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# Unveiling Sexual Power Dynamics and Their Links With Sexo-Relational Well-Being: A Systematic Literature Review

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This review targeted sexual power dynamics (SPD) and their associations with sexo-relational well-being including romantic attachment, relationship and sexual satisfaction, and sexual functioning. Historically, interest towards sexual domination and/or submission has been pathologized, where empirical data no longer support the premise that SPD are inherently problematic and therefore associated with sexo-relational distress or difficulties. The present systematic review aimed to shed light on the associations between sexual interests/behaviours towards power dynamics and sexo-relational well-being based on published quantitative data. The literature search yielded 77 articles with 16 articles deemed eligible and included in this review. The results showed contradictions, with links between SPD and more sexo-relational well-being or, on the contrary, with sexo-relational distress or difficulties. The results showed weak associations with sexo-relational well-being and highlighted the need for further research to allow a better understanding of the associations between SPD and sexo-relational well-being. A focal point pertains to the absence of a common terminology and definition of SPD-related interests and behaviours, limiting our current understanding of the concepts at play. Results showed weak associations between SPD and sexo-relational well-being, highlighting the relevance to examine indirect effects of other variables in those associations in future research.

## Public Significance Statement


Given a considerable paradigm shift as it pertains to the views/mores about sexual power dynamics, there is a need to review published empirical data to better understand the associations with sexo-relational well-being. The present systematic literature review allowed to identify 16 articles centred on sexual power dynamics and their associations with sexo-relational well-being. Implications for future studies are presented in light of the current data.


*Keywords:* sexual power dynamics, BDSM, systematic literature review, sexo-relational well-being

Power dynamics are an inherent part of social interactions (Reis et al., 2000). However, in the context of human sexuality, sexual power dynamics (SPD) remain relatively understudied and are often implicit rather than openly recognized or discussed between sexual partners. This contrasts with bondage–discipline, domination–submission, and sadism–masochism (BDSM) contexts, where power dynamics are explicitly negotiated, consent is central, and clear agreements are established in advance to create a safe space for partners (Brown et al., 2020). SPD encompass an interest towards sexual practices involving

the presence (i.e., sexual dominance and/or submissiveness) or absence (i.e., tender sex; Bolduc et al., 2024) of a sexual hierarchy between partners. Interest towards sexual hierarchy between partners such as sexual dominance and/or submissiveness has gained mainstream interests, especially since the publication and movie adaptation of the trilogy of *Fifty Shades* (James, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). Many have criticized the ways in which the depiction made by the author was not a true representation of the core values and elements of BDSM practices (e.g., consent;

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Barker, 2013; Drdová & Saxonberg, 2020). Nevertheless, the success of this trilogy allowed for a certain accessibility and acceptability of BDSM-related interests or behaviours, being a mainstream representation of BDSM (e.g., Deller & Smith, 2013; Khan, 2017). The current scientific literature targets SPD, which encompass BDSM interests or behaviours along with an inclusive array of sexual realities. Given that most people that report at least one BDSM-related behaviour (e.g., using handcuffs) do not necessarily identify as a BDSM practitioner (80%; Coppens et al., 2020), SPD seem to be more aligned with people's realities.

The present systematic literature review targets SPD and their associations with specific sexo-relational well-being variables, that is, romantic attachment, relationship and sexual satisfaction, and sexual (dys)function. Considering that BDSM includes domination and submission, the articles on BDSM are of interest for this review. BDSM might also include the use of pain, and because this review is focused on SPD, only sexual hierarchy between partners will be considered.

Previous systematic reviews focused on the prevalence rates of BDSM interests or practices (Brown et al., 2020; De Neef et al., 2019) or their association with personality traits, childhood trauma (De Neef et al., 2019), as well as aetiological, psychological, and interpersonal factors and characteristics (Brown et al., 2020; Richters et al., 2008; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Other reviews either targeted biological components of BDSM (De Neef et al., 2019; Wuyts & Morrens, 2022) or clinical implications when working with BDSM practitioners (Dunkley & Brotto, 2018). No systematic literature review has focused specifically on SPD and their associations with sexo-relational well-being. Such a review is needed to offer a precise picture of current empirical data about SPD and their associations with sexo-relational well-being, which allows us to understand if or how SPD are related to these central components of sexuality. The goal of this article is to go beyond normalizing these sexual interests/behaviours with prevalence but rather to report the relations documented with sexo-relational well-being.

Given the broad and multidimensional nature of sexo-relational well-being, the present review focused on four core indicators—romantic attachment, relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and sexual functioning—to provide a clearer and more coherent framework for our article selection. These variables were selected for their centrality to human sexuality and their theoretical and empirical interconnectedness (Lorimer et al., 2019; Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014). In their comprehensive review, Lorimer et al. (2019) identified sexual satisfaction and sexual functioning as the most frequently examined indicators in the individual domain, while relationship satisfaction emerged as the most prevalent in the interpersonal domain. Romantic attachment, although less frequently studied as found in Lorimer et al., was emphasized by Sánchez-Fuentes et al. (2014) as a key component of sexo-relational well-being, reflecting the intertwined nature of attachment processes and sexual expression. Accordingly, in the present review, sexo-relational well-being is conceptualized through these four empirically and theoretically grounded indicators that together capture both the sexual and relational dimensions of intimate relationships.

Indeed, sexuality constitutes an integral part of the attachment bond within romantic relationships, serving as a means of expressing intimacy and affection between partners (Birbaum & Finkel, 2015). Accordingly, an (in)secure attachment system can shape multiple

relational domains, influencing sexual and relationship satisfaction as well as sexual functioning (Mark et al., 2018; Péloquin et al., 2014; Stefanou & McCabe, 2012). Romantic attachment is therefore a particularly relevant construct for examining associations with sexual and relational outcomes given the reciprocal links between attachment needs and sexual behaviour (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Moreover, sexual satisfaction is strongly associated with relationship satisfaction (Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Byers, 2005; McNulty et al., 2016; Vowels & Mark, 2020) and broader indicators of well-being such as quality of life (Davison et al., 2009; Flynn et al., 2016). Likewise, the absence of sexual dysfunctions contributes to a fulfilling sexual life and a more satisfying romantic relationship (Wincze & Weisberg, 2015), while low sexual satisfaction and the presence of dysfunctions are commonly reported in the general population (Graham et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2015). Collectively, these four indicators are widely used as proxies for assessing sexo-relational well-being (Lorimer et al., 2019). Examining these indicators in relation to SPD offers clinically meaningful insights as they are amongst the variables most frequently targeted in interventions for individuals and couples seeking support for sexual or relational difficulties (e.g., Lafortune et al., 2023).

Interest towards sexual domination and/or submission has historically been pathologized and found to be associated with higher levels of relationship and sexual distress, as well as patterns of insecure attachment (Brown et al., 2020) and sexual dysfunction (Sanchez et al., 2006). Yet, studies that examined these links have found inconsistent results ranging from no relationship (Pascoal et al., 2015; Rogak & Connor, 2018) to a positive one in which SPD were related to higher levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction and lesser symptoms of sexual dysfunction (Botta et al., 2019; Strizzi et al., 2022; Ten Brink et al., 2021; Vander Molen et al., 2021; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). These differences emphasize the need for a systematic literature review examining the associations between SPD and sexo-relational well-being to clarify the commonalities and distinctions within the current empirical data, as well as to identify tailored recommendations to further our scientific knowledge to date.

## Objective

The objective is to perform a systematic literature review that sifts through the available quantitative data examining SPD and sexo-relational variables (i.e., romantic attachment, relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and sexual functioning).

## Method

The present systematic literature review followed the 2020 guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (Page, McKenzie et al., 2021; Page, Moher et al., 2021).

## Search Strategy

This review identified quantitative peer-reviewed articles published in a journal written in English that examined the link between SPD and sexo-relational variables of interest (i.e., romantic attachment, sexual and relationship satisfaction, and sexual functioning). There was no limit as for the date of the publication of the articles; the search was

finalized on April 16, 2024. Two databases were used: APA PsycNet (which regroups APA PsycInfo and APA PsycArticles) and Scopus. In order to regroup all possible combination, the search terms used were as follows: (BDSM OR “Sexual Domination” OR “Sexual Dominance” OR “Sexual Submission” OR “Sexual Submissiveness” OR “Sexual Power Dynamic” OR “Sexual Power Dynamics”) AND (“Romantic Attachment” OR “Adult Attachment” OR “Sexual Satisfaction” OR “Sexually Satisfied” OR “Relationship Satisfaction” OR “Couple Satisfaction” OR “Dyadic Satisfaction” OR “Romantic Satisfaction” OR “Sexual Function” OR “Sexual Functioning”) AND NOT (IPV OR Violen\* OR Abus\* OR Aggressi\*) AND NOT (HIV OR STI\* OR “Sexually Transmitted”). The exclusion of specific keywords in the search terms, that is, NOT (IPV OR Violen\* OR Abus\* OR Aggressi\*) AND NOT (HIV OR STI\* OR “Sexually Transmitted”), was specified to avoid articles on other types of power such as control over one’s partner (i.e., interpersonal partner violence [IPV]); violence, abuse, and/or aggression towards a partner; or one’s capacity to negotiate safer sex practices (i.e., condom use), lessening the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STI) and specifically human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

The selection and screening process is shown by the flowchart presented in Figure 1. Through our database search, 55 articles were identified, where eight duplicates were identified and removed. The articles obtained were then screened for eligibility by the first author through reading the titles and abstracts of the articles found ( $n = 47$ ). Studies that solely focused on sadomasochism (either combined or as separate components) without addressing SPD were excluded

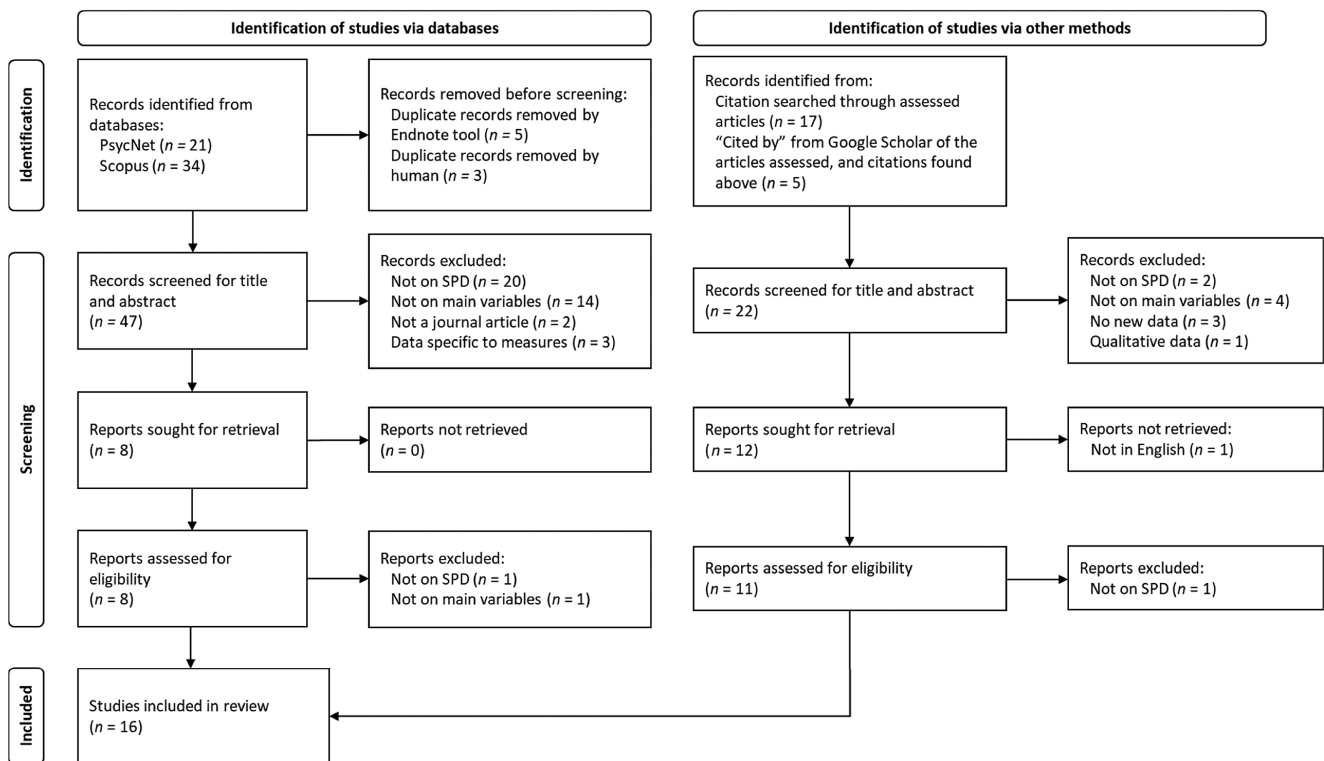
from this review to focus our attention on SPD including sexual dominance and submission but not on pain (either received or inflicted). From the articles screened through titles and abstracts, the studies that met the inclusion criteria were then retrieved ( $n = 8$ ). The complete articles were then screened to guarantee their eligibility; two articles were excluded because they did not include SPD ( $n = 1$ ) or did not use sexo-relational variables ( $n = 1$ ), leaving a total of six articles to be included in the review.

Additional methods used to identify potential studies included examining the references of each identified article and using Google Scholar “Cited by” from the eight previously retrieved articles. This strategy allowed us to identify 22 additional possible articles. Screening through titles and abstracts ( $n = 22$ ), 12 articles were identified as meeting the inclusion criteria. One article was not written in English ( $n = 1$ ), although the title and abstract were translated into English. The text of the remaining 11 articles was assessed for eligibility; one article was excluded as the context did not include SPD ( $n = 1$ ). A total of 10 articles were added to the review. The second author participated in the systematic review process, reviewing each decision during the screening process, and both authors agreed on the articles included and excluded in the review. The final sample consisted of 16 articles.

## Results

The information extracted from each article is presented in Table 1. Results are summarized in accordance with the four sexo-relational

**Figure 1**  
Flowchart of the Systematic Review Process



Note. SPD = sexual power dynamics.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptions of Reviewed Articles*

Study	Sample descriptive	SPD terminology	Outcome	Main result
Bonell et al. (2022)	308 heterosexual American women	Sexual submission (behaviour and interest in partner dominance)	Sexual satisfaction (dissatisfaction)	More sexually submissive behaviours were related with higher sexual dissatisfaction ( $r = .14$ ). Stronger interest in partner dominance was related with lower sexual dissatisfaction ( $r = -.14$ ). Interest in partner dominance moderated the link between sexual submissive behaviour and sexual dissatisfaction, where more sexual submission behaviours were associated with higher sexual dissatisfaction only when the participants reported lower interest in partner dominance.
Botta et al. (2019)	Italian participants, mostly heterosexual BDSM group: 266 (47% women)	BDSM practitioners classified into three groups (dominant, submissive, or switch)	Sexual satisfaction; sexual function (sexual complaints and distress, sexual dysfunction)	The dominant group reported higher sexual satisfaction compared to the submissive and non-BDSM groups; the switch group reported higher sexual satisfaction compared to the non-BDSM group. In men, the dominant group reported lower erectile dysfunction distress, lower premature ejaculation complaints, lower premature ejaculation distress, higher sexual satisfaction, and lower distress total compared to the submissive and the non-BDSM groups. Both dominant and switch groups reported less erectile dysfunction, less premature ejaculation, and fewer disorders than submissive and non-BDSM groups based on <i>DSM-5</i> criteria.
	Non-BDSM group: 200 (50% women)			In women, the dominant group reported fewer anorgasmia complaints, fewer sexual pain complaints, lower sexual pain distress, less persistent genital arousal complaints, higher sexual satisfaction, and lower distress total compared to women from submissive and non-BDSM groups. Women from dominant and switch groups reported less sexual pain and less overall disorders compared to submissive and non-BDSM groups based on <i>DSM-5</i> criteria.
Huang et al. (2023)	29,821 Finnish participants (66.2% women), mostly heterosexual (79%–88%)	Sexual submission and dominance (behaviour)	Sexual satisfaction; sexual distress; sexual function (dysfunction)	In men, the presence of sexual submission behaviour was associated with higher sexual distress ( $r = .119$ ), better erectile function ( $r = .040$ ), and less early ejaculation symptoms ( $r = -.126$ ). The presence of sexual dominance behaviour was related with higher sexual distress ( $r = .150$ ), better erectile function ( $r = .062$ ), better orgasmic function ( $r = .049$ ), higher intercourse satisfaction ( $r = .068$ ), higher sexual satisfaction ( $r = .042$ ), and less early ejaculation symptoms ( $r = -.156$ ).
Kiefer and Sanchez (2007)	American and heterosexual participants Study 1: 285 (43.5% women) Study 2: 398 (65.8% women from the original sample, before exclusions)	Sexual submission (passive sexual behaviour)	Sexual satisfaction (Studies 1 and 2); sexual function (desire in Study 1 and arousal in Study 2, ability to reach orgasm in Study 2)	In women, the presence of sexual submission behaviour was related with higher sexual distress ( $r = .175$ ), higher sexual desire ( $r = .326$ ), higher sexual arousal ( $r = .276$ ), more lubrication ( $r = .266$ ), more orgasm ( $r = .187$ ), higher sexual satisfaction ( $r = .265$ ), more sexual pain ( $r = .280$ ), and higher sexual function ( $r = .184$ ). The presence of sexual dominance behaviour was associated with more sexual distress ( $r = .147$ ), higher sexual desire ( $r = .288$ ), higher sexual arousal ( $r = .266$ ), more lubrication ( $r = .256$ ), more orgasm ( $r = .196$ ), higher sexual satisfaction ( $r = .261$ ), more sexual pain ( $r = .269$ ), and higher sexual function ( $r = .173$ ). In Study 1, in men and women, more sexual submission behaviours were related with lower sexual satisfaction ( $r_{\text{men}} = -.190$ ; $r_{\text{women}} = -.213$ ) and lower sexual desire ( $r_{\text{men}} = -.328$ ; $r_{\text{women}} = -.357$ ). In Study 2, only amongst women, more sexual submission behaviours were associated with lower sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.14$ ) and lower sexual arousal ( $r = -.18$ ). No associations were found between sexual submission behaviours and men's level of arousal and sexual satisfaction. No associations were found in women and men as for their sexual submission behaviours and their ability to reach orgasm.

(table continues)

**Table 1** (continued)

Study	Sample descriptive	SPD terminology	Outcome	Main result
Kiefer et al. (2006)	Heterosexual American women, undergraduate students Study 1: 48 Study 2: 110	Sexual submission and dominance (unconscious associations of sex with submission and unconscious associations of sex with dominance) BDSM practitioners separated into three groups (dominant, submissive, or switch)	Sexual function (subjective perceptions of their ability to become aroused in Study 1, overall ability to reach orgasm in Study 2)	In Study 1, a greater association of sex with submission was related with lower ability to become aroused ( $r = -.459$ ). In Study 2, a greater association of sex with submission was associated with a lesser ability to reach orgasm ( $r = -.229$ ).
Li (2024)	Chinese participants  BDSM group: 1,856 (77% women; 52.4% heterosexual) Non-BDSM group: 1,454 (44.5% women; 47.6% heterosexual)	BDSM practitioners separated into three groups (dominant, submissive, or switch)	Romantic attachment	Participants from the dominant group reported higher proportions of secure and avoidant attachment styles compared to submissive and switch groups. Participants from the submissive group had higher proportions of insecure and anxious attachment styles compared to the dominant and switch groups. Participants from the submissive group reported a higher mean score of anxious attachment compared to both dominant and switch groups. Women from the submissive group had a lower mean score of dependence attachment compared to women from dominant and switch groups.
Pascoal et al. (2015)	68 Portuguese participants who self-identified as a nonexclusive BDSM practitioner (32.4% women, mostly heterosexual (71%))	BDSM practitioners (self-identified nonexclusive BDSM practitioner)	Sexual satisfaction; sexual functioning distress	No differences were found as for the participant's, men and women, sexual satisfaction in a BDSM context compared to a non-BDSM context. Men reported lower distress related to their low desire, to their difficulties to feel aroused, to the maintenance of their arousal and their inhibition to orgasm when engaged in a BDSM context compared to a non-BDSM context. Women reported a lower level of distress related to the maintenance of their arousal in a BDSM context compared to a non-BDSM context.
Richters et al. (2008)	19,307 Australians (47% women)	BDSM practitioners (B&D or S&M)	Sexual difficulties in the last 12 months	No differences were found in terms of participants' sexual difficulties between BDSM and non-BDSM groups.
Rogak and Connor (2018)	163 BDSM practitioners (46% women; 53.8% heterosexual; 95.7% white)	BDSM practitioners separated into two groups (dominant and submissive)	Relationship satisfaction	No differences were found in terms of participants' relationship satisfaction between the dominant and submissive groups.
Sanchez et al. (2006)	Study 4: 96 heterosexual American women, undergraduate students	Sexual submission (behaviour)	Sexual function (subjective arousal and arousal difficulty)	More sexual submission behaviours were associated with lower subjective sexual arousal ( $r = -.253$ ) and more difficulties with sexual arousal ( $r = .201$ ).
Sanchez et al. (2012)	181 heterosexual American couples (50% women)	Sexual submission (behaviour and interest in partner dominance)	Relationship satisfaction; sexual function (sexual desire)	In men, more submissive behaviours were related with lower levels of their own sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.21$ ) and sexual desire ( $r = -.18$ ). In women, more interest towards a dominant partner was associated with higher levels of their own sexual satisfaction ( $r = .33$ ) and sexual desire ( $r = .35$ ). More submissive behaviours were related with lower levels of their own sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.19$ ) and relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.18$ ), as well as lower levels of their partner's sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.22$ ) and sexual desire ( $r = -.20$ ). An integrative model based on actor-partner interdependence model showed a direct link where more submissive behaviours in women were associated with their lower sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = -.20$ ). Moderations were also found in this model and explored further through simple slopes analysis. In women with low interest in partner dominance, more submissive behaviours were associated with lower levels of their sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = -.35$ ) and their partner's sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = -.24$ ). When women reported high interest in partner dominance, these were no longer significant associations. More arousal towards ritual sub/dom games was associated with lower relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.048$ ). More interests in BDSM were related with lower relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.037$ ) and sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.045$ ). More BDSM behaviours were associated with higher sexual satisfaction ( $r = .054$ ).
Strizzi et al. (2022)	4,148 Norwegians (47.3% women), mostly heterosexual (93.5%)	BDSM (arousal, interest, and behaviour)	Relationship satisfaction; sexual satisfaction	More interests in BDSM were related with lower relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.037$ ) and sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.045$ ). More BDSM behaviours were associated with higher sexual satisfaction ( $r = .054$ ).

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Study	Sample descriptive	SPD terminology	Outcome	Main result
Ten Brink et al. (2021)	Total sample of 1,289 individuals, mostly heterosexual (85.3%; 52.6% women)	BDSM interests were divided into four groups (not interested, fantasy, practitioners within private practice, and community practice), and BDSM identities amongst practitioners were separated into three groups (dominant, submissive, and switch)	Romantic attachment	When assessing for associations between BDSM and attachment style, within the BDSM practitioners who had community practices, reporting more dominant behaviours was associated with more secure attachment ( $r = .206$ ), while reporting more submissive behaviours was related to more insecure attachment ( $r = .200$ ). No group differences within BDSM interests' groups were found for the avoidant attachment style. BDSM practitioners within a community practice reported the highest secure attachment scores, compared to the other groups (non-BDSM, BDSM fantasy, and BDSM private practice). Participants from BDSM community practice reported less insecure attachment compared to participants with BDSM private practice and BDSM fantasy. Participants with BDSM community practice reported more anxious attachment compared to participants with BDSM private practice and non-BDSM participants. Participants from BDSM fantasy group had a higher score of anxious attachment in contrast to the non-BDSM individuals. No group differences were found for the avoidant and anxious attachment styles when comparing BDSM identities' groups within BDSM practitioners. Participants from the dominant group reported more secure attachment compared to the submissive group and lower insecure attachment compared to participants from the submissive and switch groups. No significant group effect was found for the avoidant attachment style when comparing non-BDSM to BDSM identities' groups only within BDSM community practitioners. Participants from the non-BDSM group reported the lowest score of secure attachment, compared to those from the BDSM community groups (dominant, submissive, and switch). Participants from the dominant group reported lower scores of insecure attachment compared to those of the submissive and the non-BDSM groups. Anxious attachment was lower within the non-BDSM group compared to the BDSM community groups (dominant, submissive, and switch). In men, no associations were found between BDSM interests and romantic attachment as well as with relationship satisfaction. In women, no association was found between BDSM interests and relationship satisfaction. In men, more BDSM interests were associated with higher sexual satisfaction ( $r = .21$ ). In women, more BDSM interests were related with lower attachment dependence ( $r = -.16$ ) and higher sexual satisfaction ( $r = .19$ ). Higher score of SPD was linked with higher levels of sexual excitation ( $r = .64$ ), arousability ( $r = .38$ ), sexual function at baseline ( $r = .25$ ), sexual function at Follow-Up 1 ( $r = .21$ ), and sexual function at Follow-Up 2 ( $r = .15$ ). Higher score of SPD was, on the other hand, associated with lower levels of sexual inhibition ( $r = -.30$ ), concerns about sexual function ( $r = -.17$ ), and arousal contingency ( $r = -.27$ ). In men, participants from the dominant group had a lower mean score of anxious attachment compared to submissive and switch groups. In women, anxious attachment style was lower for BDSM compared to non-BDSM participants, lower for dominant compared to submissive and non-BDSM individuals. No significant group differences were found for avoidant attachment, discomfort with closeness, and preoccupation when comparing BDSM identities.
Vander Molen et al. (2021)	614 American or Canadian participants (44.8% women, mostly heterosexual (82%))	BDSM interests	Romantic attachment; relationship satisfaction; sexual satisfaction	
Velten et al. (2017)	2,214 German women at baseline (last data point, $n = 278$ ), mostly heterosexual (71.6%)	Sexual power dynamics	Sexual function (sexual function, sexual excitation, arousability, sexual inhibition, concerns about sexual function, and arousal contingency)	
Wismeijer and van Assen (2013)	Dutch participants	BDSM identities separated into three groups (dominant, submissive, or switch)	Romantic attachment	
	BDSM group: 902 (48.6% women) Non-BDSM group: 434 (70.3% women)			

Note. Data reported were significant ( $p < .05$ ), whereas the absence of differences or associations were nonsignificant ( $p > .05$ ). SPD = sexual power dynamics; BDSM = bondage-discipline, domination-submission, and sadism-masochism; DSM-5 = *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition.

variables targeted in this review: romantic attachment, sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and sexual functioning. The characteristics of each sample (i.e., age, sample size, country of residence, gender, sexual orientation, information on recruitment) as well as the definition used in each study are also presented. The effect sizes are reported based on usual standards (i.e., small when  $r \geq .10$ , medium when  $r \geq .30$ , large when  $r \geq .50$ ; Cohen, 1988).

### Samples' Sociodemographic Characteristics

Sociodemographic characteristics are detailed to contextualize the results of the reviewed studies (see Table 1 for details). The main takeaways are that the sample sizes varied greatly, from 48 to almost 3,000 participants. A considerable proportion of participants were sampled from North American or European countries. Most studies primarily included women in their sample, while some had equal proportions of men and women. Most of the studies focused on binary gender identities, with a few including nonbinary or trans participants though their low representation (<2%) often led to their exclusion when doing gender-based comparative analyses. Regarding sexual orientation, most studies included only heterosexual participants or a majority of their sample identified as heterosexual, with few studies not reporting or specifying their participants' sexual orientation.

### SPD: Terminology and Definitions

The SPD-related terminology and definitions used within the reviewed articles were documented, due to their implications to understand and generalize the data. A total of four main terminology categories were extracted: (a) BDSM, (b) SPD, (c) sexual submission, and (d) sexual dominance. Those terminology categories are described based on the operationalization and definitions offered. See Table 2 for a detailed account of each article's terminology, indicators, and definitions used.

### BDSM

BDSM is an acronym that refers to bondage–discipline, domination–submission, and sadism–masochism and is the most used term in the current scientific literature. A total of nine articles focused on BDSM, and the authors used three different empirical indicators to identify BDSM participants, either through self-identification as a BDSM practitioner, individuals exploring BDSM-specific forums/websites, or based on their response to BDSM-related questions/measures assessing their levels of interest or behaviours. Self-identification regrouped studies where being a BDSM practitioner was necessary to participate in their study (Botta et al., 2019; Li, 2024; Pascoal et al., 2015). Other authors assumed that their targeted advertisements done through BDSM-specific forums/websites attracted participants who can be labelled as BDSM practitioners (Rogak & Connor, 2018; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Finally, other studies used questions to identify BDSM practitioners (Richters et al., 2008; Ten Brink et al., 2021; Vander Molen et al., 2021).

BDSM includes sexual submission and sexual dominance without specific emphasis on one or the other. Within the nine studies that used BDSM, five inquired about the participants' roles and interest levels to perform comparative group analysis (Botta et al., 2019; Li, 2024; Rogak & Connor, 2018; Ten Brink et al., 2021; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Within these five studies, three studies divided

BDSM practitioners into the same three groups and used Wismeijer and van Assen (2013) definitions (Botta et al., 2019; Ten Brink et al., 2021; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

### SPD

Only one study used the term SPD, which was measured via a subscale of a related questionnaire (Velten et al., 2017).

### Sexual Submission

A total of five studies examined sexual submission, either by measuring sexual submission/passive behaviours or interest in partner dominance. Three studies used the same measure for sexual submission behaviours (Bonell et al., 2022; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2012), while Huang et al. (2023) grouped participants based on the presence or absence of such behaviours. Interest in partner dominance was measured in two studies (Bonell et al., 2022; Sanchez et al., 2012), though terminology varied across these studies, with Bonell et al. (2022) using different terms interchangeably when referencing this concept. Similarly, Kiefer et al. (2006) used different terms to associate sex with submission.

### Sexual Dominance

The concept of sexual dominance was included in two studies, where it was either measured through questions (Huang et al., 2023) or with using different terms to associate sex with dominance (Kiefer et al., 2006).

### SPD and Romantic Attachment

This review identified four studies that examined the associations between romantic attachment and BDSM (Li, 2024; Ten Brink et al., 2021; Vander Molen et al., 2021; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Overall, BDSM practitioners tended to report more secure attachment and lower levels of anxious and avoidant attachment than non-BDSM participants, although findings were not entirely consistent across studies. Some gender differences emerged, where women with BDSM interest reported lower avoidant attachment (Vander Molen et al., 2021; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Subgroups analyses yielded mixed results, but dominant participants generally reported less attachment insecurities than submissive, switch, and non-BDSM groups (Li, 2024; Ten Brink et al., 2021). Differences based on BDSM interests (non-BDSM, BDSM fantasies, BDSM community practice, and BDSM private practice) were observed, although interpretations are limited as these categories were examined only in one study (Ten Brink et al., 2021). Participants engaged in BDSM community practice reported higher secure attachment and higher anxious attachment than other groups, while individuals with BDSM fantasies had higher anxious attachment compared to non-BDSM participants, and no differences were found for avoidant attachment (Ten Brink et al., 2021).

### SPD and Relationship Satisfaction

Four studies examined relationship satisfaction and BDSM (Rogak & Connor, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2012; Strizzi et al., 2022; Vander Molen et al., 2021). Overall, associations were weak and inconsistent. Specifically, interest towards SPD was weakly

**Table 2***SPD Terminology, Indicators, and Definitions in Reviewed Articles*

Terminology category	Empirical indicator used	Operationalization and definition
1. BDSM	Self-identification as an inclusion criterion, no definition mentioned	<p>Botta et al. (2019) regrouped “participants who self-identified as consensual BDSM practitioners” (p. 464). Botta et al. regrouped their participants into three groups: dominant, submissive, and switch, where they referenced Wismeijer and van Assen’s (2013) definitions.</p> <p>Li (2024) asked participants: “Are you someone who engages in BDSM-related activities?” (p. 3). Li regrouped the participants within three groups: dom, sub, and switch. “Dom” refers to people who “prefer discipline and/or dominance and/or act as a sadist and/or act as a caregiver in BDSM-related activities,” “Sub” is for people who “prefer to be submissive and/or be subjected to bondage and/or act as a masochist and/or as a ‘little’ role in BDSM-related activities,” and “Switch” when they “can change their identity as they wish” (p. 3).</p> <p>Pascoal et al. (2015) included people who “self-identifying as a nonexclusive BDSM practitioner” (p. 1054).</p>
	BDSM-specific forums/websites	<p>Rogak and Connor (2018) specified wanting the participants to make their own interpretations, using the labels as presented on FetLife.com (a popular social network for the BDSM, fetish, and kinky community) and the site’s absence of defined labels. Rogak and Connor regrouped their participants into two groups: dominants and submissives, by combining “top” and “dominant” into “Dominants,” and combining “bottom” and “submissive” into “Submissives” (p. 461).</p> <p>Wismeijer and van Assen (2013) mentioned their research objective in their advertisement as “a study mapping the psychology of the practice of BDSM” (p. 1 945). Wismeijer and van Assen regrouped BDSM practitioners into three groups with associated definitions: (a) dominant/dom is “the person that exerts control,” (b) submissive/sub is “the person that gives up control,” and (c) switch is “expressing the possibility to be flexible, playing as dom or sub, in different scenes or with different partners” (p. 1 943).</p>
	BDSM-related questions	<p>Richters et al. (2008) selected the participants who responded “yes” to “In the last 12 months have you been involved in B&amp;D or S&amp;M? That’s bondage and discipline, sadomasochism, or dominance and submission” (p. 1 668).</p> <p>Strizzi et al. (2022) measured the participants’ BDSM arousal (i.e., “can think of doing this myself” or “could see yourself being sexually stimulated by”), BDSM interest (i.e., “I want to try it”), and BDSM behaviour (i.e., “I have already tried it”) using the following items: “(a) Could you see yourself being sexually stimulated by ritual games connected to dominance and submission? (b) Could you see yourself being sexually stimulated by using consensual dominance/submission/pain? (c) What have you tried, or want to try, during sex: Roleplay? (d) What have you tried, or want to try, during sex: BDSM (sadomasochism, bondage, dominance and submission)?” (pp. 250–251).</p> <p>Ten Brink et al. (2021) used 54 items measuring participants’ level of “interest and practice experience with specific BDSM activities” (p. 3), to identify participants based on their BDSM interest/practice: (a) “No interest,” (b) “Fantasy,” (c) “BDSM-Private Practice” where “practitioners performed their activities solely at home,” and (d) “BDSM-Community Practice” where “practitioners performed their activities within an existing BDSM Community” (p. 3). Ten Brink et al. divided their BDSM practitioners into three identity groups: dominant, submissive, and switch, referencing Wismeijer and van Assen’s (2013) definitions of these groups.</p> <p>Vander Molen et al. (2021) used an adapted BDSM subscale (seven items) of the Paraphilias Scale (Seto et al., 2012) to identify participants with BDSM interest, where the participants reported their level of interest, from “very repulsive” to “very arousing” for the following items: “You are being tied or handcuffed,” “You are tying or handcuffing someone,” “You are being spanked, beaten, or whipped by someone,” “You are controlling or dominating someone,” “You are being controlled or dominated by someone,” “You are spanking, beating, or whipping someone,” and “You are having your breathing restricted during sexual activity” (p. 280).</p>
2. SPD	SPD-related questions	<p>Velten et al. (2017) used the four-item subscale of the Sexual Excitation Scale, where items are: “Feeling overpowered in a sexual situation by someone I trust increases my arousal,” “It turns me on if my partner ‘talks dirty’ to me during sex,” “If a partner is forceful during sex, it reduces my arousal,” and “Dominating my partner is arousing to me” (code reverse; Graham et al., 2006, p. 402).</p>
3. Sexual submission	Sexual submission behaviour-related questions	<p>Sexual submission behaviour was measured with items developed by Sanchez et al. (2006) in three studies (Bonell et al., 2022; Kiefer &amp; Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2012). The items are as follows: “I tend to take on the passive role during sexual activity,” “I tend to take on the submissive role during sexual activities,” “I prefer to take on the passive role during sexual activities,” and “I prefer to take on the more agentic or active role during sexual activity” (reverse coded; Sanchez et al., 2006, p. 516).</p>

*(table continues)*

**Table 2** (continued)

Terminology category	Empirical indicator used	Operationalization and definition
	Level of interest in partner dominance-related questions	Huang et al. (2023) regrouped three different population-based data sets where the first data set had two items: "Have you ever been humiliated in a way that made you sexually aroused?" and "Has somebody ever caused you physical pain so that you became sexually aroused by it?" whereas one item was used in the other two data sets: "Have you been dominated, humiliated, controlled (e.g., bondage), or have your partner caused you pain, with mutual consent to achieve sexual pleasure?" (p. 2), to differentiate their participants according to the presence or absence of sexual submission behaviours (1 = <i>yes</i> , 0 = <i>no</i> ). Sanchez et al. (2012) and Bonell et al. (2022) measured the participants' level of interest in partner dominance via the same three items: "I find it arousing when my partner is the aggressive one in bed," "I think it is sexiest when my partner takes control in bed," and "I think it is very exciting when my partner leads our sexual experiences" (Bonell et al., 2022; Sanchez et al., 2012, p. 532). Bonell et al. used the terms enjoying submissiveness and sexual preference for submission interchangeably with participants' level of interest in partner dominance. Kiefer et al. (2006) used the terms "comply, submit, slave, yield, concede, and weaken" to associate sex with submission (p. 86).
4. Sexual dominance	Sexual dominance-related questions	Huang et al. (2023) measured sexual dominance with two items in their first data set: "Have you ever caused another person physical pain and become sexually aroused by it?" and "Have you ever humiliated somebody and become sexually aroused by it?" whereas one item was used in their other two data sets: "Have you dominated, humiliated, controlled (e.g., bondage), or caused pain to a partner, with mutual consent to achieve sexual pleasure?" (p. 2). The participants were divided into two groups according to the presence (1 = <i>yes</i> ) or absence (0 = <i>no</i> ) of sexual dominance behaviours. Kiefer et al. (2006) had the following terms that associated sex with dominance: "coerce, assert, power, fierce, strong, and challenge" (p. 86).

*Note.* SPD = sexual power dynamics; BDSM = bondage–discipline, domination–submission, and sadism–masochism.

associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Sanchez et al., 2012; Strizzi et al., 2022), whereas no association was found in other studies (Rogak & Connor, 2018; Vander Molen et al., 2021).

### SPD and Sexual Satisfaction

Findings regarding SPD and sexual satisfaction were found in eight studies and were also mixed. BDSM behaviours were weakly associated with higher sexual satisfaction, whereas BDSM interest showed inconsistent associations, being linked to both lower (Strizzi et al., 2022) and higher sexual satisfaction (Vander Molen et al., 2021). No differences were found between BDSM and non-BDSM contexts (Pascoal et al., 2015). Sexual dominance was consistently associated with higher sexual satisfaction, while findings for sexual submission varied (Bonell et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2012). Both sexual dominance and submission behaviours were associated with higher levels of sexual distress (Huang et al., 2023). Subgroup analyses indicated higher sexual satisfaction amongst dominant and switch participants compared to their counterparts from the submissive and the non-BDSM groups (Botta et al., 2019).

### SPD and Sexual Function

Nine studies examined SPD and sexual function, including sexual dysfunction, yielding mixed but predominantly positive results. Some studies reported no association between BDSM and sexual difficulties (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Richters et al., 2008). Other studies identified negative associations primarily linking sexual submission to lower sexual desire, arousal, and orgasmic capacity (Kiefer et al., 2006; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2006,

2012). Sanchez et al. (2012) also found the opposite to be true, where higher sexual desire was associated with women reporting greater interest in a dominant partner. Other studies found SPD to be associated with greater overall sexual functioning and lower distress (Huang et al., 2023; Pascoal et al., 2015; Velten et al., 2017). Another discrepancy was found where increased sexual pain was observed amongst women engaging in SPD behaviours (Huang et al., 2023). Subgroup analyses further indicated that dominant and switch participants reported fewer sexual difficulties and lower prevalence of sexual dysfunctions (based on criteria of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) than submissive and non-BDSM groups across genders (Botta et al., 2019).

### Discussion

The present systematic literature review allowed to paint a picture of the empirical data published on SPD and their associations with sexo-relational well-being, namely, romantic attachment, relationship and sexual satisfaction, as well as sexual functioning. A total of 16 articles were included in our review, without controlling for the date of the publication. All articles were published over the past 18 years. The main takeaways and recommendations are discussed below to help further empirical knowledge on SPD and their association with sexo-relational well-being.

### Samples' Sociodemographic Characteristics

The examination of the samples' characteristics of the reviewed articles showed a lack of diversity in terms of gender identities and

sexual orientation. Specifically, no comparative results are available to document potential differences or specificities for nonbinary, trans, and genderqueer folks. As for the participants' sexual orientation, 75% of the studies had a predominantly heterosexual sample, with limited representation of people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, and so forth. Interestingly, Richters et al.'s (2008) study highlighted that people who participated in BDSM in the past year were more likely to identify as bisexual, lesbian, or gay.

### SPD: Terminology and Definitions

There is a lack of consensus regarding SPD terminology and definition through empirical knowledge. This limits the comparability of available data, as discrepancies take precedence and do not allow the accurate identification of meaningful nuances. Specifically, most studies used the term BDSM practices or interests as their terminology of SPD, and only one study used the term SPD. SPD as defined in Velten et al. (2017) seems to be inadequate since it includes *dirty talk*, which is not specific to SPD, and also used the terms *overpowered* and *forceful* (Graham et al., 2006), which could gain from adding the notion of consent which is instrumental in terms of SPD to differentiate it from interpersonal sexual violence (e.g., Bolduc et al., 2024). Some definitions of sexual submission or dominance also appeared questionable as they included other concepts such as humiliation, physical pain, bondage (Huang et al., 2023), sexual passivity (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007), and aggressiveness in bed (Bonell et al., 2022; Sanchez et al., 2012). When using the term BDSM, SPD are included, but also bondage and sadomasochism (inflicting and/or receiving pain), terms that fall outside the scope of SPD. Without specific definitions and distinctions, it is possible that studies regroup heterogeneous groups of people, which could explain some of the discrepancies found in the reviewed data. Most studies on BDSM did not offer a specific definition, and authors mentioned not defining the terms to allow for each participant's own perspective and self-identification to having BDSM interest or practices.

SPD seem more appropriate to accurately represent people's sexual interest towards sexual power hierarchy (Bolduc et al., 2024), given that most people who report SPD-related behaviours do not self-identify as BDSM practitioners (Coppens et al., 2020). The presence of a sexual power hierarchy encompasses both sexual dominance and sexual submission. Sexual dominance refers to a person who takes charge during sex, enjoys exerting consensual sexual control over their partner, and is aroused when their partner sexually submits to them (Bolduc et al., 2024; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Sexual submission refers to a person who lets their partner's lead during sex, enjoys consensually yielding sexual control to their partner, and is aroused when their partner sexually dominates them (Bolduc et al., 2024; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

For rigorous scientific conclusions, the categories proposed by Ten Brink et al. (2021) seem promising. It could be beneficial for future studies to regroup participants in accordance with their SPD interests: (a) not interested in SPD, (b) fantasizing about SPD, and SPD behaviours, (c) differentiating from their settings from private (d) to community practices. Studying subgroups according to their specific SPD interest could add a level of specificity that is currently lacking in the scientific literature. This recommendation could allow for more accurate and homogeneous groups of participants, as well

as testing if and what differentiates these groups in terms of their sexo-relational well-being.

### SPD and Sexo-Relational Well-Being

Given the mixed results found, it is challenging to highlight an accurate overarching conclusion about SPD and their association with sexo-relational well-being. Overall, SPD seem to be generally associated with better sexo-relational well-being, notwithstanding the need to better understand the discrepancies found. Some nuances were found in terms of differentiating SPD interests level and participants' role (dominant or submissive). We hypothesize that the mixed results observed in the scientific literature are largely driven by the lack of consensus regarding the definitions and measures used to assess SPD and sexo-relational well-being variables, which hinders the comparability of findings across studies and limits the interpretability of such heterogeneous results.

### Limits and Further Research

A focal point in terms of the present review's limits pertains to the difficulty to generalize the data reviewed due to the varied terminologies and SPD definitions used in the studies. Considering the absence of common definition of SPD, qualitative and participative work could allow to have people's perspective and definition of these concepts. Most studies reported weak links (i.e.,  $r < .30$ ; Cohen, 1988) between SPD and sexo-relational well-being, highlighting the need to further study these associations to examine potential mechanisms or indirect factors that could be at play. The scope of the present review was limited to quantitative work, and statistically significant associations were emphasized. Reporting all statistically nonsignificant links could garner further exploration to better explain this phenomenon which could potentially offer a more complex/nuanced understanding than the one currently available. Only one study (Sanchez et al., 2012) included both partners within their sample and was able to analyze their data based on the actor-partner interdependence model. Future studies should include dyadic design to consider the interdependence of such concepts amongst the dyad of the couple. Considering the limited diversity found in the reviewed articles, future studies should also overrepresent diverse groups of people in terms of their gender identity, their sexual orientation, and cultural background to then ensure the necessary statistical power to include them into comparative analyses, allowing to empirically test if their results are similar amongst these groups too. Last, as the field advances towards greater conceptual and methodological standardization, future research would benefit from meta-analytic approaches to more accurately estimate effect sizes, clarify inconsistencies, and strengthen evidence-based knowledge.

### Clinical Implications

The overall results of this review highlight the importance to inquire about the person's perspective, specifically their own understanding and definition of SPD without judgement. Integrating this approach could also limit the prejudice of having a lens that pathologizes or focuses on SPD as being harmful or oversimplifying it as being healthy. Most of the reviewed findings highlight the potential benefits of SPD on sexo-relational well-being while also supporting that some difficulties may arise, especially regarding

SPD and relationship satisfaction. Exploring the couple's level of comfort to discuss and explore their SPD interests/behaviours could be a key element to better understand the link between SPD and sexo-relational well-being. This exploration could also allow to clarify the expectations and needs centred around SPD and to find a common ground if differences arise between partners as for their SPD preferences, which could enhance their sexo-relational well-being by actualizing their desires in a more congruent way. These open and honest discussions could lessen potential resentment and frustration that partners could feel if their SPD preferences differed or have not yet been actualized and integrated as part of the realm of possibilities within their sexual practices. Therapists can foster a safe environment for partners to identify their individual and common desires, as well as facilitate these open discussions.

## Conclusion

Through reviewing the data on SPD and sexo-relational well-being, the need to pursue such studies has shown through the inconsistencies and lack of definitive answers. A hypothesis could be that we are missing a piece of the present puzzle when it comes to SPD and their associations with romantic attachment, relationship and sexual satisfaction, and sexual functioning. There could be indirect factors implicated such as the importance or place that SPD has within people's sexuality, ranging from occasional to necessary, as well as exploring the potential implications for (in)compatibility or flexibility of such SPD interests/behaviours within a romantic relationship (e.g., both partners are interested in sexual dominance; one partner is interested in sexual submission and the other is not). These avenues could allow to better understand the differences found when it comes to SPD and their associations with sexo-relational well-being.

## Résumé

Cette revue de la documentation scientifique s'est intéressée aux dynamiques de pouvoir sexuelles (DPS) et à leurs associations avec le bien-être sexo-relational, notamment l'attachement romantique, la satisfaction relationnelle et sexuelle, ainsi que le fonctionnement sexuel. Historiquement, l'intérêt pour la domination et/ou la soumission sexuelles a été pathologisé, les données empiriques ne soutiennent plus l'hypothèse selon laquelle les DPS sont intrinsèquement problématiques et donc associées à une détresse ou des difficultés sexo-relationnelles. La présente revue systématique visait à mettre en lumière les associations entre les intérêts/comportements sexuels envers les dynamiques de pouvoir et le bien-être sexo-relational, en s'appuyant sur des données quantitatives publiées. La recherche documentaire a permis de recenser 77 articles, dont 16 ont été jugés éligibles et inclus dans cette revue. Les résultats ont mis en évidence des contradictions, avec des liens entre les DPS et un bien-être sexo-relational accru, ou au contraire, avec une détresse ou des difficultés sexo-relationnelles. Les résultats ont révélé de faibles associations avec le bien-être sexo-relational et ont souligné la nécessité d'effectuer des recherches complémentaires pour mieux comprendre les associations entre les DPS et le bien-être sexo-relational. Un point central qui ressort de cette recension concerne l'absence de terminologie et de définition communes des intérêts et comportements liés aux DPS, limitant notre compréhension actuelle des concepts ciblés. Les résultats ont révélé de faibles associations entre les

DPS et le bien-être sexo-relational, soulignant la pertinence d'examiner les effets indirects d'autres variables sur ces associations dans de futures recherches.

**Mots-clés :** dynamiques de pouvoir sexuelles, BDSM, revue systématique de la littérature, bien-être sexo-relational

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