

Between a role and identification. Understanding BDSM practices from practitioners' perspective

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Summary

Aim. The aim of the research was to study the narrative of BDSM practitioners (sadism and masochism – S/M, bondage and discipline – B&D) and to attempt to describe how they interpret and define their practices and what significance they have in their life.

Method and materials. Qualitative methodology – grounded theory – has been used in the study. The sample consisted of 12 individuals aged 20–49 who identified with BDSM practices. The data have been collected through intensive interviews with participants.

Results. Based on the language analysis of the interviews, researchers established categories related to identity and the definition of BDSM. Subsequently, the initial model of the process of defining one's own sexuality in BDSM practicing individuals was proposed.

Conclusions. The research showed stages of the process of defining and accepting their sexuality in BDSM practicing individuals and multifaceted identification with their BDSM roles. The initial stage of the development of identification with BDSM was gender identity and sexual orientation. The participants defined their sexuality by either the identification with their roles in BDSM practices (not only as a form of sexual activity, but also in everyday life) or assuming such roles temporarily. It seems that defining their identity by the persons practicing BDSM is not an either-or between “identity” or a “role”, but can be seen as a continuum.

Key words: BDSM, identity, sexuality

Introduction

While discussing the BDSM practices, we would like to refer to the concept of Gender, Sexual and Relationship Diversity (GSRD), which means a diversity related to the gender, sexuality, and involvement in relationships. This concept refers to individuals whose gender, sexual and/or relationship identities are different than in the majority of the society (often called “normative”). This concept includes non-binary,

transsexual, asexual, bisexual, homosexual, queer, pansexual, non-monogamous persons and those practicing BDSM [1, 2].

BDSM practices have become more visible both in pop culture and in clinical practice as well as in scientific research. Authors of new publications both analyze the BDSM phenomenon and propose guidelines for mental health professionals on how to work with individuals involved in that form of relationship. It should also be noted that persons practicing BDSM make attempts to define their minority identities [3–5]. Involvement in BDSM practices may be revealed by the patient in the office of a therapist, medical doctor, sexologist or psychologist. However, expressing such information directly may be difficult due to fear of judgement, rejection, discrimination or pathologization of their sexuality [6, 7].

The BDSM practitioners can be divided into three categories based on their preferences, i.e., submissive (who is controlled), dominant (who takes control of the submissive person) and switch (who finds satisfaction in both domination and submission, and who likes to change roles according to the changing situation). However, it is worth mentioning that in BDSM communities there are more terms defining the assumed roles, such as dom, slave, top, bottom, primal, sub, princess, prince, pup, son and brother [8, 9], which can be confirmed both in direct conversations with individuals practicing BDSM and on related websites. One of the most popular international BDSM portals – Fetlife.com [10] distinguishes as many as sixty-five terms describing the various roles, ten involving sexual orientation and nine referring to gender identity, which may be chosen by the user themselves for self-presentation. This may reveal a variety of features within the research group and the necessity to go beyond the majority frameworks to understand the specific issues of the BDSM community.

While analyzing research on the identity of BDSM individuals, the work by Yost and Hunter [9] is worth mentioning. A total of 272 participants anonymously filled an online questionnaire, which included both closed and open-ended questions. One of the questions referred to the participant's definition of their role and required the participant to indicate which terms from the list applied to them. The list included 11 terms: (1) dominant, (2) top, (3) master, (4) mistress, (5) sadist, (6) submissive, (7) bottom, (8) slave, (9) masochist, (10) switch, (11) sadomasochist. Among the participants, 84.2% selected 1-4 roles, and 16% marked 5-10 roles with which they identify. Most of the males identified themselves with the roles related to domination, while most of the females indicated the terms from the spectrum of submission. There were no gender differences related to the term of switch role. It can be assumed that BDSM practitioners may interpret their roles in the practices as fluent and multifaceted. Cultural factors related to gender seem to be significant here.

For the purpose of this research, it is important to distinguish between the role and identification in BDSM. Ortmann and Sprott [8] in their studies understand the concept of identity as relatively permanent in comparison with the role which may become fluctuant, related to the context, specific situation and/or activity. It does not mean that the sexual identity does not change, as it transforms with individual

development, yet not as dynamically and frequently as the various roles played in BDSM sessions [8].

The number of studies on the functioning of persons practicing BDSM is still relatively small. Thus, both professionals and the general public might be prone to stereotypes which often pathologize BDSM practices [11]. Due to the fact that it is a relatively new area of research, a decision was made to apply qualitative methods of research. In cases where the research focuses on personal experiences (that are difficult to narrow down to categories such as quantity, frequency or intensity), the chosen methodology allows for in-depth understanding [12]. The research was carried out on the basis of grounded theory [12–14]. Due to the diversity of participants, the constructivist approach seemed the most suitable. Constructivism assumes a subjectivistic perception of reality, and thus the existence of multiple social realities. In accordance with this methodological approach, the researcher does not formulate hypotheses before conducting an investigation. When relating with participants, the researcher's own experiences, beliefs, values and opinions are not without significance [12, 15].

In this article, identity-related terms are approached descriptively and there is no reference to a specific theoretical concept. We believe that such an approach is helpful in understanding and not pathologizing the variety of forms of the BDSM phenomenon.

Aim

The aim of this study was to become familiar with how BDSM practitioners interpret and define their practices and what significance they have in their life.

Material

The participants in the survey were BDSM practitioners. The sampling process was consistent with the grounded theory methodology; therefore, diversity of the experiences was important in the data collection. Participants took part in intensive interviews during meetings with the researcher, which lasted from 15 minutes up to 1.5 hours. A self-selected sample of 12 participants (6 males and 6 females at the age of 20-49), recruited through thematic forums and websites, took part in the research. Based on existing knowledge, it was assumed that gender may influence the experience related to BDSM (e.g., playing a role in line with social expectations concerning femininity/masculinity); therefore, the study included an equal gender representation [9]. The recruitment of the participants and the process of conducting subsequent interviews were completed when the categories were saturated, i.e., when the new data would not enrich further the existing content of the theoretical reconstruction [16, 17]. The participants were informed about the purpose of the survey, and each of them signed up voluntarily and gave their consent for recording the interviews and using them for scientific purposes. Participation was anonymous, voluntary and without compensation. None of the persons withdrew from the survey. The study was

approved by the Commission for Ethics of Scientific Research. A detailed description of the surveyed persons is found in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Profession/education	Sexual orientation	BDSM role	Participation in BDSM
F1	Female	20	Uncompleted secondary education; copywriting, writing articles, she owns a business selling (producing) BDSM gadgets	Heteroflexible ¹	Submissive	In relation with two play-partners ² practicing BDSM.
F2	Female	20	Secondary education; student	Heteroflexible	Submissive, masochist	In relationship with a non-practicing BDSM person, introduces her partner to BDSM.
F3	Female	26	Secondary education; student	Heteroflexible	Dominant	Currently looking for a partner with similar preferences.
F4	Female	20	Secondary education; student	Heterosexual	Submissive	She has a non-BDSM partner, and she is also in other relationships where she develops her preferences.
F5	Female	40	Higher education; works for a corporation	Heterosexual	In the spectrum of submission, brat ³ .	In a new relationship, but her partner does not know about her BDSM preferences.
F6	Female	28	Higher education; employed in the cosmetics industry	Heteroflexible	Submissive	In a relation with a partner who also has BDSM preferences, in this relationship BDSM and sexuality are jointly explored. At the same time she is from time to time in a relationship with another master.

table continued on the next page

M1	Male	25	Secondary education; businessman who owns a company trading BDSM gadgets	Heterosexual	Master	In relation with a BDSM person, they have joint preferences.
M2	Male	34	Secondary education; IT technician	Heterosexual	Submissive	Currently single with BDSM preferences, looking for a female partner.
M3	Male	36	Higher education; owns a business in the energy industry	Heterosexual	Switch	Single, currently looking for a female partner with similar preferences.
G4	Gender-fluid ⁴	25	Secondary education; IT student, employed in a vindication company.	"sexual desire to females"	Dominant	Single, currently looking for a female partner who could accept his preferences.
M5	Male	25	Higher education; works in sales	Heterosexual	Dominant	In a relationship with a female partner who shares his sexual preferences, in the relationship there are elements of BDSM, they jointly explore their sexuality.
M6	Male	49	Higher education; employed in the IT industry	Heterosexual	Masochist, hedonist	Leads a double life, on the one hand he is a husband and father, and on the other, he is in the BDSM community where from time to time he starts relations in line with his preferences.

To maintain clarity, the participants were coded with reference to their designated gender (F and M).

¹ Heteroflexible – mainly a heterosexual orientation with a tendency to homosexual behaviours

² Play-partner – partner only for BDSM play

³ Brat – a person displaying rebellious behaviours, disrespectful or disobedient as a part of power play in a BDSM relationship

⁴ Gender-fluid – fluid sexual identity – the experienced gender is changing and depends on sexual roles

Method

The survey was carried out with the use of the grounded theory methodology, which was developed and described by Glaser and Strauss [18, 19] and consists in building a middle-range theory (that aims to describe particular aspects of social life) on the basis of systematically collected empirical evidence. According to this approach, this type of research involves a certain process. The theory arises during field research on the basis of empirical data, which refer to the observed social reality. Assumptions, concepts, and their features are also built during the research and in this process they are modified and verified [19]. While applying this method, the researcher creates and re-creates the manner of data collection, and constantly improves their methodology. Everything that the researcher learns in the field related to the research is relevant as it may become the source of important data [12, 14]. The researcher tries to make sense of and interpret the specific phenomena, applying the terms used by the participants [15].

The application of this method allowed the researchers to look at the issues of functioning in BDSM relationships from the participants' perspective, as it has been assumed that they are the experts in this field and the research is an investigation of the reality that they construct. The researcher examines how the participants explain their own experiences and asks them about the analytical meaning of the concepts [14]. The research tool was an unstructured interview with an open, unlimited character. This tool allows to rearrange the sequence of questions, re-formulating them depending on the research situation [19]. Prior to the interviews, the general topics of discussion were listed:

1. What does BDSM mean to you?
2. Where did you get your BDSM knowledge from?
3. How would you describe yourself within BDSM?
4. What did discovering the BDSM 'climate' look like in your case? When did you discover your preferences linked to BDSM?
5. What functions does BDSM play in your life?
6. In your opinion, what is the social reception of BDSM practices?
7. Are you an active member of the BDSM community?
8. How does BDSM contribute to your life? What does fulfilling these preferences do for you?

Before the interviews, no specific questions were prepared in order to be able to freely follow the participants in the conversation. The questions were open-ended, and the content and language were adjusted to participants' needs. In line with the grounded theory methodology, when topics highly relevant to the research area emerged during the interview, the researchers followed the lead of the interviewees. The recorded

interviews were transcribed, and subsequently the researchers started the examination of the research material [12, 14]. The recordings were analyzed many times, which enabled matching of data from the interviews. As a result, new conclusions emerged. Next, the researchers started encoding the data – i.e., labelling particular portions of data. Through this process, they analyzed each verse, word, and segment, which precisely corresponded with the data. In order to analytically interpret the data, initially the researchers concentrated on coding word by word to analyze the language and meanings of terms which are used by the respondents [15]. Then, in order to change perspective on the data, the researchers focused on the coding of each verse where they searched for hidden assumptions by comparing data and made efforts to render precisely the meanings of participants' statements. Also, they paid attention to specific events described by the participants, which allowed the researchers to get a general idea of their reality. The language of the tested group and how it builds their reality were essential parts of the analysis. *In vivo* codes (related to the specific use of the language by the participants) were used to mark the participants' accounts with symbols. This was an important step in the analysis because the tested group used many specific expressions, including English ones, which, as they are part of the linguistic reality of the participants, were purposefully not translated into Polish.

The next stage of the analysis consisted in focused coding in order to describe in detail and develop significant categories based on larger portions of data. During this stage, the analysis focuses on collecting the most frequent and/or significant codes – the researcher decides which ones allow for the most incisive categorization of the phenomenon. It is worth noting that with focused coding, theoretical integration begins, which lasts through the following stages of the analysis [14]. As a consequence of the coding, the data were divided into general categories, i.e., identification, what BDSM means to the participant, intragroup relationships, etc. During the entire analysis, grouping techniques were used (i.e., creating graphic models representing distinctive codes and relationships between categories in each interview). This allowed for multiple comparisons of data, in-depth investigations and following the ideas that emerged during the analyses. On the basis of the created categories, the interviews were interpreted and the theoretical model was constructed [12, 14].

Two researchers were involved in the data analysis – the coding process was performed individually and then the data were joined and compared with each other. As mentioned above, in line with the chosen methodology, the sample size is sufficient when the point of empirical data saturation (category saturation) is reached. Theoretical saturation, according to this paradigm, means successful verification of the research results in terms of sampling. Saturation is reached when the information is doubled – when new data no longer significantly enrich the research material [16, 17].

While approaching the discussion on the research outcomes, it seems important to stress that the aim of the research was to learn the BDSM practitioners' perspective on their practices. However, during the analyses of the interviews, the researchers noted that the participants were not describing BDSM practices

as something external but rather through the prism of their personal experience of the participation and the meaning it had to them. This led to the necessity of using different terms – identification (as a process of developing an identity) and a role (assumed in a given situation).

Results

At the beginning of the interviews, the subjects were requested to say a few words about themselves. They gave accounts on their gender, sexual orientation and roles in BDSM practices. This may indicate that they knew more or less the aim of the study, and also, that these practices are an important part of their lives. It is worth mentioning that each of the three areas can be disclosed or not in various social situations. Social perception may determine whether or not an individual may decide to express them.

Gender

Participants used a variety of features to describe gender-related behaviours, both in BDSM and everyday life, such as:

I say so, because I am in this position, I am the bottom person, I am a female – F2. Well, as it is clear in my account, I am a female and I feel like a female, and I am a female, in every bit – F3.

One of the participants interpreted their gender in a non-binary way as gender-fluid, shifting between masculine and feminine roles depending on the situation. For this reason, revealing their “other side” was an intimate issue, often difficult to disclose:

Currently, I define myself as gender-fluid, often there are some quite fluid forms of sexuality– G4.

Based on the interview data, BDSM practitioners appear to share specific beliefs about gender roles, e.g., men are perceived as having more dominant attributes. It turns out that males defining themselves as submissive may experience disregard from their social group as they are frequently perceived as weak, indecisive, unable to cope with problems and dependent. Male submissiveness in the BDSM relationship may thus be related to breaking the stereotype when their desires are not strictly interpreted as masculine (e.g., strength and/or domination):

Submissive males are perceived by the majority of people as queer, because they have no opinions of their own and you could do everything with them, and how is it possible that a woman wishes to be with a submissive male? Really, he is not a real man. I think, generally, that a man has great strength and if a man is submissive, it doesn't mean that he is somehow limited. So, it is a common stereotype. But some men are also submissive, so it is based on facts [laughter] – F3.

[...] and with regard to a dominating person; I just see it as masculine... well, I also perceive certain things in men as masculine just because they are, for example, dominant – F4.

In turn, in line with the cultural perception of femininity, women are mainly identified with submissive roles as it is confirmed in the research by Yost and Hunter [9]. The account of one of the participants confirms it:

Surely, there are fewer dominating women, much fewer than the submissive women. This seems to refer to our biology. Women's purpose is to deliver children, take care of the household; this is our biological and original role. That's it, right? And all women who are in a way powerful and/or choose a professional career are perceived as not normal, because they do not fit in stereotypical role. So, on the basic level, there should be such a difference in the roles, though e.g., I like cooking; [...] I can beat my submissive partner, but later on I will cook dinner for him, because I like it, OK? In the beginning there is a conflict with the society, even with the BDSM community, because as I say, e.g., at the meetings most of the men assume that you are submissive because you are a female, and shall treat you this way till they are slapped in the face due to crossing the boundaries – so, that's it – F3.

On the basis of the above-quoted accounts, it can be assumed that BDSM-practicing individuals introduce to the BDSM reality their socio-cultural beliefs related to gender and/or gender roles.

Sexual orientation

In the accounts of the subjects, the issue of sexual orientation seemed essential. The individuals often expressed a desire to experiment and/or seek new sexual experience. Three out of four examined females described themselves as heteroflexible, which meant mainly a heterosexual orientation with a tendency to homosexual behaviours. Interestingly, they found it easier to describe themselves as more open to the partner's gender than the male participants. This may be related to the greater cultural tolerance for non-heterosexual orientation in women than in men. All examined males declared to be heterosexual.

I am of heteroflexible sexual orientation. I'd prefer females as far as sexual relationships are concerned, but I cannot exclude that in the future, I could meet a woman with whom I could start a romantic relationship. However, I'd rather establish long-lasting relationships with males, for ninety-five percent – F3.

I could define myself as heteroflexible, which sounds quite good; I find BDSM relations with men more attractive and although I could be with a woman in both roles it wouldn't be anything more than some adventure, experience, something to cross off your bucket list – F1.

The lack of non-heterosexual participants in the voluntary sample may be linked to a certain separateness of homosexual groups in the BDSM society. It should be taken into consideration when gathering samples in future research.

Identification with the BDSM role

The participants described themselves and their BDSM roles in different manners – they often considered their role to be their identity, nature or something acquired through sexual experiences. Different terms referring to submission, domination or switching were used. Referring to the narratives below, it can be noted that the role is part of their identity rather than a label describing a set of behaviours in a specific context.

I am a master, and only a master. Being a sub, being submissive, is totally excluded. It is beyond me. In this society, it is not accepted – M1.

BDSM orientation in fact is treated as something additional. There are homo, hetero, and bi-sexual orientations; it is the same if you are a dominating, submissive or other BDSM-related person. I think that it is the same sort of orientation. So, I have always felt like I am, perhaps I couldn't define it, but ever since I could do it, this is my approach to that issue, simply speaking, we are what we are, and that's it. Either we are not interested, we are not into it – we're vanilla or we are what we are. I'm dominating, I feel good with it, it's a part of my personality, and surely, it's not a stepping stone from traditional sexual life for me, because it's a part of me – F3.

While speaking about BDSM practices, the participants in their accounts often concentrated on themselves, which may indicate a strong identification with these practices. However, as the sample was diverse, it might be assumed that their understanding of BDSM practices would be on a continuum – from just assuming a role in the relationship to identification, present also when the role is not assumed. Identification may lead to a situation where BDSM becomes a lifestyle, and elements of this/those relationships may enter everyday life.

This assumption was confirmed in the responses of the participants, who answered the question “what does BDSM mean to me?”. Some answers revealed the participants' identification with the BDSM roles/practices, but the narrative of some of the participants was linked to describing BDSM practices as something external and a different kind of experience rather than an area related to their identity. Despite the differences in the descriptions of their practices, it seems interesting and significant that the participants most often referred to sexual preferences through the prism of their own experiences – they described the role of BDSM in their life. The category itself (What does BDSM mean to me?) was concerned with how the participants experience and understand their preferences. And for each person their meanings were different, which may be seen in the quoted accounts.

Form of “a game”

Some participants treated BDSM activities as a form of a game with a partner which was strictly linked to playing certain roles. Sometimes it involved competing for dominance and testing the limits of the partner’s capabilities:

We’re playing a game, I assume a role, and the other person assumes another one. The role of communication is not so important, because... the aim of the game is to fulfill my command, my role is to enforce it, and the communication is of lesser importance. I’ve seen some relations, where someone was concerned with communication, and the message was clear and straightforward. I don’t understand this, for me it’s a form of a game. [...] I like this game, because it is like a spring which may be spread and folded– something very flexible – M1.

Sometimes I feel that I am exceptional because of this. This is like a treat in sexual relations. [...] For me it’s a game. – M2.

One of the female participants understands her sexual activities as a game with her partner, who, being in the dominant role, has to make an effort to achieve his partner’s submission. Such a perspective of a participant who is submissive reveals her power to make decisions and take control despite the apparent interpretation that it is the dominating person who decides on the course of the sexual activity, for example:

For me... the coolest part about all of this is this game. So that the other person, who is dominant, would be able to direct the whole game in such a way that would make me want to give in. Well, that’s the game, not just an agreement that you would be dominating and I would be submissive. You need to earn it – if you play it right, I will feel like submitting – that’s my case – F6.

A path to sexual satisfaction

The participants often understood BDSM practices as a way to gain sexual satisfaction, not necessarily meaning orgasm – they emphasized the aspect of fulfilling fantasies together with a partner and communication leading to mutual satisfaction:

While right now I am really proud of myself that I have such strong self-awareness that I know what I like and what makes me happy and I know what gives me satisfaction. [...] If I know that someone is doing something for their own satisfaction, but also for me, this makes me really happy, and it is great, yes, it is something really awesome for me, and if I can see that someone really listens to me, hears what I say, listens to what makes me happy and does it, this is so unbelievably fine that... man, there is no need for a hug as such, there is no need for a kiss, but if someone listens to me and is willing to fulfill my fantasies and derive joy from this themselves, it is really awesome – F1.

A way to establish a bond with the partner

In the course of the interviews, it was noticeable that the participants perceived BDSM relations as deeper than the standard relationship without such elements. Often the role of trust and intimacy was stressed, and satisfaction was understood as emotional intimacy, for instance:

For me, BDSM is not strictly sex, it must involve trust, awareness – self-awareness and awareness of the other person, trust between people, a kind of intimacy, not necessarily love, it does not necessarily have to be romantic, but there has to be a sort of a connection and first of all you need to be honest and open to one another, and there are a lot of aspects that are completely about the relationship and not sex [...]. This is what BDSM gives me – a sense of completeness, a sense of satisfaction which is much stronger than an orgasm itself and stronger than just sexual fulfillment, a sense of much closer intimacy, a much stronger bond. Due to all these elements that we talked about earlier – due to trust, harmony, the fact that someone is giving themselves to me – if I did not have this, a large part of me would really be missing – F3.

In the course of analyzing the interviews, it was noticeable that some participants were treating BDSM practices as an alternative form of tenderness, which is emphasized below by a participant. Her narration is filled with positive emotions, and there are aspects related to closeness and a sense of security despite the fact that the practices themselves could be associated with an experience of pain. It is worth noticing how much this sensation is influenced by the interpretation of pain and the intimate bond with a partner:

I am a person who really seeks tenderness and who needs it badly, and I also experience anxiety and then I really need someone to hold me, because (unclear) tenderness and it is not fine, while ropes are like hugging, when they get tighter on you, they provide a sensation as if someone is holding you tight and hugging you, and this gives me this bloody sense of security, and disregarding the aspect of domination, ropes just have this tenderness about them which the classical BDSM practices do not have. [...] because you can have a rape play session and here it is difficult to give someone tenderness, this tenderness may be given afterwards, aftercare may be given and so forth, and you can treat someone as a little animal, a little kitten and give someone a lot of tenderness and warmth. And, man, even hitting can be warm and tender if someone knows how to do it. So even at the time when someone does something which they know is really what I like and which gives me joy, this, in my opinion, is really tender and really makes me happy – F1.

Growing to accept one's carnality

BDSM may be related to considerable exploration and exposure of the body, including nakedness, accompanied by such actions as bondage, spanking or a few hours long sessions with the partner. Below, one of the participants emphasized the influence of BDSM practices on self-acceptance. Both in their case and in the case of other participants (as demonstrated by their statements), practicing such activities enabled them to accept their own carnality and needs, including the aspect of gender expression:

Indeed, at some point I began to realize that... with this acceptance of myself in the female version, I started to accept the fact that I am so much different than I thought I was, right? So, you know, everything is based on the fact that you begin to accept yourself more and more and at some point things that were difficult for you suddenly become much easier than before – G4.

Satisfying one's psychological needs

As mentioned before, the participants understood BDSM as a form of satisfying their needs, not only sexual ones, but above all, psychological needs, such as the need for control, power or being appreciated:

I would say that it's all about the symbolic aspect of this matter. It is not about whipping someone till they get unconscious or to replay every week scenes from the *Passion* by Mel Gibson. It is about the very fact that a man is able to act in such a way, to grab my hair or do something more violent to me, that he does not walk on eggshells around me. It is believed that this is a way of humiliating a woman and reducing her to a subordinate role. I believe that it is different, showing her that the man appreciates that she is strong enough that he, being a man, can do something like that to her, that he can really hit her and treat her with such intensity with which he would treat his mate – F2.

Another participant describes her sexual experience that was significant for her in the mental aspect. Because of taking control over others as the dominating party, she did not feel the need to have an orgasm – the very sense of having control of the situation and taking care of others was for her an intense and satisfactory experience:

And to see how tears were running down his cheeks, how tightly he cuddled up to me, how he thanked me that I let him experience something like that – was the most intense sexual experience in my life, and it was even more exciting and more intense as I did not have any sexual satisfaction from this situation, I did not need it at all at the time. That was a total fulfillment and satisfaction of all my needs that were in my head, all that I had in my head. [...] BDSM and expressing myself in this way is really important for me and despite the fact that I would have been able to have an orgasm in the purely vanilla way, as it is really not so difficult, it

surely would have been hard for me to obtain this mental satisfaction which is much more intense... and much more satisfying, just like that – F3.

Constant overcoming of one's limits

This subcategory refers to the noticeable need for searching for new sensations and openness to new experiences in BDSM practitioners. It was often emphasized during interviews that along with the newly learnt practices they are searching for other, fresh experiences:

It just began with things that were so nice and more delicate, such as gentle hitting of the cheek or asphyxiation. And then came some new fetishes, and, well, it somehow cannot be stopped. But there are also limits that I know I will never cross, because... they simply don't excite me [...], what once was my limit at a certain point stops being one and, for example, at that time I am able to draw some pleasure from it, because one may get used to many things. Because we stop being afraid of it. But at times I know that I can stand more and I like when my partner is firm and when his domination is also connected with some kind of gentle touch or a kiss – F4.

The participants talked about BDSM practices as of a certain path of experiences which is at times made deeper, which may be related to the need for experiencing more intense emotions – when one gets used to certain practices, a search for new ones that offer new sensations follows.

Adding diversity to one's sexual life

As stated before, some participants defined BDSM as an addition to classical, so-called “vanilla” sexual behaviours:

It does not mean that this is the only thing I live for and that I never talk to anyone else or that I do not have vanilla sex, because it is complete rubbish, because I like sex just as I like hitting someone – it simply gives me pleasure. So BDSM is my advantage and it is also... it also determines my character in my relationships, absolutely. I also cannot imagine being in a permanent relationship with a vanilla person, because I simply would not feel fulfilled, both sexually and simply as a person – F3.

The participant who provided the above narration clearly points out that BDSM practices are not the only form of experiencing pleasure for her in the relationship with a partner. Fulfilling her own sexual preferences is important to her, and BDSM provides a kind of variation.

Testing and discovering one's preferences

The participants described a certain path of gradually getting to know their preferences. It was often related to satisfying their curiosity and gradual testing of what may bring pleasure:

Perhaps it just began with this Japanese art of tying-up the body, and that was the beginning. And this started to grow later on [...]. I am rather open to various new experiences and I think that saying that I do not like something if I have not tried it is not entirely right, unless someone has a mental block, that he/she approaches it mentally and this is a limit for this person. On the other hand, in my case, I have not met anyone like this. Perhaps this is the question of what kind of partners you are with. You know, I have always been quite tolerant and had a wide range of interests and fantasies, so that was rather connected with a gradual discovering of all this, getting to know it – M3.

I developed a view that it is better to have BDSM relationships. And it really was like that, in every meeting I learnt something new and I answered myself the question of what it was that I liked. It was that simple. Those were not revelations of any kind, nothing like that – F3.

These narrations indicate how important it is in BDSM relationships to be able to communicate with the partner, and most importantly, to talk openly about one's needs and define together the partner norm and somehow modify it with new experiences [20].

Exploration of sexuality

This subcategory focuses on the notion of self-awareness. The participants felt more confident about their preferences as a result of their experiences related to BDSM:

[A]s early as at my age – I am 26 now, but I have 11 years of sexual experience. I have had many various experiences in my life, I have tried many things and now I am really not chasing those fantasies because I want to have something left for later [laughter], I simply want to experience the pleasure bit by bit, gradually. But still, each sexual encounter is a sort of... fulfillment of a part of what I would like and of what I like, as otherwise it would be pointless – F3.

Getting to know and accepting one's own preferences was related to a certain kind of development, a sense of sexual fulfillment, including being aware of one's own needs and preferences.

Satisfying one's curiosity

On the basis of the narratives, it may be stated that all of the participants showed a certain curiosity in exploring their sexuality:

BDSM is first of all something interesting for me, I am in a way interested in its atmosphere, complexity, and most of all, in the trust which is most important for me in a relationship – G4.

Method of earning money

Three of the participants treated BDSM also as a method of earning money. The quote below shows the satisfaction with choosing the BDSM community as a professional prospect:

In my profession I also weave whips and make other funny toys for BDSM. And slowly I am beginning to play with furniture making. And, basically, this is it. On the other hand, I am not denying that I wanted to combine my professional future with the BDSM area. This is something which brings me joy and allows me to find myself, and if I may earn some money at the same time, then why not? Among other things, it enables me to have contact with the community which can be different at times, but is quite likeable and you can communicate with them – F1.

Another participant was involved in providing sexual services in the context of BDSM, as the submissive one, which was a difficult experience for her. Many times her boundaries were violated and due to the role she was playing she could not refuse her clients certain practices. This shows that in this type of services the principles of practicing may be violated, especially when it comes to consent and safety:

I had a brief episode of prostitution just in the scope of BDSM. That was really a short episode when I really needed money. It turned out to be a strange experience, really strange. Because I think that if I had played Dominatrix, first of all, it would not have damaged me mentally. Secondly, I would have felt more safe and I would not have allowed others to cross my boundaries. I had a sense that I could not say “No” because someone was paying me, right? Because I cannot say “hey, stop it”, because, man, the arrangements are what they are, okay, there are fixed limits for which they should either pay me more when crossing them or I would not agree to do this at all, but this was also there. I also could not really refuse. Let us say that there was a strict boundary, for instance, it was classical sex and they really respected it as it would be obvious for them to respect it. On the other hand, let us say with spanking too hard, it would have been difficult for me to say “it really is too hard”, and very often it was too hard. And now, when there were situations when it was too hard or if someone exaggerated in mental domination, which I could not bear too much, and I was not in any way satisfied with it, and it was revolting for me. At some point I was more afraid that the client would not turn up, as the number of people they stood up was really large, and this was the method to eliminate the competition. Now I will tell you if I was afraid. Yes, I was, but this is money, and when someone needs money they stop being afraid at some

point. You are more afraid that you will not have this money than that someone will spank you too hard – F1.

Discussion of results

BDSM is a broad term, difficult to define clearly, describing a range of behaviours related both to sexual and non-sexual contexts [13]. It seems characteristic that BDSM practitioners attach different importance to specific sexual motives and give them their own, subjective meanings [21]. These practices are strongly connected with the relationship, in which sexual elements serve to complement such a relationship and are implemented occasionally or are a regular component of erotic life. It is worth highlighting that BDSM practitioners may perceive the sexual aspects of the relationship as of minor importance, giving way to drawing pleasure from the relationship of dependence [4, 22].

Based on our own research, we noticed that in the course of the analysis of the interviews the participants had significantly different life experiences, revealed considerable differences concerning the surrounding reality and assigned different meanings to their own sexuality. Despite such a great number of differences, there were some common themes in the narratives of participants. On the basis of the analyzed material, a model (presented in the diagram below) was created,

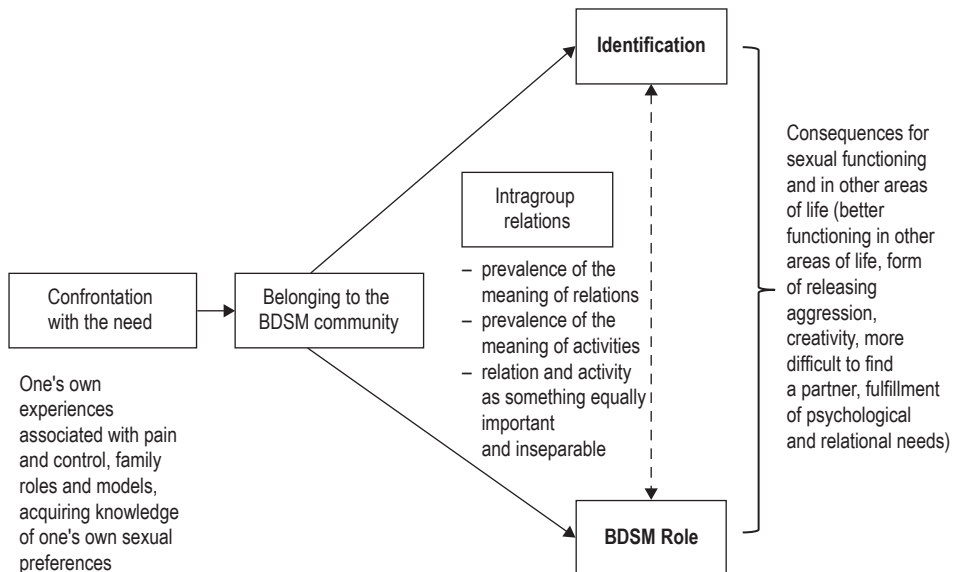


Diagram 1. **Our own model. Process of defining one's own sexuality in persons practicing BDSM**

relating to how BDSM practitioners define their own sexuality. It was presented as a multidirectional process which can lead to identifying with a role in BDSM, also in a non-sexual context.

We understand the process of defining one's own sexuality as a certain path, starting with the experience of confrontation with one's needs, such as the need for domination, submission or experiencing pain. The initial phase of getting to know one's own non-normative sexuality has been divided into the experiences of a person and situations associated with the person's relations with others. One's individual experiences focused primarily on the influence of such factors as personality traits (especially sensation-seeking and openness to experience) and one's own (often positive) experiences with being in control and with pain, manifested also in everyday situations, such as children's play or dentist appointments.

In the course of the analysis of the interviews, it was noticeable that in the areas of initial experiences the participants focused on the life events frequently associated with pain and control. It seems that relationship issues were also important, especially those concerning the patterns learned in childhood and relating to the role of a woman and a man:

But even before the period when it became defined, I now notice that at that time I tended to show dominating behaviours although I was not aware of the fact that it was just that [...] still at the beginning of my sexual life, some time at the very beginning, in those childish games at the age of 11 or 12 I was always on top, I was always the head of the family, I also usually played the role of a male character, as it was always related to being above others, being someone more important, being in control of the entire household, hierarchy, and so forth; so among girls I always was a man and earlier I had not paid any attention to it, I had never thought of this in such terms. But somewhere from the very beginning of my sexual life it was there [...], for instance, I did not let my ex-partner experience any satisfaction and have an orgasm for several days, and instead he had to caress me – F3.

Becoming aware of one's needs is usually a stage of information seeking; a person notices that it is not typical, normative or found in the majority. Getting to know one's preferences may be affected by the media, third parties or a practicing partner who wants to experiment and spice up their sexual life. The discussed experiences include getting to know one's own sexuality and obtaining knowledge, leading to a confrontation with one's preferences, because it is on their basis that beliefs about the BDSM world and where one situates oneself in it later are formed.

When a person is aware of their own preferences, the next stage is joining the BDSM community. This may be carried out by activity on thematic portals, participation in community meetings or further gathering knowledge (educating oneself on the Internet, reading relevant literature or attending developmental workshops in this area). A significant element is to define how one understands what BDSM is for them, and what are the costs and benefits of fulfilling their preferences.

I simply had some acquaintances and an acquaintance of mine showed me this website and later I started to look at photographs and this inspired my imagination and the way I wanted some things to be like, so I think that it is mainly by the Internet portals. Plus, I later started to meet people there and when we talked, we exchanged our experiences [...] my friend, [...] if he had known that he should not exaggerate with some things, but he also knew that, well, there should be some discipline in that, which he somehow taught me step by step, so... Well, yes, I think that I would not be able to get to this level by myself – F4.

As stated earlier, fulfilling one's own preferences in BDSM practices may be related to close relations with people. Also of importance are the intragroup relations described in the model, that is, the ones concerning one's own group (BDSM practitioners). Participation in a social group sharing the same preferences is of key importance – it is thanks to such activity that an individual may receive social support and enter into relationships that are a match in terms of sexual preferences, which increases the likelihood of finding a proper partner. The participants paid great attention to the meaning of attachment to another person; for some of them, intimacy was a synonym of a BDSM relationship. One may suppose that at a certain stage a person makes decisions concerning what is more important to them in an intimate relationship – whether it is the relationship itself or the presence of BDSM practices. The participants stressed the significance of the quality of the contact with their partner/partners; despite the fact that BDSM components were also important, the persons' statements were focused more on the relationship, trust and mutual communication. Some people focused mainly on the meaning of BDSM elements in the lives of practitioners. Others thought that without these practices the relationships were not complete and meaningless. Therefore, they sought partners with similar preferences or fulfilled their needs by having several relationships at a time. It also happened that activity in the BDSM area was understood as equally important as an intimate relationship.

One may say that because of intragroup relations, an individual creates their self-image as a person belonging or not belonging to the community. Frequently, the lack of wish to get involved in this community may be affected by stereotypes related to this community, primarily resulting from the social reception of the sexual preferences discussed here. A person has to face the negative attitude toward BDSM, i.e., understanding it as pathology, which may affect their contacts with others. This is undoubtedly a difficult process, which may be accompanied by internalization of the negative (pathological) image of one's own preferences (internalized kinkphobia), with the feeling of shame or sense of guilt. Yet, it may happen that one's own sexual preferences may be accepted and pursued, which may be accompanied by positive emotions. A person practicing BDSM may either conceal their own preferences in order to avoid being rejected or come out and face stereotypization of BDSM practices. What seems significant here is the gender role defined earlier, which is closely linked to how BDSM is perceived – for instance, a submissive man is very negatively evalu-

ated (which may be caused by not fitting the stereotypical male characteristics), while a submissive or masochist woman may be perceived as more attractive.

Gender identity and sexual orientation seem to be of great significance for psychological and sexual functioning, especially in the stage of the formation of one's identification in the context of BDSM preferences. Some participants defined themselves in the context of their own role within BDSM, giving it the meaning as an identity component. On the other hand, other participants understood the role as a sexual scene which they enter in the course of a session. In the model discussed, we presented it as a continuum. Identification with sexual practices is not a condition necessary to end this process.

Getting involved in BDSM practices may significantly affect both the person and their relations with others. The person carries out a kind of analysis of the gains and losses in the area of fulfilling their own preferences. One of the declared positive consequences was better functioning in other areas of life (e.g., professional). BDSM preferences and their fulfillment in the participants' narratives directly affected the functioning in various areas, for instance, it led to relief from work-related stress. Another positive consequence reported by the participants was applying BDSM practices as a method of releasing tension. They pointed out that BDSM is a way of its release, a chance to let the steam off. What may significantly affect such interpretation is predictability and controllability of the conditions in which the practices take place. An example may be sensations related to experiencing pain or inflicting pain which is the source of pleasure. Another participant perceived BDSM practices as a way of developing one's creativity. As she understood it, BDSM was a certain inspiration, a tool for completing an experience, making it possible to create something new:

Now I remembered the conversation with a woman who I think is very, very intelligent. She told me once that without suffering and without certain experiences you will never be so creative. I think this would deprive me of creativity, I would never take such photos as I take now, I would not write short stories, because I also like to write. So it simply seems to me that I would not be as complete and as creative, as I would be deprived of some kind of a tool, which is the experiences that we are talking about – F4.

The participants also emphasized that BDSM practices are a way of satisfying their psychological and relational needs. They also felt more confident of their preferences thanks to the BDSM experiences. They related getting to know and accepting their own preferences to the feeling of being complete and in agreement with themselves:

[P]erhaps this is what was missing earlier. And perhaps that is why my satisfaction from previous sexual relationships was not completely how I wanted it to be, that simply [...] I did not realize some of my needs. And therefore, if I have to be honest with myself, if I am not to be a hypocrite toward myself, it would be stupid if now, with all my intelligence, awareness, life experiences, I would suddenly made a step backward to the moment when I did not even realize what my own

preferences or my own orientation were. This would... I would have to be really much more stupid than I am now, after all my experiences, also sexual ones, to go backward to that moment – F3.

The participants perceived BDSM relations also as more satisfactory, or intimate than relationships without those elements. They often highlighted the role of trust and intimacy, and satisfaction was associated with emotional closeness. It may be said that BDSM practices may be treated by the practitioners as an alternative form of manifesting feelings, related to closeness and a sense of safety, despite the fact that those practices themselves are associated with experiencing pain. It is then worth indicating how much the interpretation of experiencing pain and intimate bonds with a partner affects those sensations. Discussing negative consequences of practicing BDSM, the persons under study brought-up the issue related to the fact that it was more difficult to find a partner or satisfactory relationship. Issues of fear of revealing to others one's own sexual preferences and experiences of rejection, termination of a relationship due to the fact that the sexual preferences were not accepted by the partner were also mentioned. Participants would sometimes decide to conceal their preferences, as they knew they belonged to a minority. Coming out, in the narrations of participants, might be associated with shame and fear of being excluded in many areas of life due to being distinct in the sexual preferences:

[T]he truth is that only very few people know that, as I think that admitting I am a dominant person or that I am interested in BDSM would be perceived worse in my social group than admitting, for example, that I am a lesbian – F3.

On the basis of participants' accounts, one may conclude that the development of BDSM identity may be affected by many environmental factors as well as individual factors. The starting point of shaping one's identification with BDSM practices was gender identity and sexual orientation. BDSM practitioners defined their activity by identifying with the role or by taking up the role. In the case of identification, we may assume that BDSM is not just a form of sexual activity, but it also has reference to everyday life, for instance, in the form of continuing relationships of dependence or perceiving oneself in the context of those practices. Certain elements of the relation may also be transferred to everyday functioning.

On the other hand, in the case of taking up a role, this may be understood as entering a certain role only in the course of the session limited in time, when the individuals involved create a sexual scene. Yet it seems that defining one's BDSM activity is not an either-or question limited to "identity" or "role", but it is rather a continuum between them. This was confirmed in the answers to questions about the definition of BDSM practices. They showed identification with the roles/practices, while the narrative of some of the participants described practices as something external, a certain diversion and not something that creates their identity. Despite the differences in the description of the practices, it seems interesting and significant that most often the participants

referred to sexual preferences in terms of their own experiences – they talked about the BDSM practices as an important element of their lives.

The results of the conducted study and the existing knowledge allow to propose a certain outline of sexual, psychological and social functioning of BDSM practitioners. They show two aspects of fulfilling one's preferences – gains and difficulties. With no doubt, the main advantage is sexual satisfaction and stronger attachment to the partner, satisfying the need of experiences/sensations and treating BDSM as a certain strategy of coping with everyday life. Due to being a part of the BDSM community, an individual can be involved in the practices, and he/she can see that they are not alone in their non-normative nature and that other people also have similar preferences. As for the difficulties related to practicing, due to their non-normative preferences, an individual has potentially worse chances to find a satisfactory relation than a person with normative preferences. Fear of being excluded may be experienced more strongly, and it can affect both close relationships and social functioning in general. Just like the authors Ortmann and Sprott [8] understand, it seems that the process of coming out itself may initially cause certain negative consequences, such as a sense of internalized shame, isolation and internalized kinkphobia, which could also be found in the narrations of participants.

Satisfying one's preferences in BDSM practices is inseparably related to close relations with people. It is significant that the model distinguishes the intragroup relations. Being involved with a group of people with similar preferences is of key importance here, as it is thanks to this relation that the individual may obtain social support and enter into relationships that are a match in terms of sexual preferences, which increases the likelihood of finding a proper partner. The participants paid considerable attention to the meaning of attachment to another person; for some of them, intimacy was a synonym of BDSM relation. The participants emphasized the significance of the quality of the contact with the partner. BDSM elements were also important, but they focused more on the relation, trust and mutual communication.

Discussion

The fulfillment of one's own sexual preferences and the relationships of BDSM practitioners are in fact similar to the relationships that are considered normative by the society – they involve mutual bond, closeness (intimacy), opening up to each other based on consent, safety and consciousness. The studies presented demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the meanings ascribed to BDSM practices. Negative reception of the phenomenon discussed may be caused by insufficient knowledge concerning that sexual minority and unfamiliarity with the principles followed by BDSM practitioners. Sexuality of the individual with BDSM preferences may be healthy if it is not egodystonic, if it does not cause suffering (one's own and that of others, without expressing consent) and exclusion from other areas of life. Forgetting about the conscious, unanimous consent of individuals getting involved in such behaviours may intensify

stigmatization, which is commonly experienced by the practitioner due to their minority position. What is also of importance here is the minority stress experienced [23, 24]. Because of the relations within the group, an individual creates their own image as a person who belongs or does not belong to the community. Often this unwillingness to be active in such a group may be affected by social stereotypes concerning the group or negative experiences related to it. The person may face a negative attitude toward BDSM outside the community (both among specialists and loved ones), which may influence the decision to either hide one's own preferences in order to avoid rejection or to come out and face certain stereotypization [25].

The research mentioned above by Yost and Hunter [9] allows to understand the perspective of self-definition of BDSM practitioners. In Poland, similar research on the community of BDSM practitioners was conducted over a decade ago, from a sociological perspective, by Suflida [26]. The research method was participant observation of the group of individuals using BDSM-themed instant messengers (chats). Through the chat, the researcher conducted 30 individual in-depth interviews with BDSM practitioners. Purposive sampling was used – the researcher aimed to maximize the diversity of the sample in terms of age, gender, place of residence, sexual preferences, sexual orientation and social status [26]. In the analysis of the findings, the author emphasized that the aim of the individuals identifying with the BDSM community was sexual fulfillment. BDSM-themed websites and messengers provide the possibility of finding a partner with similar preferences, provide a space for exchanging experiences and reflection as well as allow for fulfillment of needs in a virtual world, e.g., in the form of cybersex [26]. Although the research by Suflida concerns the functioning of the BDSM community over a dozen years ago, in the presented research motifs related to joining the BDSM community through an Internet chat were also present, which is illustrated by the narrative below:

I was an active user of BDSM chats (sodomasoneria, sadomasoklub) at some point and there I got acquainted with one person, with whom I met three times – M6.

It seems that using a similar methodological approach would allow for deeper understanding of the research topic. A question that remains is to what extent the fact that BDSM practitioners in Poland currently also associate outside of virtual space, is the next developmental stage of a sexual culture they create. The BDSM practices as a sort of sexual culture are the focus of another publication.

Limitations

The conducted research has certain methodological limitations. The assumption of the methodology of grounded theory and the perspective of social constructivism involved some kind of subjectivity of research. Focusing on the experience of individuals might be only a segment of the BDSM community, which only to a certain extent allows for inferences about functioning of the whole minority group. Also, the

research procedure involving meeting participants in person could lead to a loss of anonymity and some significant issues could be left out because of the fear of judgement or stigmatization. Another limitation of this form of research is that the researcher can unconsciously influence the responses – the participants might feel uncomfortable talking about intimate issues.

Another constraint was the conditions of the interview – the researcher adjusted to participants' preferences concerning the location. Some of them were more comfortable in public spaces, whereas others preferred to be interviewed at home. This diversity of places could have influenced if and to what extent the participants were able to openly talk about the issues that the interview focused on. It is also worth noticing that, despite the maintained gender ratio, no individuals identifying as non-heteronormative volunteered for the research. Perhaps, future research should include a bigger sample, especially of the orientation different than heterosexual and heteroflexible. Additionally, it would be useful to conduct quantitative research including a larger group of participants, which would allow to look at the researched phenomenon from a different than qualitative perspective.

Summary

The research presented a diversity and multiple aspects of perceiving one's own sexuality in BDSM practitioners. In the course of the analysis of the interviews, it could be noticed that the participants, despite the differences in their life experiences or meanings ascribed to sexuality, also brought-up common issues in their narratives. The studies showed a certain stage-like nature of the process of defining and accepting one's sexuality and multifaceted nature of the identification with one's own role in BDSM. The BDSM practitioners themselves defined their activity by identifying with the activity itself, or by choosing/adopting a role within it. Identification may lead to BDSM becoming one's unique lifestyle, and elements of these relations may also be transferred to everyday functioning, which seems to be an important perspective in understanding this phenomenon.

Studying minority groups enables the interpretation of motivations as well as behaviours themselves, and also ways of building up relations. A certain danger that may appear here is pathologization of behaviours which are rare or which do not fit in the standard set of behaviours present in cultural messages. And, eventually, studying the minority groups may be valuable in the context of analyzing the functioning of majority groups. In the former, one may recognize repressed, suppressed or unaccepted tendencies, yet present in the population.

Research focused on individuals belonging to minority groups seems to be valuable not only for cognitive reasons. Knowledge of their functioning seems to be very useful in therapeutic practice. Disregarding the aspects of the patient's functioning, which refer to his/her functioning in a minority community, may result in a mistaken understanding of his behaviours and thus negatively affect both the process of the

diagnosis and therapy. Being unprepared to work with BDSM practitioners may be linked to stereotypization in perceiving their behaviours, considering them unhealthy or associated with the experiences of abuse or violence. The therapist's inability to withdraw the psychopathological categories may lead to (unaware) attempts at exerting pressure on the change in the patient's behaviour. Specialist knowledge and taking into consideration the patient's sexual diversity, acceptance and an open attitude may be an important step toward overcoming the social taboo and establishing a professional therapeutic relation.

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