

Subculture of Youth: Sadomasochism and Gender Roles

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Abstract. As world openness expands and science and technology advance unprecedentedly, Chinese people's perception of sexual behavior has shifted towards a more open and inclusive manner. No longer limited to the reproductive function, their perception highlights the pursuit of harmony and pleasure in the connection between love and sexual behavior. In the current social and cultural environment, sadomasochism (SM) with unconventional sexual practices is gradually being recognized by the younger generation today. In this study, the attitudes and perceptions of today's youth on SM are discussed, and the role and impacts of gender roles on SM behavior are analyzed. Based on traditional recognition of gender roles in social structure as well as sexual attitudes in Confucianism, this paper explores how these traditional perceptions shape young people's perceptions and behaviors toward SM. Online interviews were conducted via SM platforms, together with offline interviews, to collect the views of youth around the age of 20. It is found that young people's perceptions and preference for SM behavior are mainly attributed to the novel, unique, and thrilling experiences that it offers. Delving deeper, it is found that although SM behavior subverts traditional sexual norms to a certain extent, gender roles remain prevalent with men more likely to assume dominant roles and women favoring submissive roles.

Keywords: Traditional gender views, SM, gender roles, contemporary youth, sexual interest

1. Introduction

This study analyzes and discusses the prevailing SM behavior in the subculture of contemporary youth and the hidden gender role concept. As China accelerates its opening-up process and experiences rapid development of technology, the sexual attitudes of China's youth are changing, shifting from conservative to a more open and inclusive perception. Such a shift is reflected through the understanding of sex and the pursuit of sexual pleasure and diversity. This study is of great significance for further understanding the sexual attitudes of contemporary youth and the underlying gender structure. By examining youth's perception and acceptance of SM behavior and the implications of gender roles, this study reveals how the conventional gender norms are either being perpetuated or subverted in modern sexual behavior.

This study unfolds with the perception and acceptance of youth on SM behavior, the influence of gender roles, and the embodiment of traditional and modern sexual attitudes in SM behavior. Literature analysis and interviews are used for a comprehensive and in-depth discussion.

By reviewing and analyzing relevant literature, the author illustrated the development history of traditional gender and sexual concepts and their impact on sexual behavior. Meanwhile, interviews were conducted to gather the authentic SM experiences and feelings of contemporary youth.

Traditional gender views such as "men work outside and women take care of the family" and "men are superior to women" and the subsequent gender role distribution have long imposed significant impacts on people's sexual behavior. It is unclear that SM, a less traditional sexual practice, is affected by these traditional views. The research aim of this study is to address the following questions:

How do contemporary youth perceive and accept SM behavior?

How do gender attitudes affect different gender's thoughts and actions while performing sexual behavior?

Does the role distribution of sadists and masochists in SM activities subvert or reinforce traditional gender roles?

By investigating these questions, this study reveals the perceptions and views of contemporary China's youth on sex and further uncovers how traditional gender attitudes influence people in modern society.

2. Definitions of Traditional Gender Views

Regarding the definition of traditional gender views, Yang pointed out in his research that gender views are perceptions and views on roles and positions, rights, and responsibilities of men and women in the social structure that are developed due to biological sex differences. The concept covers the general views of the public on gender relations and reflects deeper social attitudes. It is a deeply ingrained and widely-accepted social belief in gender inequality. In traditional gender attitudes, the roles of men and women are sharply divided with distinct characteristics with a stereotype that men are strong and in dominance of external affairs while women are gentle and focus on family affairs. Meanwhile, it often comes with a hierarchical thinking that favors men over women and clearly defined boundaries in social roles. In the process, opposite descriptions and traits are labeled to men and women, including sky and earth, strength and weakness, superiority and inferiority, outside and inside, dominant and subordinate, noble and humble, creating a binary value system and behavioral norms [1].

Yan and He, along with Gu mentioned in their studies that the core of traditional China's gender views highlight the clear boundaries of social roles and behavioral modes between men and women, such as the typical perception of "men work outside and women take care of the family." Even though modern society has provided women with more choices and rights for equality, it is still affected by traditional beliefs. The concept of gender quality is downplayed within the unit of a family, where the mode of "men work outside and women take care of the family" remains widely accepted [2, 3].

2.1. Sexual Behavior in Traditional Chinese Gender Views

Furthermore, after examining sexual behavior in the context of traditional Chinese gender attitudes, it is clear that traditional sexual behavior, like traditional beliefs, is also subject to strict moral and social norms. In China, perspectives on sexuality are influenced by Confucian culture. According to Confucius, "food and sex represent the greatest desires of human nature", which emphasizes the importance of "basic instincts for pleasure". In the Han Dynasty, Confucian scholars further developed these ideas into sexual ethics, which became one of the basic principles for maintaining the rule of feudal order. Sex was no longer merely the demonstration of personal desire but a behavior imbued with more complex social significance. Further developed with the booming development of Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties, perspectives on sexuality had become more extreme with a concept of "adhering to the natural order and extinguishing human desires", leading to stricter sexual repression. In accordance with such perspectives that stemmed from Confucian ethics, sexuality, one of the most primitive and basic human nature, was suppressed and forbidden. Subsequently, sex became a secret, suppressed, and controlled act with the reproductive function as the only legitimate motive [4, 5].

During the process, the ingrained gender discrimination in traditional culture and the thoughts including "women are inferior to men" and "men are stronger than women" were dominant and permeated in every aspects of social life. Meanwhile, these thoughts strictly defined and restricted the gender role distribution of men and women in sexual behavior, where men usually played dominant role in sexual behavior and women were expected to play the submissive and obedient role [6].

3. BDSM Subculture

As mentioned in the above section, traditional sexual behavior focuses on the reproductive function due to the suppression of sexual behavior in Confucian culture during the Song and Ming dynasties. However, as China develops rapidly and the discipline of social sciences advances, Chinese people's sexual attitudes are shifting towards a more open and inclusive perspective. They no longer view sexuality as a means for reproduction but rather prioritizing to balance sex and love and seeking pleasure and satisfaction in sexual experiences. As a result, the "adults' game" SM, a behavior that is based on mutual consent and in sharp contrast to traditional sexual behavior, has become popular in today's society, introducing an unconventional type of pleasure. Even though SM behavior is still being rejected and misunderstood in certain areas and groups, more studies show that it is a form of sexual expression with voluntary participation, mutual consent, and mutual agreement and should not be seen as pathological or abnormal [7]. The emergence of the subculture of Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM) is closely associated with the various social and historical backgrounds of the 19th century. Firstly, the industrialization and urbanization process provided BDSM participants with a script of "theatrical power dynamics" with anonymity and privacy protection. Secondly, the secularization of daily life, the emergence of consumerism, the rise of the middle class, and the increase of leisure time promoted the development of individual subjectivity and the BDSM subculture. Additionally, the suppressive intervention by the national governments imposed on individuals and their subsequent resistance, and the transformations of communication and mass media also contributed to the formation of the BDSM subculture. All these factors facilitated the development and expansion of the subculture in a specific social and historical context [8]. Although SM breaks loose from the constraints of traditional sexual behavior norms, the influence of gender roles remains significant within its context. In some SM behaviors, gender roles became more fixed and extreme with participants playing the male or female characters in accordance with traditional perceptions, fundamentally reflecting conventional gender views.

As discussed in *The Use of Gender in the Interpretation of BDSM*, gender roles are expressed and interpreted in various ways in the context of BDSM. Even though some participants try to downplay the importance of gender in BDSM and highlight the

significance of power, many people still interpret BDSM behavior through a gender analysis framework. Leveraging hegemonic gender beliefs, these participants link men's abilities and interests with body control while linking women's abilities and interests with emotional control. It emphasizes that such an interpretation strengthens traditional gender roles. Even in behaviors that seem to challenge gender expectations, gender is used to identify individuals, thus maintaining the continuation of gender inequality [9].

3.1. Definition of SM

Taking BDSM activities as an example, Michel Foucault put forward the concept of "desexualized pleasure", indicating that BDSM is not merely a pursuit for pleasure among a small group of people, but more of an exploration and expansion of human's physical and mental potential. Moreover, it enables people to experience a new form of pleasure. BDSM activities can be seen as an adult game or theatrical experience, adding a touch of color to the ordinary days.

BDSM links pleasure with the sense of pain closely. The pain includes both the physical pain (such as the pain inflicted by whiplash) and the mental pain (such as the psychological indisposition due to the humiliation in power dynamics). In BDSM activities, sadists inflict pain on others to boost their libido while the masochists arouse their sexual urges by accepting pain. Dominance and submission, and practices centering on physical and mental pains are the core of a BDSM relationship.

In specific practices, whipping and bondage are the epitome of BDSM activities, often occurring in multiple scenarios. Therefore, it is summarized that BDSM represents the activities of a minority who gains pleasure through pain [10].

4. Methodology

4.1. Interview

To discuss SM in-depth, a private activity involving personal information, the interview is the primary method. First of all, through communication during the interview, the author can conduct a thorough communication with interviewees. The interviewees' psychological state, emotions, and attitudes are understood comprehensively rather than merely collecting basic information. Moreover, participants of the interview can carry out an effective exchange regarding both listening and expressing. The in-depth engagement allows this study to fully explore the actual opinions and level of acceptance of interviewees in terms of SM behavior as well as the nuanced emotions they have experienced in such behaviors.

Secondly, the adaptability of interviews allows flexible research. The author can adjust the questions and directions based on the real-time feedback of interviewees, thereby avoiding the rigidity of a preset framework. Through the interview, the ideas and thoughts are fully unfolded, contributing to authentic research.

Lastly, interviews are a crucial means to present private details in public research considering that SM behavior is often accompanied by strong emotional experiences and personal stories. By directly listening to their emotional experiences and life stories, the author can collect their genuine attitudes and thoughts about SM behavior and how their perceptions are influenced by their personal experiences, thereby providing an essential emotional dimension to thoroughly understand the culture of SM.

To delve into the aforementioned questions, the author accessed the Nico app, SM Sanctuary Ba of Baidu Tieba (a Chinese online forum), and conducted offline interviews as an SM enthusiast. Interviewees were selected through posting, matching, and street interviews and all interviews were carried out with the consent of participants. Three representative interviewees, all around the age of 20, were selected, including one female and two males. Discussions centered on the interview contents and their personal experiences.

4.2. Research Process

To discuss perceptions and acceptance levels of SM behavior, the author conducted unstructured interviews with individuals of different ages, genders, and backgrounds. These interviews aim to comprehensively unveil SM activities and promote the public's understanding and respect through the unique experiences and perceptions of different individuals. The in-depth discussions and exchanges clarify common questions such as interviewees' understanding and learning channels of SM, help the author establish a closer relationship with the interviewees, and offer an open and inclusive exchange platform for both sides.

During the interviews, most of the interviewees said that their understanding and fondness for SM is mainly that it is different from conventional sexual behaviors and provides thrilling and novel experiences for them. It is a psychological preference and also a means to enhance their sex interests. In modern society, the diversity of sexual behavior is capturing attention. The interviewees indicated that SM is gaining popularity among young people. Compared to conventional sexual behavior, it brings extra excitement and freshness, satisfying people's psychological demands of longing for sex and constantly pursuing pleasure. Both sadists and masochists are able to experience different kinds of pleasure and fulfillment, unlike any other experiences. Meanwhile, for some of them, SM is likely an exploration of relationships involving power, control, or submission, which are missing, unsatisfied, or reflected in their daily life. Subsequently, they may find satisfaction and compensation in SM activities, which is expected to enhance emotional experiences and a sense of self-identity.

Two of the interviewees' experiences serve as examples of this.

One of the male interviewees has a sadistic inclination. According to the interviewee, he had shown relevant inclinations since senior high school, and he was not excited by ordinary sex that much. He mentioned that he came to recognize his sadistic inclination after accessing SM-related topics during his university study period abroad. He was eager to try some new activities to arouse his sexual interest.

The female interviewee has a masochistic inclination. She shared that in her previous romantic relationship, her ex-boyfriend sometimes would perform several SM behaviors such as choking, spanking, or verbal humiliation. She then realized that she was not repulsed by these behaviors. Instead, she felt that these behaviors excite her more than ordinary sex. Later, she learned that these behaviors can be classified in SM activities and became a part of the community.

In conversations with the two interviewees, it was learned that the enhanced popularity and awareness of SM can be mainly attributed to its distinctive and novel experience, unlike that of conventional sexual behavior.

During interviews, the author learned that even though SM activities have cast off the traditional sex mode, they still reflect the inherent gender biases in society. Examining the three interviewees, it is found that the two male interviewees assume the sadist role (typically men) and the female interviewee takes on the masochist role (typically women), a common dynamic in SM activities. The traditional gender attitudes are still influencing the thinking and behavior of SM participants in a nuanced manner. Men, as the sadist, inherit the desire to conquer and control granted by society, which can be traced in the theory of gender roles. Conventionally, men are positioned as "the stronger one" and "the protector", reinforcing their leadership and dominance. In SM behaviors, the desire to conquer and control is transformed to control and conquer over their partners' bodies and minds. Therefore, it is easier for them to assume the controlling and dominant role, echoing their positions in traditional gender roles. Women, as the masochist, usually pursue a sense of being needed, accepted, or even being "saved" in SM activities. It also reflects the impact of traditional gender roles on them. In traditional gender views, women are expected to be submissive and obedient. Their values are closely connected with contributions to their family and others, which are seen as ways to realize their self-worth. In SM activities, women seek hurtful actions such as being controlled, whipped, or bound, reflecting their desire for a unique emotional experience and psychological satisfaction. Such a process allows women to feel the attention and recognition from the "master", which is lacking in their daily life, providing them with a sense of fulfillment. As a result, women are inclined to subdue themselves and accept behaviors such as bonding and whipping.

One of the male sadists reflected his growing environment, especially the impact of his father's volatile temperament, which prompted him to seek more intense emotional release and a sense of control in certain scenarios. He mentioned that his sexual desire can be greatly aroused by some visual or psychological stimulation, an experience similar to SM in his understanding. Meanwhile, he expressed his thoughts that he wish his partner could completely understand or obey him in an intimate relationship.

Another male sadist described his preference in a sexual relationship, namely developing voluntary cooperation with the partner through mental guidance rather than coercion. He also addressed that this preference only exists in the context of SM and he gains a sense of safety and fulfillment through the process of mental guidance and progressive dominance.

The female masochist shared her own experience and expressed that her preference for SM might originated from her complex experiences in her childhood. Her mother divorced multiple times and one of her stepfathers attempted to rape her. She said that her mother's complex relationships and what her stepfather had down might have impacted her profoundly. Additionally, her mother constantly asked her to be obedient, an expectation that shaped her certain behavioral mode. Therefore, in her romantic relationships after adulthood, she yearns for clear instructions and concerns from her partners. Whether positive or negative, the feedback makes her feel valued and cared for.

From the perspective of sociology, gender roles are not fixed. It is shaped by social, cultural, and historical influences. In traditional society, men are endowed with the dominant, controlling, and conquering roles while women are often associated with descriptions including submissiveness, dependency, and care. Actually, in SM activities, participants are engaged in a special social exchange. Sadists fulfill their desire to conquer and control by inflicting pain and stimulation on others while masochists obtain attention, recognition, and self-worth by accepting pain and restrictions. The hidden logic of such exchange is that individuals try to maximize personal interests in interactions.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes contemporary youth's perceptions and acceptance levels towards SM behavior. With the theory of gender roles, discusses how traditional gender views significantly influence modern relationships. Although today's young people bear a more open sexual attitude, traditional gender roles still play a significant influence in SM activities. Usually, sadists assume the dominant and controlling role more frequently, reflecting the social expectation for men to have a stronger desire for conquer and control. Masochists are more inclined to pursue the feeling of being accepted and needed by society, which might be associated with the social expectation for women to be more obedient. This study argues that contemporary young people's understanding and acceptance of SM behavior are mainly attributed to their growing interest in novel and stimulating sexual behavior. This study uncovers the hidden gender views of SM behavior, leading to the discovery that traditional gender views are still inherent in today's culture. In the future, it is hoped that a more equal and inclusive social environment with diverse cultures can be established.

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