

# “A View From the Top”: Crafting the Male “Domdentity” in Domestic Discipline Relationships

Journal of Men's Studies  
2015, Vol. 23(1) 63–78  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1060826514561976  
men.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

Domestic discipline (DD) is a relationship approach that advocates wifely submission and male dominance through the use of disciplinary tactics such as spanking. Because DD is seen as a deviant behavioral approach to relationships, men often turn to blogs to chronicle their experiences with DD. These blogs provide insight regarding their identity as a Dominant (Dom), or what they refer to as their “Domdentity.” The purpose of our study is to investigate how Doms socially construct and perform their Domdentity. The Domdentity is constructed through a dialectic of discipline and love in the DD relationship, continuously working to maintain the DD relationship, and actively participating, and questioning their roles, in the DD relationship.

## Keywords

hegemonic masculinity, social construction, identity, domestic discipline

Romantic relationships that include spanking have recently been thrust into the public eye as a result of the vastly popular *50 Shades of Grey* trilogy, which depicts a sado-masochistic relationship between a young female college student and a male business magnate. The three-book series has sold more than 70 million copies worldwide (Hendrix, 2013), and a movie based on the books is slated to be released in August 2014 (Savage, 2013). Journalists have recently investigated the practice of engaging in

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sadomasochistic behaviors (e.g., spanking and other punishments) that are practiced under the banner of “Domestic Discipline” (Bennett-Smith, 2013; Dolan, 2013; Rubino, 2013). Domestic discipline (DD) is described by a DD handbook as

... the practice between two consenting life partners in which the head of the household (HOH) takes [t]he necessary measures to achieve a healthy relationship dynamic; the necessary measure to create a healthy home environment and the necessary measures to protect all members of the family from dangerous or detrimental outcomes by punishing the contributing, and thus unwanted, behaviors for the greater good of the family. (“Beginner’s Packet,” 2013, p. 4)

In traditional DD, the dominant, punishment-delivering head of the household (HOH) is male, and his submissive partner is female. Punishments in the form of lecturing, removing privileges, corner time-outs, or spanking are doled out as a means to correct the woman’s unwanted behaviors and keep her submissive (Beusman, 2013). Often, the men require their female counterparts to maintain a blog as part of her “wifely duties,” and, in some instances, the men also blog about their DD experiences. As the men blog, they describe what it means to be the Dominant (or “Dom”) in the relationship. They often provide insight regarding their identity as a Dom, or what they refer to as their “Domidentity.” They discuss topics such as personal growth and role-related challenges. These blogs and the issue of Domidentity are the focus of our research.

The purpose of our study is to investigate how Doms in DD relationships describe and perform their Domidentity. We begin with a discussion of how individuals socially construct identity, focusing on the ways men create and resist hegemonic masculine identities. After explaining our methodology, we present the social construction of the Domidentity, highlighting the tensions men experience as they wrestle with this new and contradictory identity. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings, underscoring the difficulties of adopting alternative and competing identities and problematizing how we make sense of masculine identities.

## **Literature Review**

Communication scholars have long positioned communication as a socially constructed experience in which meanings between people are co-constructed through interaction (Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Identity construction (how we see and present ourselves in our social world) is directly tied to how we socially construct the world (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Identity provides a structure that helps organize experiences, including our relationships with others (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). Others may accept or reject our identity, which will have a bearing on both how we understand ourselves and our behaviors. Because our social world is created and maintained through interactions, our identities must also be created and maintained (Thorne, 2004) and is a constant, ongoing process (Ochs, 1993). Through the creation and enactment of our identity, we discover who we are as people as well as who we are

when performing certain social roles with others (Guiot, 1977). This means that there is a performative nature to our identity; we enact different identities (personal and social), depending on the situation. As revealed in this study, men may be performing a number of roles, including the Dom role.

Through everyday interaction, identities are constantly updated as they are supported, challenged, or reshaped (Bagnoli, 2003). Certain events often cause us to reexamine our identity and can lead to the development and performance of new identities (Bagnoli, 2003; Dutton et al., 2010). As individuals adapt to changing conditions, their identities evolve. Performance of identity requires us to change or adopt new behaviors (Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002). This is a reciprocal relationship; as we adopt new behaviors, we reinforce our new identity through action (Ochs, 1993). Deciding to implement a DD relationship is an example of a life-altering event that can force both parties to reexamine their identities. As we argue in this study, men must not only reexamine it but also change their identity to embody the masculine identity of the Dom. As men continue to perform their Dom identity, they further reinforce their new identity.

### *Masculine Identity*

Masculinity is a socially constructed identity performance, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes challenging dominant understandings of what it means to be masculine. To “be ‘masculine’ is to have a particular psychological identity, social role, cultural script” (Stimpson, 1987, p. xii). Masculinity is often associated with traits, behaviors, and characteristics that imply authority and mastery; by contrast, femininity is often associated with traits, behaviors, and characteristics that communicate passivity and subordination (Kimmel, 1987). The masculine identity emphasizes achieving control over an “other,” usually women. The definition of masculinity plays an important role in informing and influencing identity. Brod (1987) defined this process in terms of “hegemonic masculinities . . . the term for the institutionalized codes that . . . govern and restrict all men’s lives, and give some men power over others” (p. 12). As the culturally idealized form of masculine character (Connell, 1990), masculinity becomes hegemonic when it is accepted as commonplace, expected, or the desired norm for how men should be (Hanke, 1990). Societal expectations still foster “persisting images of masculinity . . . that ‘real men’ are physically strong, aggressive, and in control” (Brod, 1987, p. 14).

Five characteristics comprise the discursive composition of hegemonic masculinity: (a) physical force and control, (b) occupational achievement, (c) familial patriarchy, (d) frontiersmanship, and (e) heterosexuality (Trujillo, 1991). Physical force and control serves as “the anchor” in discussions of hegemonic masculinity (see Connell, 1990) because the definition of “masculine” includes physical strength, speed, and control. All of these elements lay the groundwork for the other characteristics. Overall, hegemonic masculinities are designed to maintain power hierarchies; in other words, “performing power is performing masculinity” (Hatfield, 2010, p. 527).

### *“Double-Bind of Masculinity”*

Gregory Bateson (1969/1972) introduced the concept of “double-bind.” The double-bind theory focuses on communication dilemmas that arise when an individual receives two conflicting messages that negate each other. The double bind puts an individual in a difficult communicative place because to respond to one message automatically means to not respond to another message. Bordo, a feminist theorist, argued that the “double-bind of masculinity” arose as a result of a culture that both praises male “primitive potency” and prohibits male sexual aggression. Bordo’s (1999) conceptualization of the double bind of masculinity is “any situation in which a person is directed to fulfill two mutually incompatible instructions, in which they are directed to fulfill two contradictory requirements at the same time” (p. 242). She referred to a double bind as being when individuals are faced with “contradictory directives that put [them] in a difficult (if not impossible)” position (Bordo, 1999, p. 242).

Bordo (1999) considered the double standard created by society in which men are expected to show their masculinity through strength and dominance, yet also embody the characteristics of a true gentleman and show complete control over their bodies the minute a woman says “no.” For instance, violence in men is rewarded in our society, adding to the misunderstanding men face regarding whether they are to act on their animal qualities or to perform their role of a gentleman. For example, players who show their dominance on the football field or basketball court are compensated with “scholarships, community adulation, romantic attention, special attendance deals cut with teachers, administrative leniency when ‘boys will be boys’” (Bordo, 1999, p. 234). Western culture assumes that young men will know how to combine the exclusionary opposite roles of being a “gentlemen” and at the same time being primal (Bordo, 1999).

For Bordo (1999), this primal framing is problematic not because men should not behave as gentlemen (and should sedate libido when instructed), but rather because these discourses of masculinity put two opposing ideals of proper masculine behavior as both possible and desirable in one male body. Bordo’s exploration of the double bind of masculinity provides a useful tool for analyzing cases of DD, as men in DD relationships find themselves in a double bind, negotiating the tension between punishing a submissive wife and knowing when to comfort her.

Guided by the theoretical ideas of social construction of identity and the double bind of masculinity, we posited the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How do men in DD relationships construct their DD identity?

**Research Question 2:** What tensions arise for men in the performance of the DD identity?

### **Method**

We were interested in how men, as the dominant partner in the DD relationship, make sense of their participation in DD. To study this phenomenon, we turned to unsolicited

blog posts as the appropriate discourse to analyze. The use of blogs, as forms of public texts, allow researchers to explore individuals' lived experiences in their own words and in their own time (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Using blogs is also appropriate, as participation in DD is usually a private experience not shared with others. The Internet provides bloggers with anonymity and a safe space to talk about DD.

We began data collection by collecting links to DD blogs written by HOHs. As we discovered in a previous analysis (DeGroot, Carmack, & Quinlan, 2014), there are more DD blogs written by the submissive partners (women) than by the HOHs because HOHs may require their submissive partners to blog. Our initial search identified nine blogs from the male HOH perspective; however, five of these blogs were removed for consideration, as they were actually about bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism (BDSM) or erotic BDSM fiction. Another search identified an additional blog, bringing the total blogs analyzed for this study to five blogs. These blogs ranged in start date from 2007 to 2012. They were in varying stages of activity: Two blogs appear to still be active, although the last post was in 2012, while three blogs ended in 2007, 2009, and 2011. We collected all blog posts from the active and inactive blogs, resulting in 144 blog posts. Along with blog posts, we made note of all pictures, Bible scriptures, and other miscellaneous items included on the blogs.

We engaged in a constant comparative method of analysis, comparing each blog topic with the previously analyzed topics (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All authors read through the blog posts several times, making note of initial themes that emerged in the data. The authors met after their first analysis of the data, discussing potential themes. We continuously engaged in identifying concepts, until themes crystallized. In the analysis section, we present the complex construction and performance of the Dom identity on HOH blogs. We provide exemplar comments from the blogs in this article to illustrate these themes. We present blog comments as they appear in the HOH blogs, including profanity and spelling and grammatical errors, to maintain the integrity of bloggers' comments.

## **Analysis**

For the DD relationship to work, the HOH must embody and perform the Dominant identity. This identity is an identity performance based on love and respect for their wives. As one HOH explained, "Because I love her intensely, I spank my wife." A Dom must balance strength and dominance with tenderness and support. The DD relationship is one focused on maintaining female submissiveness and masculine leadership, as one Dom clearly stated, "I'll let her worry about the Submission. My job is to lead by example. My job is to Communicate, Respect and Trust. My job is to Love, Cherish and Sacrifice." Doms engage in the DD relationship because they love their wives, support their wives' desire to be femininely submissive (DeGroot et al., 2014), and want to do what needs to be done to maintain a happy relationship. For partners participating in DD relationships, discipline and submission is needed to maintain the relationship. Being perceived as a strong Dom is important to the men, as one blogger explained,

Through DD I have experienced a swelling up in me of a need to look out for her best interests; a stronger desire to care for her; a more passionate love for her; and an intense desire to keep her happy. I can't really explain it but a DD relationship built on love, communication, trust and integrity would and should produce positive changes in both parties.

As part of the Domdentity, the HOH must be strong and help his wife or girlfriend be submissive. HOHs embody and perform the Domdentity through (a) dialectic of discipline and love in the DD relationship, (b) continuously working to maintain the DD relationship, and (c) actively participating in and questioning their roles in the DD relationship.

### *Dialectic of Discipline and Love: Balancing Love and Discipline in the DD Relationship*

A key element in the enactment of the Domdentity is a clear identification of what it means to be a Dom. First and foremost, the Domdentity is an identity focused on traditionally masculine traits. In their blogs, the men described what it means to be a dominant husband, using words such as "leadership," "duty," and "protection." Important to the Domdentity is the understanding that the HOH is not misogynistic. One Dom explained, "The entire point of HOHing is to engender respect." A Dom has to be reliable and stable, using discipline to help his wife or girlfriend maintain the DD lifestyle. It is up to a Dom to maintain control in the relationship, whether it is disciplining his girlfriend for earning poor grades, giving his wife maintenance spankings as a way to reinforce good behavior, or holding doors for his wife or girlfriend. As another Dom stated, "We have this dynamic because she likes having me weigh in with a little more authority on certain areas." This Dom's comment also underscores a secondary element of the Domdentity: The wives or girlfriends in DD relationships want to be in a DD relationship. They want their husbands and boyfriends to be dominant and masculine. It is up to the Dom, then, to embody those qualities.

A second important element of the Domdentity is the preservation of "traditional" masculine and feminine roles. These traditional roles encourage men to be the protectors and women to be submissive. Doms presented a complex understanding of what it means to be a Dom while still basing their relationships of what they see as "classic" dynamics, as discussed by one HOH:

For those of us who like this lifestyle, we really love the classic dynamic between a man and woman as it kind of supercharges those differences. Some women love a man who is strong and when a guy exerts that strength at the right time in a safe and trusting environment it is very attractive to her.

This "classic dynamic" referenced by the Dom's comments connects directly to these traditional gender roles. Doms were also quick to point out, however, that the DD relationship does not play on gender stereotypes, and it is the Dom's job to keep that from happening. One blogger explaining the idea further:

At the end of the day, there's not much the girl can do. It's up to us guys!! We're the driving force. All that the girl can do is test boundaries and push back, looking for you to step in. And if you don't pay attention, you may miss some of those cues and opportunities to be that reliable rock for her. Of course, this doesn't mean [you] become a dictator. It doesn't give you the right to make her your slave to your every whim (Woman, go get me a beer!! BURP!). BUT, watch out for opportunities to keep the dynamic in check. You're the guy. She's the girl. If she starts acting sassy, PUT THINGS IN CHECK!!!

As this Dom pointed out, the Domdentity is not about being mean or overbearing. Doms must have control and help their wives and girlfriends by knowing their limits.

Protection is another vital component of the Domdentity. As the masculine leader who protects his partner, the Dom has a sense of "knowing what is best" for his partner and "holding [her] accountable" for her actions. As one blogger reflected,

While some couples struggle over the leadership of their relationship, we have an understanding that I will protect and love her at all times and if necessary, pull her across my knee and spank her when she needs protection from herself.

"Protection from herself" is a key statement in this Dom's comment; DD relationships often begin because the female partner is engaging in behaviors that are harmful to her and her HOH. Bloggers discussed a variety of reasons their partners needed to be disciplined, ranging from not exercising to helping mitigate depression. One blogger wrote,

I need to be her hero. Husbands naturally feel this way about their wives. At least I think they should. I love taking care of Sugar. But more than that, I think I need to take care of her. In fact, it goes well beyond all of that chivalrous stuff: beyond the opening of doors and the walking down stairs in front of her. It goes beyond the anticipating her need of a sweater, an umbrella or a toothpick after popcorn. It even goes beyond fulfilling her wants and desires—and protecting her from them when her indulgence could lead her into harm's way.

Although it may be difficult, a Dom's job is to discipline his partner as a way to help her stop those detrimental behaviors.

Failing to protect their partners has negative consequences for one's Domdentity and relationships. When a blogger did not follow through on a promised maintenance spanking, both he and his wife were upset. He said, "If I follow through now, she appears to be 'topping from the bottom.' But if I don't follow through, the integrity of my Domdentity is suspect." He later referred to this lapse as a "self-inflicted chink in the Domdentity armor." "Topping from the bottom," when a submissive woman takes control and attempts to initiate discipline, is a common problem in DD relationships. When this occurs, it undermines the relationship and the HOH's ability to be the dominant party in the relationship.

Ultimately, being a HOH is not just for the submissive partner. Performing the Domdentity is also for the benefit of the HOH, providing him an opportunity to be a

“better man.” The Domdentity often seeps into other identities, as one blogger talked about:

Being the HOH gives me a greater sense of who I am. More importantly, it gives me a greater sense of who I can be . . . the potential to be greater than I am today. I owe that feeling to my Kim, I would not want to let her down.

For the bloggers, performing the Domdentity allowed them to develop a sense of who they are in the DD relationship and who they want to be to others not in the DD relationship.

### ***Being a Dom Is Hard Work: Continuously Working to Maintain the DD Relationship***

Adopting and maintaining a Domdentity required many bloggers to constantly change their thinking about relationships and who they are as husbands. This identity evolution presents a series of challenges for HOHs, including the trials of engaging in DD, maintaining the DD lifestyle, and addressing problems that may arise. As the dominant figure in the relationship, it is the Dom's responsibility to deal with these changes.

One of the major issues that arise for Doms during the evolution of their Domdentity is the initial adapting to the role of the HOH. Many bloggers indicated that their participation and behavior in DD changed when they started including DD in their relationships. One man mentioned the importance of easing himself and his wife into this lifestyle. He explained, “I have been careful not to overburden her, careful to ease her into becoming more organized—more submissive to me. And careful to ease myself into becoming more direct—and Dominant for her.” DD is not a lifestyle choice partners take on without preparation. There are rules and structure as part of DD, but more important, it may take partners time to emotionally transition into DD. Trust and comfort help with this transition. One Dom wrote, “I have a tendency to over-examine things, over-analyze and question things to death. I've learned quickly that I have to trust myself and my instincts for this to work.” Trust is the foundation of DD, and Doms need to trust themselves in the role of HOH for their partners to trust them. Without this trust, the DD relationship will not thrive.

Personal growth is another key part of the Domdentity evolution. One HOH explained,

I used to deal with things knee jerk and off the cuff. It was easier back then to get mad and make a fool of myself by throwing a temper tantrum. Now though, I am here on the other side of those fires a wiser, more considerate man. Two qualities that are essential for a HOH in a LDD [Loving Domestic Discipline] relationship, if I understand everything that I have studied thus far.

Bloggers are quick to point out that discipline is given not out of anger but rather for “focus, purpose and exposure.” Along with trust, approaching discipline from the appropriate emotional frame is important for the success of DD. As one Dom said,



You're out on [a] lengthy limb when punishing your partner. Your authority is total and your decisions final—don't screw it up! The pressure is on and your ongoing authority is easily jeopardized by the wrong word or action. One slip and you can go from being the big, strong family leader and HOH to nothing but a little boy lost in a big man's shirt.

The evolution of the Domdentity allows HOHs to hone traits such as empathy, assertiveness, and trust, all of which are important for the DD relationship.

The evolution of the Domdentity is not without challenges. One of the major challenges of performing the Domdentity occurs when HOHs do not perform in the "appropriate" manner. A number of reasons exist for why a Dom might not perform his role appropriately. One Dom explained his particular problem:

The biggest problems arise when I, as HOH, fall under the spell of what Churchill memorably called "The Black Dog." I often find clear thinking and decisive action crushingly difficult when I'm depressed, which makes HOHing feel like driving a racing car at high speed with one hand tied behind your back.

For this Dom, depression prevented him from enacting the authority needed to be the HOH. Similarly, another Dom identified depression as a setback for him: "I really had to reach deeper than ever before inside myself to find the will and authority to be an effective HOH. It's so, so difficult sometimes when I'm really low." The challenge for Doms is when they are not emotionally prepared for the masculine behavior required for providing discipline.

Another challenge for Doms in enacting the Domdentity occurs when a discipline event does not go the way it is supposed to go. One Dom described a failed attempt at discipline: "Well, the first official punishment spanking went badly last night. Hopefully with time it will fade away forever. But for now? PTSD: because another spanking has gone badly. Very, very badly." A failure or mistake does not just hurt the partner. Doms may experience guilt as a result of these mistakes, making them question whether DD is appropriate or if they have what it takes to be a HOH. Many of the bloggers reflected on instances in which they were not sure whether they should have disciplined when they did not, should not have disciplined when they did, or disciplined too much. One Dom explained,

Part of the reason I haven't been the HOH I prefer to be this week is that I haven't done all that I need to do. Much of the house mess this week is my fault and anytime I fail to complete what I need to I find it extremely difficult to hold my wife rigidly accountable . . . Therefore I flinch when it comes to spanking.

However, Doms do realize that making mistakes and learning from those mistakes is an important part of the evolution of the Domdentity, as characterized by one blogger:

And the reality is: I'm okay with that. I'm okay with it because I can see what's growing out of me as I step further along the path of my Domdentity. This pace allows the woman in her to hold onto the man in me for love and protection, while the man in me holds on

and loves and protects the child in her. As we hold this delicate balance, the woman in her remains captive to the freedom she's always enjoyed; and the child in her lives free to enjoy her new found captivity.

Doms see the challenges and mistakes of being HOHs as ways to grow and develop their Domdentity.

### *Doms Make Mistakes, Too: Participating in and Questioning the DD Relationship*

Another element in the development and enactment of their Domdentity is the reflexive questioning of their participation as HOHs and in the DD lifestyle. One of the major areas Doms question is whether participating in DD will actually help or hurt their relationships. Many DD relationships are initiated by women, which may explain why the men have a difficult time. The female partners are asking the Doms to go against their personal and societal beliefs to help them. One Dom reflexively questions his participation in "this thing we do":

Wasn't I just helping her out—helping us out when we started "tweed" [this thing we do (TTWD)]? Wasn't I just assisting in getting her life in order? Wasn't I just being the strong and dutiful husband who does what it takes to bring order to our lives so that we could have the liberty to love, and the emotional freedom to pursue our brand happiness? Wasn't I? I mean—I was, WASN'T I?

For this Dom, participating in DD forces him to question whether it is worth it. In addition, questioning his participation is both a part of the Domdentity and a chance to further develop his Domdentity. He questions not only whether his participation is good for his marriage but also whether he is actually being a good husband.

The impact of participating in DD in their marriage is a constant concern for Doms, one that they question from the beginning of their DD relationships. One Dom, detailing the first time he administered punishment, explained his fears of how DD will affect his marriage:

The first time, she merely gasped, but the second time she cried out, "please, not my legs." There was something about the anguish of her tone and the timing of her comment which stopped me in my tracks somewhat, triggering an unforeseen reaction inside me. All sorts of introspective and frightening thoughts came to mind . . . "what am I *doing*?" . . . "I'm a *monster*!" . . . etc., etc. I knew this was irrational, as my wife is a willing and actively contributory partner in our DD relationship. I may be at the wheel, but in a general sense my wife is often the engine of both our marriage and our life in DD.

Later in the blog post, he continued,

I was left with an overwhelming sense of sadness which hung from me like a limp flag from a masthead on a windless day. I really struggled to make sense of the situation and the strange shift of dynamic within myself.

As previously discussed, the first discipline event can be an emotional experience, especially if it is not successful. Even if the first disciplinary spanking is successful, it can still trigger feelings of doubt. It is important, however, for the development and performance of the Domdentity that Doms follow through with punishment. As one Dom stated, “I persisted because it would have been selfish and unleaderlike of me to stop.” The blogger seemed proud that, regardless of his feelings, he continued with the punishment. This is the embodiment of the Domdentity—providing leadership, protection, and strength for their partners.

On the blogs, the HOHs talk about the initial resistance to DD because of personal and societal beliefs. One blogger discussed how he felt at the beginning of his DD relationship with his wife. He had many misgivings before finally appearing to be very comfortable in this lifestyle. He wrote,

But when I did it, it ran hard against the grain of everything that I had been taught at home and in society. I was pretty uncomfortable with it . . . Result: the spanking thing was more nerve wracking than exciting for me. It seemed to me that it would be emotionally injurious to her. Yet . . . it was quite intriguing. Particularly the masculine/feminine dynamic of it.

When talking about the beginnings of their DD relationships, Doms blogged frequently about questioning whether this was a lifestyle choice in which they should engage. For many Doms, spanking goes against what he was taught about how to treat women as well as the accepted societal behavior of men in relationships. One blogger clearly articulated these tensions:

In a lot of respects I am a traditionalist . . . We have both had our internal struggles regarding the roles of men and women in society and marriage. And our struggles—due to societal pressures—have caused us quite a bit of trouble . . . That part of the BabyMan[,] which desires to be distinctly male, manly and masculine has always been met with society’s pressure to be soft and gentle and tender . . . The part of my SugarAnne[,] which desires to be distinctly female, womanly and feminine has been met with the same kind of pressure for independence and aggressiveness (as opposed to assertiveness[.] which I consider an excellent trait). The societal imposition can cause confusion and loss of self-esteem.

The Doms wrestle with making sense of having feelings that run counter to what they believe is socially acceptable. An important part of the Domdentity is finding a way to balance their desire to be masculine and protective with being sensitive to their partners’ needs. For HOHs, participating in DD allows them to be both masculine and sensitive.

The opportunity to question their participation in DD provides Doms the ability to reinforce their decision to participate in DD and to steel their resolve as HOHs. In addition, it allows Doms to appreciate the trust required of both partners. One Dom explained how questioning provides a reflexive space for participation:

I am always looking to see if I might be able [to] discern my developing Domdentity. I’m trying to find out where, in terms of mental makeup, I land on the spectrum as a dominant

in “this thing we do.” Am I a cold and harsh dominant; or am I a kind and gentle dominant? Am I a firm and consistent dominant; or am I a soft and erratic dominant? Or[,] somewhere in between? Does thinking about all of this indicate over-thoughtfulness? And does thoughtfulness indicate an approximate location on the spectrum?

As this Dom's comments suggest, Doms may constantly question the ways they enact their Domdentity as well as what that enactment might mean for who they are as HOHs and even outside the DD relationship. Ultimately, as another Dom suggested, questioning and embracing the DD is masculine:

There's something about giving a spanking that's a little bit scary for both parties . . . don't back away from admitting this to yourself as HOH if you feel it too. There's nothing unmanly about facing a difficult and challenging task for the love of your family and relationship. It's a hard job, but it's *our* job and we must take pride in our work. When I look at my beautiful family and our home that runs like clockwork, I know I certainly do.

Questioning and reflecting on their participation in DD is, for these Doms, masculine.

Even when Doms are wholeheartedly engaged in DD, they still occasionally question and doubt their participation in DD. This questioning, however, is seen as good for the development of the Domdentity and the DD relationship. As one Dom explained, “This lifestyle is rarely ‘black and white’ and often presents baffling and difficult challenges, but with the tackling and solving of each problem comes the opportunity to reach a deeper understanding, of both oneself and one's marriage.”

## Discussion

Men participating in DD relationships must develop and perform a Domdentity, a co-constructed identity created through their participation in and negotiation of the DD relationship as the HOH. The Domdentity is an example of a masculine double bind, where men must simultaneously demonstrate traditional characteristics of masculinity while still showing sensitivity to their submissive wives. Our analysis of HOH blogs revealed several tensions Doms wrestle with as they develop and perform their Domdentity. Doms must balance discipline and love, making sure to perform a strong, masculine identity while delivering both punishment and praise. Doms must also continually work at developing their Domdentity, especially to help their wives be submissive. Finally, the Doms, while actively participating in DD, questioned the impact of DD on their relationships and themselves. This reflexivity is an important part of the Domdentity. Ultimately, performing the Domdentity reinforced their decision to engage in DD and to see it as positive for their relationships.

The Domdentity is an identity that embodies hegemonic masculinity, especially the characteristics of physical force and control, familial patriarchy, and heterosexuality (Trujillo, 1991). Ironically, it is these characteristics that create the struggle for Doms. The overarching tension rests in the irony of trying to embody what could be seen as

a stereotypical “man” identity when that identity contradicts the acceptable identities they were raised to perform. Part of this struggle may be the result of “identity flip-page,” where Doms re-envision an identity socially constructed to be a negative identity into one consistent with the ideals of modern relationships. For men and women who participate in DD, their relationship is a partnership. They decided together to engage in DD. For DD to work, Doms have to embrace and perform a hegemonic masculine identity. Western society accepts a male stereotype up to a point. The Domidentity, however, takes that identity beyond that point, turning it into something a majority of society would deem unacceptable. By enacting a hegemonic masculine identity, Doms find themselves in a double bind.

Doms experience an additional identity gap as they attempt to negotiate their Domidentity and their “other” identities. Many of the Doms’ struggles centered around the disconnect they experienced between performing their Domidentity and their other identities. As a “layered” phenomenon, identities interact and influence each other (Hecht, 1993). The four different identity layers—personal, enacted, relational, and communal—often interpenetrate each other, opening up space for tension. In addition, tensions may arise because an individual may have multiple identities within each layer. For example, a Dom who is married with children may have multiple identities just within the family unit, including father, husband (according to how the children see a husband), and Dom. In some cases, these identities may conflict.

The Dom blogs also raise some interesting questions about the performance of identities. First, this analysis underscores the tensions that exist when examining a subaltern group. The nature of DD, using discipline and submissiveness as a way to control, runs counter to the acceptable standards of contemporary relationships (equality, no violence). How, then, do individuals “who are not permitted to voice their opinions freely and/or who are denied access to socially sanctioned public space” (Gring-Pemble, 1998, p. 43) go about finding a space in which to communicate? For many marginalized groups, such as Doms, the space comes in the form of virtual space on the Internet. Using the Internet to communicate, while making it somewhat public, still hides the activity. The Internet provides anonymity, which all of the Dom blogs we analyzed relied on to conceal their identities. None of the Doms used their real names. If part of the point behind DD blogs is to help others understand DD and how participants see it as a good thing for their relationship, why continue to hide it? What are the consequences of communicating this identity performance online? Does writing about DD online (as the primary medium) continue to reinforce DD as deviant?

### *Limitations and Future Studies*

There are several limitations with this study that open up space for future explorations into the dynamics of DD relationships. First, the voice of the DD partner is missing in how the Domidentity is enacted. We specifically decided to focus on the male perspective; however, it is important to understand how DD women understand and participate in the construction of the Domidentity. We have explored how women talked about their DD experiences (DeGroot et al., 2014), but we need to explore how these

couples co-construct and enact their DD roles. Second, the data set for this analysis was somewhat small; however, this limitation is tempered by the fact that we did an exhaustive search and analyzed all the male DD blogs available at the time of this study. In addition, men did not post blogs as often, nor did they spend as much time updating or maintaining their blogs. Three of the blogs we analyzed had ended prior to the start of analysis. Third, this analysis only focuses on men in heterosexual DD relationships. How homosexual men in DD relationships construct the Domdentity might be a different experience. The study of DD blogs is a first step in understanding this complex relational approach, but more research is needed to paint a complete picture. We need to move beyond the Internet to explore DD relationships through interviews with individuals and couples. Researchers need to focus on the unique relational dynamic of couples.

The creation and performance of the Domdentity is a complex process. A Dom must balance love and discipline in the relationship. In doing so, he embodies the key elements of the Domdentity: protection and a desire to help his wife or girlfriend with her submissive role. A strong Dom works to maintain his Domdentity, but constantly questioning his participation and the appropriateness of DD for their relationship, and if it is not, knowing when to stop.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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