Taking the Leather Out of Leathersex: The Implications of an Internet-mediated Sadomasochistic Public Sphere for Subcultural Identity Formation

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The rise of Internet-mediated BDSM communities and resources is slowly eliminating the perceived need for engaging in the bar scene (in which S&M is thought to stand for Stand and Model) as a precursor to finding the "real" scene. The implications for this in terms of BDSM/leather identities are discussed in this paper. This new sphere of participation is at once more involved than previous forms of BDSM public sphere discourse and at the same time is more removed from individual sexual identity in that it does not require special equipment or dress to participate. I suggest that this change has parsed the leather and BDSM communities, so that a leather identity is no longer seen as a prerequisite for participating in organized BDSM culture.
The discourse of sadomasochism (SM) as a named subculture can be traced back to sociographic work of the 1970s, though as a lived subculture it most certainly preceded that date (Weinberg, 51). Previous to that, much of the writing on the subject tended to see it as a perversion, if an oft positively regarded and eroticised one. This essay will examine the influence of an Internet-mediated public sphere presence of sadomasochistic-or as it is commonly called, BDSM (a shortened acronym for "bondage and discipline; domination and submission; sadism and masochism")-culture on the nature of sadomasochistic community formation.

In "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Nancy Fraser draws a strong link between what she calls subaltern counter-publics and subcultural identity. A public sphere, in Habermas' sense, can be understood as "a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk" and which is distinct from both the state and commerce (110). In a critique and extension of this concept, Fraser proposes a "multiple publics" model of public sphere debate in which subaltern counter-publics (smaller spheres of public debate centred around the proliferation of specific discourses in society) interact in an inter-cultural way, working from within their own discourses to bridge the cultural gaps between discourse-cultures that must be properly traversed if authentic public sphere communication is to occur (126). The functioning of these subaltern spheres and their inter-cultural communications is significant for more than just the valid expression of culture-specific opinion-they are also important conduits for the acculturation of people into subcultural communities, as well as for the development of cultural identity for those who are already part of a cultural group.

Fraser writes: "public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition they are the arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities" (125). She stops short, however, of attributing the status of "community" to these publics, as communities suggest "bounded and fairly homogeneous group[s]," while publics "emphasize discursive interaction that is in principle open-ended [between] a plurality of perspectives" (141, note 28). This distinction raises the question of the nature of micro-political debate within subcultural groupings. By micro-political, I mean specifically the intra-group debates and discussions that revolve around a group's constituent features, ideology, actions, and relations with other groups, as well as other self-referential matters. Not only do I believe that discursive debate is an essential component of any healthy community, but I also believe that modern forms of communication, which can be seen as media that support public sphere interaction, have the potential to change the way such debate occurs, radically inverting the nature of subcultural acculturation. By exploring the relationship between sadomasochistic community formation and the media that support the BDSM subaltern public sphere, I wish to demonstrate this inversion.

Serious sadomasochistic subculture is a fairly recent discourse-culture in our society. It is traceable as a distinct subculture back to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's Venus in Furs (Glassco, 1977). When the sexologist Richard von Kraft-Ebing coined and paired the terms "sadism" and "masochism" as appellations for common perversions in 1886, the discursive groundwork was laid for a reverse discourse, with subjects claiming these titles as identities (Linden, 1982; Foucault, 1990). While one doesn't, of course, need to be part of a subcultural SM scene to take part in sadomasochistic activities, many have found these identities and communities positive additions to their lives and personalities. Becoming part of a sadomasochistic subcultural group, however, is an involved process requiring access to spaces, knowledge about appropriate and especially inappropriate scene etiquette and practices, and, perhaps most importantly, having others believe that you belong as a part of that community.

It is very difficult to track the early history of sadomasochistic subcultural groups, which consisted of small circles of private practitioners and the occasional very private club, most of which didn't know of each other's existence (Stein, 1991). From the early 1970s, however, the emergence of SM clubs and writing by sadomasochists for sadomasochists has enabled a semi-public community to be assembled (Houlberg, 1995)-though it suffered in the 1980s from a crackdown in the United States on SM pornography (Califa, 1988). In the beginning, these subcultural groups were comprised of mostly gay men, and specifically "leathermen," gay males who were into leather apparel, SM, and often motorbikes (Houlberg,
The discourse of SM circulated within this subaltern counterpublic of leather clubs and specific books and magazines targeted towards leathermen. A gradual diversification, however, began to creep into Leatherculture throughout the 1980s, with straight men as well as both gay and straight women joining existing SM clubs, or forming their own (Houlberg, 1995). However, the SM community remained intimately linked with Leatherculture as the information that circulated within the sadomasochistic public sphere, while not exclusively available to those in Leatherculture, was certainly more available to, and keyed for, this audience. More importantly, that is where people went to look for it, often donning leathers and affecting/developing a leather identity to do so (Stein, 1991). Access to these semi-public spheres was essential for anyone who wanted to become part of the sadomasochistic community. The limited reach of the sadomasochistic public sphere and the identity co-requisites of participating in it therefore dictated who could easily participate in sadomasochistic subcultures. This dependence in sadomasochistic culture on the circulation and distribution of various media that enable a sadomasochistic discourse, therefore, deserves greater consideration.

In Club Cultures: Music Media, and Subcultural Capital, Sarah Thornton develops a three streamed rendering of media that can be quite useful when dissecting media/subcultural relationships. She takes as a general premise the idea that the Birmingham cultural studies conception of subcultures—that they are authentic and pure entities that pre-exist corrupting media (and commercial) influences—is an oversimplification that ignores the fundamental ways that various forms of media work to circulate the discourses of these subcultures. She draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, extending his concept of cultural capital to subcultures and defining subcultural capital as “subspecies of capital operating within... less privileged domains” (1995, 11). With this move she stakes her departure from the Birmingham tradition by theorizing that subcultural groups are not horizontally organized entities that exist in opposition to a vertically organized, stratified mainstream, but rather that they are discursive entities in their own right with an internal organization structured by a movement of subcultural capital.

Thornton theorizes that the possession of subculture-specific capital tracks one’s potential status in that subculture. Since many elements that make up subcultural capital are informational, their circulation via various media are important determinants of the relations of members within those subcultures. By this conception, instead of an outside corrupting influence (as the Birmingham scholars would have it), media becomes “a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge”(14).

Thornton goes on to identify two forms of media that play significant roles in circulating subcultural discourse. The first, niche media, are ostensibly mass-media forms, but ones that have such a highly specialized target audience that they are—even in their advertising—firmly rooted in specific subcultures. Micro media, on the other hand, are highly targeted and specific media such as flyers, posters, pirate radio, zines, and the Internet. The access to these forms can be seen as the social co-requisite to participation in many subaltern counterpublics. However, many of these forms of media are only available to people who have already become members of a specific subculture. Their limited circulation can make them difficult to get, and their use of subculture-specific jargon or slang can often make them difficult to interpret.

I would argue that the Internet, however, is a fundamentally different form of media. Its versatile nature renders it focused yet at the same time quite public. It has the specificity of niche and other micro media sources, with the resultant ability to focus on, and cater to, quite specific subcultures, while at the same time making the fruits of those discourses available to people in general. It contains the specific jargon and slang—the language of a subculture—but within the informational tools to decrypt it. In fact it is the informational nature of the Internet that gives it this versatility. It is a medium that contains and circulates subcultural capital, but unlike its more traditional counterparts, the only access restrictions it presents are the class-implicated ones of computer/Internet access, not ones of sexual or stylistic identity.

Traditionally, there were several ways of getting acculturated into the world of Leatherculture and then into SM, but they all seemed to follow a similar pattern. In his article "The Leather Career: On Becoming a
Sadomasochist,” G. W. Levi Kamel sketches out a typical pattern of SM acculturation as observed among gay men. Curiosity about SM would lead gay men to seek access to the sadomasochistic public sphere: "Avenues of such information may include perusals through both pornographic and non-pornographic periodicals; questioning friends; weighing hearsay, myths, and rumors; and visiting leather-oriented establishments [which] may include out-of-town visits to S&M bath houses" (55).

All of these actions have implications for identities. Purchasing or borrowing SM materials, revealing your interest to friends, and especially donning some leathers and becoming a patron of SM clubs or bathhouses have serious implications for the way others see you, and the way you see yourself. Indeed, Kamel goes on to say that if SM practices are indeed found to be pleasurable experiences, then an increase in commitment to Leatherculture is often the result, producing "a second coming out phase when leather bars, baths and perhaps bike organizations become a focal point of attention" (56).

Cruising these, or similar, scenes to discover potential partners that will be willing to "train" a novice in the fine art of SM is a commonly referenced part of SM acculturation and appears often in fictional and non-fictional SM narratives (Calafia, 1988; Stein, 1991). Knowledge of the art of SM is the most prominent form of subcultural capital in the SM community, with those in the know often able to use that cachet to social advantage. This can refer to everything from the knowledge of SM protocol, skill with ropes, floggers and other toys, to sheer scene experience. In addition to finding partners, spaces and resources, membership in an SM community allows one to participate in micro-political debate about SM identity. The media of these debates were often micro media attached to a specific SM scene, like, for example, the newsletter or magazine of a particular SM club.

Such clubs, however, were still very enclave spheres as to join many-though not all-of these clubs one needed to have the sponsorship of an existing member (Stein, 1991). In general then, the typical SM career-which is predicated on a gradual accumulation of sadomasochistic subcultural capital-would involve forming a leather identity, then using that image to come in contact with the SM community, forming a sadomasochistic identity, and then potentially joining an extended SM subculture. The micro media SM discourse over the Internet, however, has the ability to support a different progression due to its structure and more open points of access.

Internet communities typify the subcultural ideal of being idea-driven. Unlike Foucault's reverse discourses that claim the discursive space already marked out for certain people by a marginalizing discourse and work with it, the informational aspect of cyberculture enables a direct relationship with notional aspects of people's personalities. In Virtual Spaces: Sex and the Cybercitizen, Cleo Odzer writes "[a]ll social interaction combines our inner and outer worlds but cyberspace provides an especially versatile medium for expressing the internal" (6).

Given Thornton's notion of subcultural capital as being the prime determinant of status in a subculture, Internet communities allow the free circulation of much of this information. The existence of a publicly accessible BDSM subaltern counterpublic allows people to become acculturated into an SM community through mere participation in the discourse-culture of BDSM over the Internet. And since there is no specific SM-oriented investment entailed in computer-ownership, or Internet-access, this acculturation can occur outside and apart from the enactment of other social identities. Compared to the leather bar scene where "no one talked to anyone unless they were already friends or cruising each other" (Stein, 144) and where "sight and then touch seemed to be the main senses one communicated with" (Stein 143, my italics), the Internet allows for a more fundamental intellectual connection with the discourse of sadomasochistic sexuality.

This discourse can take many forms. There are websites devoted to the dissemination of BDSM information, and more interactive entities such as the newsgroup soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm where ongoing conversations on various topics occur. There are also online groups such as dsg.org in Toronto which provide much the same information as the magazines of specific SM clubs, but, unlike many of these predecessors, are available to anyone who sends an email request to join. Finally, there is a world of SM interaction centring around chat sites in which people use cybersexual encounters to role-play certain sexual situations that they might be reticent to attempt in real life. In fact, in the early 1990s one chat site named Strangebrew
was completely devoted to SM interactions (Odzer, 1997). Watching, participating, or reading about real-life and fictional scenes in all of these online environments is a form of access to the sadomasochistic public sphere, analogous to being present at an SM scene, but more covert and with more freedom of identity. Indeed the ease and anonymity with which one could participate in the online sexual SM discourse-culture has led an unprecedented number of people who might not ever have felt comfortable in a leather bar to engage with this counterpublic.

It is, therefore, now possible to join a sadomasochistic subaltern counterpublic without first developing an SM identity. Through participation in an Internet community, one can first form an idea of the types of BDSM behaviours in which one may be interested. This can then lead to the adoption of an SM identity second, and subsequently to real world actions. This may be compared to the previous model in which a person would need to develop a leather image (and often identity) first and then "drift" through the leather community until bad experiences would set the "limit" of what he or she was interested in doing (Kamel, 1995).

The results of this more open formation of subcultural capital distribution are widespread, but one of the most interesting is the parsing of Leatherculture and BDSM culture. Leatherculture—which incidentally also has a thriving Internet public sphere—is no longer the "host" discourse for BDSM culture. While there were always non-sadomasochistic leatherfolk and non-leather sadomasochists, until the proliferation of a more open sadomasochistic public presence, those who wanted to be part of a sadomasochistic community would generally think they had to adopt a leather identity to do so. This is ironic, as the majority of those in Leatherculture, while assumed to be SM-oriented, were, in fact, into vanilla sex; and while the majority of leather bars were full of gay men in search of the SM scene, few who actually had access to that scene chose to frequent leather bars too often, preferring private parties (Stein, 1991). Now, in fetish clubs and at play parties, while many people are still adorned in leather and spikes, there are also people in jeans and t-shirts, comfortable in their subcultural identities due to their informational and experiential endowments of subcultural capital partially gleaned from their participation in an Internet-mediated public sphere.

For BDSM practitioners, the Internet appears to enable the beginning of an apparently new style of BDSM discourse-culture, with many roots in Leatherculture, but certainly moving beyond it. In addition, since the subcultural capital of SM seems to be centred around how one can appropriate coercion, sexual violence, restraint, domination, humiliation and the like and make them work in a safe, sane and consensual way, and since these are the aspects of SM that most trouble its critics (Linden, 1982), it seems as though having this information available beyond the purview of those within the subaltern counterpublic proper would, then, be beneficial to inter-cultural communication between this public sphere and others.

REFERENCES


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