, this game that accompanies the play of lighting of the event, sometimes casting shadows, sometimes illuminating what's happening, sometimes hiding faces and bodies, sometimes showing them without modesty (Field diary - SM Culture event).

Ariel was dressed up in her own outfit. High-heeled boots, catsuit, vinyl skirt, leather mask covering her face, the whole thing. A completely different person. I finally got to witness the sadistic Ariel that I had heard so much about. [...] I noticed, this time more attentively, the significance of the outfits used, as people really tend to dress according to their intended roles at the party. For example, it was only with the presence of Ariel that I realized the importance of the full bodysuit as an indication of intent and purpose. She was dressed up to play, dressed to be mean. To de-emphasize her masculine physiognomy, incorporate a female identity and thus be able to play the way she wanted. (Field diary - Nosso Encontro event)

The previous excerpts point to the great variety of practices that exist in the BDSM universe. Clothes characterize a position of subject, accentuate intention and purpose and communicate their “place”/hierarchical status. Based on the Foucauldian notion that statements are manifested not only through text or words but also through “a graph, a growth curve, an age pyramid, a distribution cloud” (Foucault, 2008, p. 93), it is possible to identify a body-statement, consolidated in the clothing and accessories associated with a fetishist practice that is interlinked with the self-

constitution process of BDSM-practicing subjects. Thus, the excerpts above show that the body of submissive "Igg", naked, exposed, subjugated and imprisoned in an iron cage is enunciating itself, just like the body of "Ariel", covered in leather, masked and transformed for the purpose of dominating and/or inflicting pain.

However, it is worth considering that, despite their importance, spaces and props do not represent the root of BDSM practices, but only the means to incorporate and enunciate them through bodies. To put it differently, the best translator for the ethos of BDSM would be the truth value given to the rules of conduct that are present in interactions. For some, this entire body of statements points to "Liturgy".

**Leona:** The Liturgy is one of the most debated topics in BDSM. Because a beginner will usually say [...] "oh, the Liturgy, this stuff is just silly, it's ridiculous" – but you know, the Liturgy is what makes the game real! [...] BDSM is a game, you know? It's a game where you - where someone empowers someone else to do what they want to them. That's the reality of it. [...] So what makes the game real? It's the rules, the ways, the behavior, it's what you're going to say [...] BDSM is that. It's a game. Let's play, let's play using the Liturgy, which is what makes the game real. (Event: *Tertúlia: Introduction to BDSM*)

In this sense, the Liturgy, or the liturgical statements, materialize as knowledge, a starting point for discourse, a lexicon of truth, which establishes the rules and framework for the strategic game of power-knowledge-resistance in the dynamics of BDSM. The liturgical statements not only structure and organize the staging of power games, but also act as fabric, seeking to join the broad and diffuse set of practices grouped by the acronym BDSM into a reasonably coherent whole. Such an operation is fundamental for the intelligibility and sustainability of the notion of a "BDSM community", allowing the practicing subjects to come together and collectively resist the imposition of the hegemonic sexual matrix.

Reports from practitioners indicate that, based on the Liturgy, contracts between dominator and submissive are usually signed and sometimes even registered with a public notary. The process of entering into the contract includes conversation about fetishes, behaviors to be adopted, what each party expects from the relationship, the negotiation of limits, and, finally, the signing of the contract. Regarding this topic, interviewees also refer to "collaring ceremonies".

**Mr. Green:** You understand that the contract has no legal value, right? But I believe it will carry some weight if you are accused of a Maria da Penha offense<sup>1</sup> - and although it is of no real legal value, it will show that an agreement was made and signed and so on. Negotiations begin before the contract, because for me, signing the contract ends negotiations. Did we agree on everything? Let's sign it. [...] It's very a ceremonial thing - there's the contract, the collaring ceremony, you know?

1 T.N.: Brazilian Federal Law 11340, classifies domestic violence against women as a human rights violation and provides measures of protection for women under threat of aggression.

*Q: I heard.*

**Mr. Green:** Beautiful! Do you know what the collars mean?

*Q: Only vaguely.*

**Mr. Green:** You have a commitment collar, a negotiation collar, and there's a colored one, blue I think, which means that the wearer is not the Sub, but is under that Dom's protection. You've got a collar for social occasions, and you've got an ordinary leash collar...

*Q: And it's all part of the Liturgy...*

**Mr. Green:** Yes, it's all part of the Liturgy! And someone who's in the know will be able to identify...for example: "okay, that sub is wearing this or that collar around her neck, so I don't get close." To get to them, I have to see the Dom first... So, after all this negotiating is done, the sub will sign this contract. There are people who even register their contract at a public notary. [...] It has powerful significance, both moral and ceremonial.

In the previous excerpt, initially, the "collaring contract" is presented as a safeguarding mechanism, similarly to the SSC, as it represents a formal instrument which legitimizes the practices freely agreed upon between subjects. Simultaneously, the collar is a statement of possession, a material manifestation of the feeling of ownership on the part of the dominator as it pertains to the body of the submissive. Thus, the presence of the collar on the neck of the submissive enunciates itself, demanding from other practitioners the adoption of a specific conduct in relation to both the submissive and their dominator. However, liturgical statements and the practices supporting them do not guarantee that the negotiation process is always simple or tension-free, as it becomes clear in the following report:

*Q: Have you ever been through a negotiation process?*

**Natasha:** I have.

*Q: How was it?*

**Natasha:** Ah, some were total nonsense. Like, I talked to a Dom – he's known in the scene, but I for obvious reasons I won't mention his name [...] anyway, we sit down and he says: "look, if you accept being mine, you're going to have to remove all of your piercings, you're going to have to dye your hair, and about those tattoos you have, you won't be able to have any more". I said: "Cool, see you later and thank you very much!", because there are limits to what I'll let someone else control.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the negotiation process reveals itself as a strategic game of power-resistance in which, at all times, practitioners employ discursive strategies to position themselves in order obtain what they want, set their limits, to get concessions and exchanges. It is a dispute which reaches the personal limits of each party. Therefore, the statement of possession

takes on different forms depending on what is agreed upon. At the level of power relations between practitioners, the signing of a contract and its very existence affirm an agreement between equal parties, equalizing, if for a moment, the positions of the subjects. While on the other hand, from the point of fetishistic practices of role-playing, the “collaring ceremony” represents the surrender of the body of the submissive to their new owner, in acceptance of their almost animalistic and objectified abasement in front of the rising dominant.

Another issue that deserves to be highlighted is the potential for disruption of the BDSM environment in relation to dominant social standards and the hegemonic heterosexual matrix. Although the signing of contracts allows a dominator to have more than one submissive, in some cases it was observed that a monogamous model was reproduced in mutual exclusivity agreements between subjects. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, it was possible to identify a white, heterosexual majority, and bodies in line with aesthetic standards. Other elements were also identified in the reports, as explained below.

**Dom L:** Look, my views are a little different. The Brazilian scene is very sexist compared to the European scene. It is homophobic, which is kind of a contradiction, given that the scene has origins in the gay leather fetish scene. [...] it seems that if you spank a man at an event here, that means you're gay and they'll try to put you down.

In the previous excerpt, the interviewee relates the presence of homophobia and sexism in Brazilian BDSM communities. The report alludes to a whole entanglement of political issues rooted in the heteronormative matrix of society that put into question, at least in part, the BDSM community as a space of discursive and normative rupture. It shows how the play of differences operated by the vanilla life/BDSM life separation can be problematized, and how practicing subjects may bring with them a certain degree of internalization of this heteronormative matrix into the community. This is to show that some ruptures from the norm, although possible, do not occur during the constitution process of a BDSM subject.

On the other hand, reports were also collected about experiences within the scope of BDSM that led the subjects to experience or create new modes of existence.

With [Fernanda] our conversation turned more towards getting to know each other. Like others, I heard her say: "I felt a desire in me that I didn't have a name for, until I discovered BDSM." (Field Diary – Event: *Tertúlia: Bondage*)

*Q: Is it fair to say that BDSM has to do with liberation?*

**Natasha:** That question is difficult. It's hard to put it into words - it's liberating, you know? In the community, I feel like I can be myself in a more, I don't know...

*Q: In a more complete way?*

**Natasha:** Not complete, in the most basic sense. Because, like it or not, in life in the vanilla world, we wear many masks. But not here, here you can be yourself, you don't have to be so-and-so who works at so-and-so, you use a name that isn't necessarily your real name [...] So it is a freedom, for me BDSM is a freedom.

**Ariel:** Inevitably, BDSM proposes a constant breaking of taboos. Many taboos that we aren't even aware of, within our own sexuality. [...] BDSM made me look for taboos to break. [...] and then one time I met a certain person, there was so much sensitivity, attention, affection, love, so much delicacy, that I could not see a sex in this person. And that made me see that people don't have a sex. That's my biggest taboo break to date [...] transcending sexes.

The reports presented show statements of liberation by the interviewees, exalting the BDSM community as an enhancer of the experience of sexual possibilities, of making use of bodies and deriving pleasure in less restrictive ways, as a place where one doesn't feel ashamed of one's manifested desires and fetishes. At the same time, they justify the existence of the community and its practices, reinforcing its status of dissidence and opposition to the heteronormative matrix, producing subjects and spaces. This points back to [Foucault \(2004a\)](#), who affirms sexuality as part of our individual conduct and freedom, and how through our sexuality and desires, new forms of relationships and new modes of existence may be established. More than that, for some practitioners, BDSM is a space of resistance and self-constitution, in which they manage to expand their personal freedom, even if only temporarily, to be who they wish to be, relating to the truths that best characterize them. Thus, they develop, from within the BDSM community, a set of techniques of the self ([Foucault, 1993](#)), which contrast with the dominant regime of truth that is instilled in them in "vanilla" life, normalizing their bodies.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article sought to analyze how the power relations that govern bodies and conduct are configured in the context of erotic BDSM practiced in the capital of Minas Gerais. It was possible to show how the BDSM community encompasses a set of practices and a network of relationships that are not separated from the device of sexuality as defined by [Foucault \(2011\)](#), but totally imbricated in it. These are bodies that live between light and shadow, in transition between their everyday lives and their fetishistic experiences.

It is essential to emphasize that the objective of this study was not to romanticize the existence of a marginalized group in society, painting a beautiful picture of resistance to the dominant discourses that stigmatize and exclude them, or even to condemn them in their practices and behaviors, by use of scientific discourse which associate their behavior with paraphilia or crime. On the contrary, this study aimed to insert the community in the field of power-resistance

relations, distant from the logic of oppressor versus oppressed, and closer to the strategic game of knowledge-power-sexuality in which the community as a whole is inserted, as it pertains to power relations that produce both interdictions and exclusions, as well as subjects and truths.

What did emerge was a determined, situated and contingent look at the BDSM community and the subjects that are part of it, evidencing the power relations and set of practices, accessories and rules of conduct which, together, represent an expressive movement of creation of new possibilities for the use of pleasures, experiences of sexuality and eroticism, driven by sexual, ethical and political choices. Thus, the multiple folds existing in the relational field of power in which the BDSM community of Belo Horizonte is inserted, became evident as we observed a varied set of resistances and ruptures which contrasts with the reproduction of certain elements clearly present in the dominant heteronormative matrix.

On one hand, it was possible to show the resistance of this community to the classification as perverse subjects. The resistance to the power effects of discourses that view the subjects and their practices as paraphilic, as ill, and therefore, as marginal to society. Resistance to the imposition of a hegemonic sexual norm that limits the use of pleasures and of their bodies as they see fit. Transgression of the idea of sexual pleasure reduced to genital stimulation, in contrast to the full eroticization of entire bodies from a variety of instruments and stimuli.

On the other hand, there are issues that signal less than total rupture from society's norms, even frank reproduction of patterns predominant in society was observed, as in the case of gender issues, monogamy and prejudice towards the sexual orientation of practitioners, as demonstrated by mentions of sexism and homophobia in the reports collected. The very principle of discretion that hides practice spaces and protects the everyday roles of its practitioners, contrasts with other movements such as the LGBTQIA+, whose political struggle demands continuous visibility and occupation of public spaces, and encompasses the social struggle for their rights. Thus, the pendular swinging between "vanilla" and "fetishistic" life, as expressed by the interviewed subjects, could be understood as more of an axis of differentiation between practitioners and non-practitioners than as an indication of a sharp breaking away from certain dominant regimes of truth. Such reflections point to the potential of future research that analyze issues of gender, race and social class within the context of the BDSM community.

With regards to Organizational Studies, this work contributes to the expansion of research loci by encompassing BDSM communities, as well as by encouraging that research be carried out on spaces occupied by "deviant" subjects, as organizational spaces linked with sexuality and which allow a look into the ways of life of subjects who belong to dissident sexualities, their forms of organization, struggle and resistance. Furthermore, we hope that this research will contribute to problematizing and broadening the debate on alternative forms of sexual expression outside of the heteronormative matrix and which are, at the same time, as inherent to social relationships as they are silenced and excluded from discussion. Ultimately, it is necessary to question the exclusionary and dominant moral code in our societies and to highlight alternative ways of creating modes of life which may make subjects' lives more fulfilling and contribute to the political field of social struggles, of which the expansion of sexual rights in Brazil is one.

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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Andressa Carolina do Nascimento Nunes and Rafael Diogo Pereira worked on the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach. The theoretical review was conducted by Rafael Diogo Pereira. Data collection was coordinated by Andressa Carolina do Nascimento Nunes. Data analysis included Andressa Carolina do Nascimento Nunes and Rafael Diogo Pereira. Andressa Carolina do Nascimento Nunes and Rafael Diogo Pereira worked together in the writing and final revision of the manuscript.