Information literacies of self-identified sadomasochists: an ethnographic case study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present findings on the way in which self-identified sadomasochist apply their information literacy skills, and to analyse those applications in the context of existing research on information literacies (IL).

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on the author's two decades of ethnographic work within a national-level sadomasochist community, supplemented by interviews with 30 practitioners and an extensive literature survey.

Findings – Sadomasochists avoid the social stigma associated with their activities by developing highly refined ILs. Central among these is the ability to learn from other practitioners by reading and interpreting their actions as "texts." They furthermore stockpile potentially useful information for later use. Their ILs not only make sadomasochists more skilled in their practices, but also provide them with safety.

Originality/value – By examining its subject community, the paper develops the ideas of embodied information literacy, currently strongly associated with workplace learning, to the hobby and lifestyle sectors, as it deals with a particularly corporeal set of ILs. This radical example allows scholars to conduct research on the ILs other communities of practice, in which the activities may be less obviously corporeal, but the literacies just as based on embodied interpretation and the reading of others' activities as texts.

Keywords Communities of practice, Embodied experiences, Information literacies, Sadomasochism, Sexual information seeking

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Information literacies (IL) form a debated concept. It is usually tied to discussions on what is learned, why, and in what context, as well as whether it is possible to apply such literacies toward gaining skills, which are not immediately tied to the contexts and practices in which they are learned. Such literacies are not formed by interaction with specific information, but rather through practices, activities and tools specific to a setting. The meaning of the term "information literacy" varies according to context (Limberg *et al.*, 2012). For the purposes of this paper, it is defined as an understanding of how and why information is produced (see Lloyd, 2010b), an understanding of the "difference that makes a difference" (Bateson, 1972). People who are information literate have "a deep awareness, connection and fluency with the information environment" (Lloyd, 2007a). A significant element of that understanding is the ability to read the activities of others as texts and to interpret them. To examine these processes, I have studied and interviewed Finnish sadomasochists, whose hobby and lifestyle practices

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echo several prominent IL concepts. In this, my work expands existing research on embodied ILs, which have so far mostly been connected to workplace environments. It also provides a case example group, through which facets of IL can be better illuminated.

I have chosen to analyze the ILs of sadomasochists for three key reasons. The first of these was the fact that we currently have very little research on sex-related information practices, despite its prominent position in life (Rivano Eckerdal, 2012, being the key exception). The second reason was that in sadomasochists, I had access to studying a group of people who voluntarily engage in potentially risky physical activities, and need to learn skills and behaviors relating to those practices. This directly relates to the third reason: earlier data sets on similar types of ILs come from groups who also engage in risky physical practices: firemen, emergency service workers and so forth (see e.g. Lloyd, 2007a). The hobby/lifestyle nature of such play ties it to serious leisure studies within library and information science (see Newmahr, 2010, 2011 on BDSM as serious leisure, and Hartel, 2007, for a key example of information applications of serious leisure).

Sadomasochism, also commonly known as "BDSM" (simultaneously denoting bondage/discipline, domination/submission, and sadism and masochism) and with various other connotation-loaded epithets, is an umbrella concept. Under that umbrella is found a wide array of related practices, which tend to deal with the administration of consensually experienced pain, humiliation, and/or uses of power, conducted for mutual pleasure (Nordling, 2009). The pleasure is often, but not always, of a sexual nature (Brandhurst, 2011; Newmahr, 2011). Experiencing and enjoying such activities is stigmatizing, in many societies. Because of this, sadomasochists use various atypical means of learning that which they needed to know in order to enjoy their activities in a safe, risk-aware manner. So as to be able to utilize those atypical means, sadomasochists develop ILs that help them separate useful information and reliable sources from potentially harmful ones: examples of such include biased medical descriptions, information blunters, and fictional accounts.

Because of this, sadomasochist communities function as information-sharing networks and sources of education, and are self-developing communities of practice (Ortmann and Sprott, 2013). This paper analyzes individual sadomasochism practitioners' reported and observed ILs, and the way those contribute to their communities, which in turn function as their primary learning networks. The research question for this paper is "how do sadomasochists apply their information literacies to find valuable and reliable information on sadomasochism-associated skills, cultural factors and practices?" Therefore, it analyzes information practices that offer potential learning, not the learning processes themselves, in this work. This study shows that in at least certain communities, ILs are an essential tool for more than just the acquisition of skills. They are also safety systems, sources of pleasure and ways of interacting with like-minded individuals, who act as information sources.

This paper combines my ethnographic observations with the results of 30 practitioner interviews and an extensive survey of existing research on both sadomasochism and ILs.

Sadomasochist stigma and ILs

Sadomasochism is conveniently summarized as the often (but not always) sexual enjoyment of certain consensual activities relating to acts of temporary, agreed-upon dominance and submission. These are accompanied by actions such as humiliation, administration of pain, and/or bondage (Nordling, 2009). Different individuals have

very different likes and dislikes within that set of potential activities. What exactly counts as sadomasochism therefore varies from one individual to the next, meaning that it is not possible to calculate, or even estimate, the number of actual practitioners (see e.g. Ortmann and Sprott, 2013). What is so far known, for example, is that in a 1999 Finnish survey, about 8 percent of men, and 7 percent of women, reported that they had at least once tried bondage, and 3 percent, and 1.5 percent, had tried sadomasochism. In answers from young adults, the numbers were much higher (Haavio-Mannila and Kontula, 2001). This suggests that sadomasochism and bondage are sexual trends, the popularity of which is currently increasing. Practitioners themselves have noted that sadomasochist communities seem to be microcosms of the surrounding society, in that they contain people from all walks of life (e.g. Harrington and Williams, 2012).

According to a widely accepted cluster definition, by Weinberg *et al.* (1984), there are five key components to sadomasochism. Not all five need to be present in order for an activity to constitute BDSM, but they are often found together. These five are:

(1) the appearance of dominance and submission; the appearance of rule by one partner over the other;

(2) role playing;

(3) consensuality, that is, voluntary agreement to enter into the interaction;

(4) mutual definition, i.e., a shared understanding that the activities constitute SM or some similar term; and

(5) a sexual context, though the concept that SM is always sexual is not shared by all participants. (Weinberg *et al.*, 1984, pp. 380-381).

The great majority (around 70 percent) of sadomasochists has both dominant and submissive desires (i.e. are "switches"). The rest favor either end of the spectrum, with some slight gender differences (Moser and Levitt, 1987). The information needs of members of these demographics can therefore be expected to differ, a fact to which individual variance adds further complexity (Harviainen, 2012). Outside of the temporary exchange of power ("session"), practitioners tend to be more equality-oriented than the general populace. This emphasizes the fact that the giving of consensual pain during a session is a mutually enjoyed, playful exception to their normal lives, and not abuse. The pro-equality stance appears to stem from practitioners developing an ability to read subtle cues of power dialectics around them (Cross and Matheson, 2006). This is a clear example of ILs being applied on meaningful actions that are interpreted as texts.

Sadomasochism is a category of "family resemblances," a set of phenomena associated with each other because they share traits, circumstances, or both (as per Wittgenstein, 1953). The activities exist in clusters of probability (Alison *et al.*, 2001), in that certain activities are likely to be found with certain others, or learned consecutively. For example, whipping and spanking tend to be practiced by the same people. Many activities are picked up as "learning trees," not randomly. For example, those who engage in anal fisting are likely to have at least tried anal intercourse beforehand, but not everyone moves from anal sex to fisting. BDSM practitioners also pick up many influences from popular culture, some of them more reliable or stigmatizing than others. Practitioner groups may, in turn, have their own limits on what types of play are considered acceptable (Brandhurst, 2011). Because of also these factors, and not just potential stigma, sadomasochists require highly developed ILs. Manypopular representations, such as the immensely popular (and not actually practice-grounded)

Fifty Shades trilogy (James [Leonard], 2011), feed the stigma of sadomasochists being mentally imbalanced, as well as contain activities that are unsafe to try out in real life. Practitioners therefore develop the ability to avoid public notice in their information seeking, as well as the literacies they need to separate fact from fiction and stigma from reality.

An interesting, highly notable thing is that compared to the general populace, sadomasochists tend to be more open with discussing their needs and desires (see e.g. Wismeijer and van Assen, 2013). Because of this, and the subtle verbal and physical cues BDSM practitioners often share with each other, they have better access to quite reliable second-hand information sources regarding their activities. These are, however, usually only within their own communities of practice, as they cannot trust outsiders to have reliable information on what they practice, or even an approving attitude. Like in other sexual subcultures, practitioners of sex-related sadomasochism are quite likely to recognize others from the uses of signs and codes, such as certain ways of talking about sex, even when not within the confines of their own community. This increases their access to both potentially relevant information and to potential play partners (Frank, 2013). Accessing other practitioners as information sources is not just information seeking, it is also a system of belonging. As noted by Lloyd and Somerville (2006, p. 191), "Accessing information from sites of social knowledge over time renders the individual as intersubjectively embodied as a member of the community."

Embodied perspective on information literacy

In this paper, my focus on information literacies is particularly on the embodied practices of IL. All information literacy is in some sense embodied. It is dependent on the body-presence of the observer-reader within the setting in which information is observed and turned into potential practices (see Talja, 2010). Likewise, the observation of an action needs a person-acting, as embodiment is derived from being situated (Lave, 1988). Of central interest here is an inclusive approach developed especially by Annemaree Lloyd in her studies on trainee firemen, emergency service workers, and so forth (e.g. 2005, 2007a, b, 2010a, b). This is because her subject groups, as do sadomasochists, deal with very real risks in their practices. The practices are often very physical, and the practitioners need to adapt formal information sources into actual knowledge, by also reading the actions of others. According to Lloyd (2007a, p. 182), information literacy is "a way of knowing the many environments that constitute an individual being in the world." It is contextual, and constituted "through the connections that exist between people, artifacts, texts, and bodily experiences, which enable individuals to develop both subjective and intersubjective positions" (Lloyd, 2007a). It is based on the ability to perceive information, in addition to accessing, evaluating and processing it. One becomes information literate by being aware of one's presence in an information environment and learning to know that environment. This is a process that most efficiently takes place in contact with a community of practice (as per Wenger, 1998).

Sadomasochist communities, described below, engage in both verbal discourse (including the use of social media) and in physical discourses: the reciprocal analysis of other members' activities. Therefore, as will be shown, their discursive practices include not just text or spoken words, but the members' bodies speak to one another, in cues. As Bankov (2008) has noted, standards of discursive validation are always dependent on the social relations and communication of inquirers. Sadomasochists support a system where the development of information literacies is particularly

valued, by placing primary emphasis on reading actions as information, instead of conducting open inquiries,

Like Limberg *et al.* (2012), this paper sees not one information *literacy*, but rather several information literacies. Interpretations on what information literacy is are varied, depending on differing views on literacy and literacies, as well as on which aspects of IL are emphasized by each researcher (see Lupton and Bruce, 2010). Much of recent research finds IL to be tied especially to sociocultural practices (Tuominen *et al.*, 2005). Because of this, as patterns emerged from the data, I chose to employ several theories of IL (some of which are occasionally seen as even mutually exclusive), which will be presented alongside key findings later in this paper. The reason for this employment was that the data matched those theories. In addition to the action-appropriation approach, this paper utilizes a more "traditional" view on IL, one that emphasizes workplace learning and educational contexts (see e.g. Bruce, 1999; Webber and Johnston, 2000). It focusses on the acquisition of skills and attributes that make it possible to "access and evaluate information, to think about information, and to demonstrate and document the process of that thinking" (Lloyd, 2005, p. 83). According to that approach, people use IL to pick up non-contextualized skills, whereas later works argue that literacies cannot be separated from the domain-specific practices that give rise to them (Tuominen *et al.*, 2005). My interviewees consistently appeared to do both, reading information sources for both contextualized and non-contextual, potential future use. For some respondents, IL was primarily an experience of reading the bodily, for others definitely more akin to task-based seeking. This is natural, because as Savolainen (2012) notes, information needs appear to be dependent on situation, task performance and dynamic dialogue. In a BDSM context, orientational preferences (such as dominance vs submission) alone are sufficient to create very different information needs (Harviainen, 2012).

According to Lloyd, information literacy deals with three sets of sources which act as information sites, all of which were also mentioned by all of my respondents in various terms:

- textual sources, which act as a site of conceptual knowledge;
- physical sources, which act as a site of embodied knowledge; and
- social sources, which act as a site of community knowledge (Lloyd, 2007a, p. 197).

The actions of the trainee firemen and ambulance officers observed by Lloyd are good examples of treating meaningful actions as text. Any meaningful activity can be read by an observer as if it were written (if often metaphoric) text, and then interpreted by that observer in a manner similar to textual interpretation (see Ricoeur, 1981). This is a literacy, in which people learn by reading and analyzing the actions of more experienced practitioners, as if those were written guidelines (Lloyd, 2007a). Such a reading also includes the appropriation of numerous non-verbal cues such as micro-gestures or clothing (see Argyle, 1972). A pre-understanding enables people to find interest in new information, as it ties that information to their existing concepts and views. At the same time, however, it always taints the new information, due to pre-existing bias. Information literacies function as key tools to reduce that bias inherent in the pre-understanding (as per Ricoeur, 1981; Harviainen, 2012). They are a way of viewing the new information in a critical, yet relevant light, and interpreting it to suit one's needs. Eventually, the interpreted information is either discarded, or it becomes embodied knowledge – knowledge that then affects the acquisition of new information (as per Brier, 2008).

In addition to appropriation and appending, information literacy is the ability to change perspectives to match the current information landscape and then act accordingly. As noted by Ricoeur (1976, p. 67) in slightly differing terms, information literate people create models inside their heads, testing if chosen activities would help make sense of the current context in which they are acting. Successfully applied models then become behavioral scripts, which are applied in the social context.

Research ethics and methods

The data for this paper comes from two sources. The first of these is ethnographic work I have done in the Finnish sadomasochist community. Over two decades, I have been to numerous BDSM parties and helped organize several of them. I have attended safety and technique workshops, at some of which I also taught myself. I have discussed intimate and intricate details of personal play practices with hundreds of self-identified sadomasochists, and been present at BDSM sessions at both public events and in private. My status as a scholar has been public knowledge to any scene member interested in that fact, so no research ethical line was breached during those years. The ethnographic part of the research was conducted through both participant observation and radical empiricism – the learning of, and engagement in, the skills and practices of the community (as per Jackson, 1989). As noted by many scholars of sexual practices (see e.g. Haeberle, 1989; Newmahr, 2011; Frank, 2013), the visceral nature of the activity requires a participant's understanding and integration with the community to analyze it, even as one does not "go native." This fall in line with Fine's (2003, p. 53) suggestion that one should strive to reach "expected participant in social life" status in the community one seeks to study.

None of the data included in this paper was, however, collected through autoethnographic means, e.g. by engaging in play with the respondents and then analyzing those sessions. Notes were written after each event, so as not to disrupt the activities taking place during the observed gatherings. Finnish research guidelines require no board approval for this type of work: while the study touched upon issues of safety, physical integrity, consent, and very strong stimuli, all of those were discussed in an abstract manner relating to the practices of the interviewees, not administered as part of the research (see National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009). This split between engagement in practices and studying the practices of others in a more remote fashion follows Van Maanen's (e.g. 1979) assessment that in conducting ethnographic research on modern communities, one should both observe and participant observe.

The ethnographic work was supplemented by unscheduled thematic interviews with 30 practitioners of sadomasochism, 20 of who were female and ten male, with 25 respondents being predominantly submissive and five predominantly dominant (see Harviainen, 2012, for details). This was then combined with a survey of existing literature. Most were interviewed several times at various BDSM-related events, with all interviews taking place between 2002 and 2012. They were interviewed through unstructured discourse with key questions included in the informal talk (as per Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Notes were made only after each attended event and each discussion, to preserve the informal mood of the situations, and in cases of potential confusion, the questions were asked again at a later date. This informality was because many BDSM communities and their members are notoriously resistant to acting as research subjects (Harviainen, 2012). Likewise, people tend to be unreliable informants on matters pertaining to their own sexuality, due to both stigma (see e.g. Fisher, 2013) and situations where they

do not always recognize their own arousal (see e.g. Chivers *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, while the triangulation of ethnography and interviews alleviates this problem to some extent, answers provided by only a very limited number of interviewees have been treated as claims, rather than descriptions.

The data was coded for personal details (e.g. gender, age, level of formal education, primary sexual orientation), experienced sadomasochist practices, preferred information sources, information blunting, information sharing, source critique, and so forth. The information literacies and seeking practices described in the following sections were issues that were brought up by several respondents each, as well as observed by the author at numerous occasions.

In choosing an ethnographic basis, I follow the road established by other BDSM ethnographers (see Mains, 1984/2002; Brodsky, 1993; Newmahr, 2010, 2011). This paper is a part of a series of six publications resulting from my research, each of which deal with different aspects of sadomasochism (e.g. Harviainen, 2015). Because of my earlier membership in and contributions to the Finnish BDSM community, I was permitted to observe several events closed to outsiders, even when no longer a member of that community. This has allowed me to combine the "radical empiricism" (observation and analysis of one's actions and embodied contacts, especially the learning of new practices, in the world of the people being studied) needed to acquire data from a closed community (Jackson, 1989) with the distance required to properly analyze BDSM phenomena (Moser, 1998).

Data from the interviews and observations was written down, in the form of action summaries, sexual script descriptions and paths of inferred information seeking, coded, and then compared against each other in order to find patterns and potential causes for certain practices. Whenever a potential pattern was found (e.g. the ignorance of handbooks as information sources), new practitioner interviews were conducted, in order to ascertain whether the existence of such a pattern was likely. A result of this is that while this paper is able to discuss practitioner opinions on whether certain practices and patterns exist, we have as of yet no real data on how common such practices may be, beyond this relatively small sample. More research on that part is certainly needed.

This paper furthermore focusses solely on physical types of sadomasochist play, as those radically differ from virtual forms. This is a result of the immediate presence of the body and its ability for visceral, embodied experiences, when one engages in physical play. While all information literacies are embodied, the mediated, representation-based nature of virtual sadomasochism's physical responses has a direct impact on how practitioners interpret their experiences. That is a much wider subject, the study of which is beyond the confines of this one paper (see Harviainen, 2015, for details).

Because the data from this research comes from such varying sources, ranging from interview statements, to literature, and two decades of observations, it is in the following section presented in an intertwined format, where findings are analyzed as they are presented. To do otherwise would either do gross injustice to the respondents and the observed phenomena, or extend this paper into a monograph.

Findings

The combination of ethnography and interviews revealed several findings relevant to the study of information practices. These are listed below, and then, in the discussion section, placed into the context from data coming from other communities. Central themes were the instructional structures of BDSM communities, available sources

of information, IL-based appraisals of the reliability of those sources, and the appropriation of the information into potential knowledge.

1. Instructional core structure

Communities of emergency service workers, firemen have access to a set of accepted practices, refined techniques and so on. Likewise, American sadomasochists who are fortunate enough to live in certain areas are taught in a formalized manner: in community-organized workshops, some of which may even be mandatory before one is allowed to be a member of certain communities; Ortmann and Sprott, 2013), Finnish sadomasochist mostly do not. Nevertheless, the less formal communities are also "epistemic communities" – information-literate communities that provide their members with the necessary context and tools for interpreting information, by way of ongoing interaction (as per Tuominen *et al.*, 2005). Differences between the information structures and situational contexts of the communities, however, mean that members of the less formal communities may come to rely on different facets of IL than do those who have access to regular community-organized instruction.

Newcomers to the Finnish BDSM community do not enter the already agreed-upon and regulated worlds described by Lloyd (2007a, p. 195). On the contrary, in my observation, most sadomasochist communities are quite chaotic. They tend to change due to societal influences and constant changes in membership. Therefore, the standards of what information is intentionally provided by each community to newcomers may change from one day to the next. Each group has a slightly varied approach to what is thought of as acceptable, and which things are considered "safe practices." Membership in the communities is voluntary, so the standards cannot be imposed the same way as they can in a workplace environment. This necessitates that members develop information literacy abilities, instead of just listening to the standards imposed by a community. The line of shared values may not contain much beyond demands of consensuality and expected tolerance of the kinks of other members. Certain things are nevertheless trained formally in Finland, too, with lectures and carefully designed workshops led by community-recognized experts. This is because practices like breath control or complex rope bondage are highly unsafe without sufficient skill (see Newmahr, 2011; Midori, 2001). Such formal training is, however, an exception and not the rule.

2. Information source reliability

Information sources on sadomasochism are often neither reliable nor helpful. The medical community has, starting with Krafft-Ebing (1805) and Freud (e.g. 1905), produced descriptions and definitions of sadomasochism that were based on data gathered from just forensic populations – sex offenders or people distressed by their own desires. This practice still continues (Krueger, 2010a, b; Reiersøl and Skeid, 2011). Therefore, a sadomasochistically oriented person seeking guidance from medical sources is unlikely to find unbiased information. Social studies of sadomasochism appear more reliable, but can in their own manner be just as biased (see Weinberg, 2006). This means that much of the production of information relating to sadomasochism takes place outside sadomasochist communities. Actual practitioners need information literacies in order to evaluate such biased information, often presented in an academic, abstracted format. Likewise, they may need university access (or its equivalent) to even get their hands on much of such research, as it is often published in purchase-based journals. Community-produced sources (discussed below), in contrast, have a marked tendency

to be context-bound or influenced by the authors' sadomasochistic and/or sexual orientation. Therefore, they likewise require the application of information literacies, if the reader does not share the same situational context and orientation.

Fiction, in turn, consists mostly of depictions of either individual fantasies with smoothed, unrealistic representations, or of pathologies, or both (see Jelinek, 1983; Haneke, 2001; James [Leonard], 2011, for popular examples). Their authors may furthermore have no actual experience whatsoever in BDSM. The interviewees indicated that both potential and practicing sadomasochists nevertheless use many such "compromised" sources as guidelines and sources of inspiration. This made it very necessary for them to be able to separate fantasy from fact – or, more properly put, safe fantasy from things best left in just fiction (Zurbriggen and Yost, 2004; Stear, 2009).

3. Source selection

All but three of the 30 interviewees reported that they actively search for information sources on sadomasochism for potential inspiration, including ethically problematic material and risque ideas. All 30 were pleased with passively encountering such sources, even ones they would ignore due to a perceived lack of quality. The reason everyone stated for this was their need to continuously, safely transgress a bit more, to push the proverbial envelope. This is logical, given that sadomasochism appears to be a learned, evolving way of enjoying one's perceptions of pleasurable pain and social power dichotomies, the general etiology of which is unknown beyond some individual cases (Gebhard, 1969). Transgressions and new ideas keep things fresh for the practitioners, but they also require the learning of new skills, and often also financial investments (Wetzstein *et al.*, 1993): while spanking is inexpensive, fully equipped dungeons or Mr Grey's playrooms are not. Five of the interviewees stated that applying their "critical interpretations" (expressed in a manner obviously referring to information literacies) to fictional accounts enabled them to gain information on which tools or environmental factors (e.g. session settings) to invest, if they wanted to experience particularly enjoyable scenarios. Since these five respondents were in very different long-term financial situations, it appears that learning information literacies that relate to purchase assessment and session construction is not limited to just particularly affluent (or poor) practitioners.

The popularity of fictional sources inevitably alters public, and thus also practitioner, perspectives on sadomasochism: views on its etiology, practices and ethics. This makes the appropriation of information from fictional sources, or anything besides a beginners' manual of sadomasochism (e.g. Wiseman, 1996; Harrington and Williams, 2012), challenging. The great majority of the interviewees, however, considered themselves blue-collar (regardless of their actual education level), and they were uninterested in using guidebooks or information websites as information sources. This is, I believe, a key reason for the popularity of fiction, especially visual fiction, as an information source. All of the interviewees stated that they would look at BDSM-related pornography, not just for the purpose of immediate pleasure, but also in order to pick up new skills, ideas and inspiration.

Reading sadomasochism (and also non-consensual sadism) related fiction was also popular, but more limited due to its lesser availability. Five of the interviewees furthermore stated that with literature, coming up with reliable (and high quality) fiction was more difficult and much more time-consuming than with visual BDSM pornography – a factor certainly affecting their selection of inspirational material. The sole more popular source (in addition to personal experimentation) for them was

second-hand information from other practitioners. In particular favor were more experienced sadomasochists, but a fresh perspective was also appreciated. Such information is not just gleaned from those other practitioners, but also appropriated by reading their actions as texts, the interpreted results of which are then combined with one's own experiences and information acquired from more formal sources. The same process has been observed in American sadomasochist communities (Newmahr, 2011, pp. 84-89). As noted by Lloyd (2010a):

> […] [i]nformation drawn from the body about the effectiveness and application of technique is used for future guidance, action and reflections, and eventually becomes part of the conceptual knowledge domain where it is internalised and connected to previous knowledge. This form of information locates the body in relation to the material and sociocultural practices of work and emphasises observation of practice as an important source of information.

This type of learning is, in BDSM, of course exemplified by learning things such as the effect of a whip on a partner (or oneself) in a particular situation – or on a person observed from afar.

4. Appropriating the information

Sadomasochists link their new observations with existing knowledge, enabling them to, for example, adapt to changes that take place in one's partner's (or one's own) pain tolerance due to factors like stress, exhaustion, or erotic excitement. Using physical information sources, too, requires highly developed information literacies, because the desires, pain tolerances, and so forth, of each BDSM practitioner can vary greatly. Applying actions observed elsewhere directly to one's practice is not necessarily safe, nor pleasurable. Individual preferences account for significant differences in not just sadomasochists' habits, but also their learning practices. This is a fact for which practitioners compensate with ILs. Age also counts: a significant segment of sadomasochists develop their inclinations only later in life (Breslow *et al.*, 1985), at a stage when they are likely to have already developed patterns of IL. Many other practitioners, in turn, seem to develop the inclinations very early in life (Breslow *et al.*, 1985). Following Cross and Matheson (2006), we can assume that this makes them constantly sensitive to power dialectics around them.

One submissive who likes pain but not humiliation, and another who does vice versa, for example, probably seek out very different information (see Harviainen, 2012, for case examples). Being seen as inexperienced is usually problematic for a beginning sadomasochist, as it lessens the likelihood of finding play partners, unless one is very attractive or appeals to a certain demographic of practitioners. Sadomasochists tend to strongly favor, in my observation and that of others (see e.g. Newmahr, 2011), experience and skill. Even more so, however, authenticity is valued (see Mortensen, 2003, pp. 223-225; Ortmann and Sprott, 2013, pp. 19-20 for examples). Faking it until making it is not a behavior that the communities support. All of the interviewees noted that one must therefore acquire at least some information about the practices as soon as possible, for both safety and prestige. On the other hand, experienced practitioners, too, may occasionally get sloppy, due to their need to "push the envelope." This is particularly risky if that need is combined with intoxicants, which are normally strongly disliked by sadomasochists (see Jardine, 2011, for an example). Such incidents are very rare, yet all of the interviewees repeatedly stated that the risks make trust a central issue, regardless of the actual probability of accidents.

5. Cognitive authorities and blunting

During my ethnographic work in the communities, I observed that experienced, respected sadomasochists usually distributed information quite willingly. This was often done in the form of anecdotal narratives. These persons effectively become cognitive authorities (as per Wilson, 1983) for other practitioners, even if they provide no formal training. They are perceived as "being in the know," occasionally also on matters in which they do not have actual experience. For many practitioners, information gained from such persons is appropriated as knowledge, without much analysis, as the source has been already evaluated as "extremely reliable." They may furthermore work as guides rather than information sources, assisting less experienced sadomasochists in finding information, especially through facilitated experimentation. Teaching tends to be done by demonstration, even for riskier practices that require formal training to do safely (e.g. breath control, cutting). As a community of practice, sadomasochists thus enact Bruce's (1999) seventh face of information literacy: "information literacy is experienced as using information wisely for the benefit of others."

Some people intentionally seek to establish themselves as cognitive authorities, because they think theirs is the correct view on (one or more facets of) sadomasochism. Some of them do it out of a belief of being right, others for the sake of manipulation (e.g. in order to create perfect dominatrices they could then date). They work as active information blunters (as per Baker, 1996). I have repeatedly observed other practitioners do this as well, when they encounter information that they consider inappropriate or misleading.

The blunting carries particular risks. Often, when people first enter the sadomasochist scene, the community feels like a place, where one is no longer stigmatized by one's urges. This "relief effect" is likely to temporarily dampen new members' use of ILs, increasing both their credulity toward the group's views, and hostility to conflicting information (see Galanter, 1999; Newmahr, 2011, p. 38). Like the novice firefighters of Lloyd and Somerville (2006, p. 192), they too are at risk of "taking everything as gospel." For most sadomasochists, this is a short "honeymoon" period, but it may still have lasting repercussions on how they play. It can and even affect whether they will remain members of the community, once they understand how their views differ from "official versions."

Social and sexual role also has an impact on what is learned. Dominant sadomasochists must, in addition to practical skills, learn to communicate with submissives in an indirect manner during play. The communication takes place mostly through the reading and decoding of signs, because direct questions are distractions to the fantasy. In other words, they need to perfect the very kind of ILs described by Lloyd (2007a), in order to become good and trustworthy at their craft.

Several interviewees also pointed out that ILs (described in terms of, e.g. "experience," "critical eye," and so forth), including the ability to read body language as interpreted "text," furthermore protect BDSM practitioners from falling victim to antisocial (i.e. non-consensual) sexual sadists. These are criminals whom the public eye often confuses with consensual sadomasochists, even though no real connection between the two, beyond a liking for pain and humiliation, seems to exist (White, 2006; Wright, 2006; Reiersøl and Skeid, 2011). A popular myth – one more feeding the stigma – claims that consensual sadomasochism may escalate to antisocial sadism, but research does not support this (Nitschke *et al.*, 2009). This situation directly correlates with Lloyd's findings on how ILs allow trainee firemen to stay safer.

Discussion

Most of the interviewees described their learning-related information acquisition with answers resembling in Bruce's (1999) sixth face of information literacy, "information literacy is experienced as working with knowledge and personal perspectives adopted in such a way that novel insights are gained." For them, acquiring important, useful information about sadomasochism was first and foremost an experiential process based on a combination of experimentation, action-observation, and location of reliable second-hand sources. Their ILs were experienced as their sense of control over information. In this, they seem to reflect Jean Lave's ideas that everyday practice is for certain activities far more natural as a learning pattern than is any formal teaching (see Talja, 2010).

As noted by Julien and Michels (2004, p. 552), information needs manifest temporally so that people evaluate when they may need a particular piece of information – now, or later. The interviewed sadomasochists emphasized this aspect: they said that they constantly read the actions of other practitioners, and consult relevant fiction, for both entertainment and to "stockpile" on potentially useful skills and information, for possible later use. This correlates directly with the findings of Harviainen *et al.* (2012) on information practices relating to gameplay – play-related information practices appear to function as not just an aid to the play, but also as an enjoyable substitute for it, in situations where the play itself is not possible. By acquiring potentially useful information in advance, practitioners are envisioning potential uses for it. In LIS terms, they are doing an advance version of the task construction stage of task performances (see Byström and Hansen, 2005), analyzing potential performances where the information might come in handy.

The research furthermore pointed out that Lloyd's ideas on the embodied nature of ILs seem to be very accurate in also groups that deal with risky behavior, but exist outside those she herself has so far studied. Practically all of the respondents described the observation of other practitioners as a key way for the acquisition of useful or potentially useful information on sadomasochism. In addition to the acquisition of practical skills, their main reasons for doing so were safety, "knowing why" and "credible membership in the community." These are all motives as close as possible to the responses of Lloyd's (2007a) firemen. Whether applying their literacies on actions or documents, sadomasochists appear to think that acquired information holds a potential for future sadomasochistic action, if that information resonates with their inclinations in any way. This correlates with what Mandy Lupton (2008) found on the ILs of music students, who experience information as music and access to and use of instruments. In a similar manner, sadomasochists experience BDSM-relevant information as sadomasochistic experiences, and as access to and use of, well, their own kind of instruments.

Finally, and most interestingly, the sadomasochists I have observed and interviewed over the years seem to fall into no clear typologies so far suggested about ILs (e.g. Bruce, 1999). Rather, their methods appear to be eclectic pick-and-mix systems. These are defined by their individual orientations, as well as preferred search channels, access to information, educational levels, and so forth. This is a subject that certainly merits further study: if people indeed choose their information sources and the corresponding literacies first and foremost based on expected experientiality, this carries huge consequences for the study of not just literacies, but also information seeking patterns in general.

Conclusions and research possibilities

In this paper, I have shown how Finnish sadomasochists apply their ILs for the purpose of acquiring both necessary and potentially useful skills and social practices.

Central to their information acquisition is the way that they read the actions of other practitioners, as "texts" that they then interpret and possibly append to their own repertoires. This strongly correlates with the professional groups studied by Lloyd – just as firefighters learn to "read" and "speak" the fire (Lloyd and Somerville, 2006), sadomasochists learn to read and speak pain, humiliation and power dialectics, also in situations not associated with their own activities. Unlike the firefighters and other professional groups, however, they are unlikely to receive formalized training for their craft. Therefore, they have to rely even more on their ILs, in order to discern credible information sources and to adapt information that they find interesting, but do not trust.

The Finnish sadomasochist community functions as a chaotic information network. It seeks to provide its members with connections, safety in numbers, potential partners and a potential sense of identity. To accomplish this, it is constantly processing information, as a community of practice. The learning takes place through individuals who use their personal ILs to acquire and test information, information that is then hopefully shared with other members. Within the community, ILs denote learning, knowledge how to act upon one's own predilections, as well as safety. A good, respected sadomasochist is an information literate one.

As the memberships of the groups that constitute the community are always in a state of flux, the active information sharing insures that an increasing amount of knowledge is retained by the community itself. The knowledge is then distributed back to practitioners, by way of both various forms of training and by the provision of opportunities for sadomasochists to watch each other play. In such occasions, community members especially apply their ILs, reading the activities of each other like guidebooks. They discard some parts of that information, while appending that which they find useful to their own knowledge structures. They circumvent the stigmatizing image of their predilections, by applying ILs to not just actions, but also fiction. By doing so, they appropriate potentially useful ideas for personal adaptation and storing the information for later use.

These findings also suggest that the study of risk and stigma as significantly influencing information acquisition deserves further research, not just in areas of sexual information practices, but also on how social stigma may strongly affect information practices in other aspects of life.

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