

## The Phenomenon of Fifty Shades of Grey: the Role of Sexual Satisfaction and Motivation

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### Abstract

In recent years we have been able to observe the phenomenon of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This poses questions about why the primary, female target audience liked the book. In the presented study we asked what aspects of the book attract female attention, what they despise and how the book assessment relates to sexual satisfaction or motivation. 217 respondents participated in the study. The variables analysed in the study included book assessment, sexual motivations, satisfaction and other features characterising individual sexuality. A positive assessment was negatively correlated with the respondents' emotional satisfaction. The respondents who read similar books assessed *Fifty Shades of Grey* higher and reported lower emotional satisfaction compared to those who did not read such books.

**Keywords:** *sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, erotic literature, Fifty Shades of Grey*

### Introduction

The role of sexuality in human life can be assessed, e.g., based on broadly understood culture, i.e., art, film, media, advertising, Internet or literature. Literature depicting various love affairs has been popular for ages. Today, it generates higher sales than any other type of books. This literary genre (Romance-erotic novels) makes up a market worth over one billion dollars. In 2004 this was 55% of all paperbacks sold in the U.S. (Meston, Buss, 2009). In recent years we have been able

to observe the phenomenon of the sales of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This is an English erotic novel by the author publishing under the pen name E.L. James (her real name is Erika Mitchell). It describes the relations and sexual intercourses with slightly sadomasochistic touches between a university graduate, Anastasia Steele, and a young businessman, Christopher Grey. The book is addressed primarily to women. It has sold over 90 million copies worldwide and has been translated into 52 languages. The dimension of this success should promote reflection on the reasons for it.

In reference works, there are some analyses of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the context of promoting Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (Bonomi, Altenburger, 2013). Some psychologists believe that some women's finding the descriptions of forced sexual submission exciting is a negative phenomenon. Others perceive it as an indication of psychopathology or internalised scripts of gender roles which make some women associate sex with submission to men (Meston, Buss, 2009). However, empirical studies by Patricia Hawley and William Hansley (2009) failed to confirm such assumptions. They studied a group of over eight hundred women, asking them about their fantasies related to forced sexual submission. The results showed that the women who had such fantasies did not suffer from mental problems and were not submissive. What is more, those women were more dominant, self-confident and independent than the rest. The respondents with the lower social impact had more rare sexual fantasies of that type. The study authors put forth a hypothesis that the phenomenon in which female erotic fantasies related to sexual submission are attractive for some women is a result of female strength rather than weakness. This is thought to stem from the fact that in such a fantasy the partner cannot disregard the charm and appeal of the woman (Hawley, Hansley, 2009; Meston, Buss, 2009).

There are numerous studies devoted to the impact of erotic threads in literary works, with some of them being especially interesting. For instance, in the studies by G. Anderton (2010), 75% of respondents confirmed that reading erotic novels affected their sexual life, making them more eager to engage in sexual activities and/or try new ones. Studies by J. Carroll et al. (2008) demonstrated a connection between watching pornography and displaying risky sexual behaviours among adult women. Pornography turned out to be connected with frequent casual sexual relations and a higher number of partners. Also the media provide information on the impact of erotic contents on the audience. Studies by M. Reese-Weber and D. McBride (2014) provided important information on the impact of reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The women who strongly identified themselves with the protagonist reported increased sexual desire, while the women who had read the book but did not identify themselves with the protagonist did not report such an increase.

Based on a review of the literature, the objectives of this study were determined. The primary objective was to find an answer to general questions related to the cultural phenomenon of the popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The specific objectives referred to analysing the dependencies between the book assessment and sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, gender and selected sexual preferences (inclination to initiate sexual activity, to accomplish sexual fantasies and to dominate). Other specific objectives referred to analysing dependencies between reading romantic and erotic literature and the above-mentioned sexuality variables.

## **Research Methodology**

The study was carried out with the use of a traditional paper (n=125) and on-line (n=92) survey. The study using the paper version was conducted using the snowball qualification method among students and their friends. The study using the on-line version was conducted by means of *www.ebadania.pl*. The study included people based on their knowledge of the book *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

### **Sample group**

The sample group consisted of 217 people, including 194 women and 23 men. The average age of the respondents was 25.72 (SD = 6.61). The oldest respondent was 67 and the youngest 18. 2% (n = 5) of the respondents had a primary and secondary vocational education, 51% (n = 111) secondary, and 47% (n = 101) university education. 13% (n = 28) of the respondents came from cities with over 500,000 inhabitants, 16% (n = 34) from villages, 28% (n = 62) from a town with 10,000–100,000 inhabitants, while 43% (n = 93) from a city with 100,000–500,000 inhabitants. 14% (n = 30) of the respondents were in an informal relationship shorter than one year, 44% (n = 96) in an informal relationship over one year, 23% (n = 50) were married, 16% (n = 35) described themselves as single, while 2% (n = 6) said that their status was different at the time (widow/er, divorced, separation pending). 94% (n = 204) of the respondents described themselves as heterosexual, 5% (n = 10) as bisexual and 1% (n = 3) as homosexual.

### **Instrument**

·*Survey concerning the assessment of Fifty Shades of Grey and other romantic and erotic literature.* This tool included 6 questions: 1. Have you read *Fifty Shades*

of Grey? (yes, no); 2. If yes, indicate your assessment of the book (I liked it very much; I liked it; I have no opinion; I disliked the book; I disliked the book very much); 3. What did you like most about the book? (open-ended question); 4. What did you dislike about the book most? (open-ended question); 5. Have you read any books similar to *Fifty Shades of Grey*? (yes, no); 6. If yes, what books and what did you think of them? (open-ended question).

·*Sexual Satisfaction Scale* (Davies, 2006). It is composed of three sub-scales: Physical satisfaction (11 items) related to the assessment of sex quality in a relationship, partner's sexual skills and satisfaction of one's own sexual needs. Another scale refers to emotional satisfaction (4 items) and measures satisfaction based on affective feelings towards sex and one's partner's behaviour as well as one's feelings towards the partner. The last scale refers to satisfaction related to the sense of control (6 items). It is related to the satisfaction derived from the assessment of one's impact on when, how and if sexual intercourse takes place at all. The tool reliability was satisfactory: the Physical Satisfaction scale  $\alpha=0.86$ ; Emotional Satisfaction scale  $\alpha=0.87$  and Scale of Satisfaction related to the sense of control  $\alpha=0.78$ .

·*AMORE Scale* (Hill, Preston, 1996). This is a questionnaire related to the emotional and motivational orientation related to sexual arousal. It is composed of 8 scales: Experiencing Partner's Strength (10 items), Recognising Partner's Value (8 items), Stress Alleviation (10 items), Procreation (6 items), Improving Sense of Power (10 items), Sense of Being Appreciated by the Partner (7 items), Caring (6 items), Pleasure (5 items). The reliability of the method was satisfactory (from  $\alpha=0.78$  to  $\alpha=0.93$ ).

·*Gender Inventory* (Inwentarz Płci Psychologicznej, IPP) developed by Alicja Kuczyńska. This is a Polish adaptation of the Sex Roles Inventory by Sandra Bem (Bem, 1975). It is composed of 35 items describing human properties, which the respondents answer based on the five-tiered scales (1 – I am not like that at all, 5 – This is exactly what I am like). The inventory is composed of two scales: Femininity scale ( $\alpha=0.80$ ) and Masculinity scale ( $\alpha=0.82$ ) (Kuczyńska, 1992).

## **Research Results**

One of the main questions was related to the assessment of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The respondents could choose from *I disliked it very much* (1) to *I liked it very much* (5). The average was 3.69 (SD = 1.1). The detailed numbers are presented in Table 1. A negative attitude to the book was displayed by 19% of the respondents, a neutral one by 13%, while 68% were positive about it. Tables 2 and 3 present the parts of the book that evoked the greatest liking and antipathy of the readers.

**Table 1.** Assessment of the book

Answers	N	%
I disliked it very much	8	3.69
I disliked it	33	15.21
No opinion	28	12.90
I liked it	98	45.16
I liked it very much	50	23.04

**Table 2.** The parts the readers liked most in *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Parts	N	%
Sexual aspects	77	35.48
The figure of Grey	41	18.89
Story	37	17.05
Relation between the protagonists	28	12.90
Breaking the taboo/Perversion	23	10.60
Style, language	21	9.68
Book quick and nice to read	20	9.22
Nothing	17	7.83
Opens up new possibilities	11	5.07
Sadomasochistic threads	10	4.61
The reader is taken to a different world	10	4.61
Characteristics of protagonists	9	4.15
Anastasia	7	3.23
Breaking stereotypes	6	2.76
Everything	4	1.84

\* 100% = 217 people.

**Table 3.** The parts the readers disliked most in *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Parts	N	%
Primitive language, poor vocabulary	46	21.20
No comments	36	16.59
Too many detailed, repeated and exaggerated erotic descriptions	34	15.67
Unrealistic, exaggerated threads	34	15.67
Story	27	12.44

Parts	N	%
Predictability, repetition of scenes	26	11.98
Anastasia	22	10.14
Long, boring descriptions	15	6.91
Naive, simplified, shallow descriptions	13	5.99
Objectification, ill treatment, brutality towards a woman	13	5.99
Protagonists together	12	5.53
The figure of Grey and his behaviour	10	4.61
Part 2 and/or 3	7	3.23
Ending	7	3.23
Relying on stereotypes	6	2.76
Shocking descriptions	5	2.30
Similarity to <i>Twilight</i>	5	2.30

\* 100% = 217 people.

Table 4 presents the results of correlation between the book assessment and other variables. Positive correlations were noted solely for femininity while negative correlations occurred with the emotional satisfaction stemming from sexual relationships. On the level of a statistical trend, positive correlations between book assessment and overall sexual satisfaction were also noted.

**Table 4.** Correlations of the book assessment and other variables\*

Variables	R – Spearman	t(N-2)	P
Overall sexual satisfaction	0.115	1.704	0.090
Emotional satisfaction	-0.154	-2.280	0.024
Femininity	0.188	2.784	0.006
Inclination to dominate sexually	0.118	1.745	0.082

\* Only significant correlations

Table 5 presents a comparison of the group of people who have read similar books and those who have not with respect to the assessment of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Those who have read other books devoted to similar topics assessed *Fifty Shades of Grey* higher. A significant difference was observed also with respect to the emotional satisfaction scale. Those who read romantic and erotic books had a significantly lower sense of emotional satisfaction. No differences between the

groups were observed with respect to overall sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, inclination to initiate sexual activity, or inclination to dominate or act out sexual fantasies.

**Table 5.** Comparison of the groups of people who have not read similar books and those who have read them with respect to book assessment and sexual satisfaction

	People who have not read similar books ( <i>n</i> = 144)		People who have read similar books ( <i>n</i> = 73)		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Assessment of the book	3.569	1.075	3.917	1.115	-2.227	0.026	0.30
Physical satisfaction	3.580	0.755	3.474	0.764	0.975	0.330	0.13
Emotional satisfaction	3.229	1.160	2.818	1.107	2.500	0.013	0.34
Satisfaction related to the sense of control	3.515	0.810	3.502	0.878	0.106	0.915	0.01

## Discussion

The numerous negative reviews of *Fifty Shades of Grey* did not exert any significant impact on the readers' assessment. Almost 70% of the respondents who have read the book gave it a positive assessment and only 19% of the respondents disliked it. It is worth paying attention to certain aspects of the book that aroused the most positive and negative emotions. The same aspects appeared in the answers to the question of what they liked most and what they disliked most about the book. For instance, sexual threads were most frequently quoted as the aspect the readers liked and also as one of the greatest drawbacks of the book. Another example is the plot, which was a frequently given answer to both questions. Interestingly, the style and language of *Fifty Shades of Grey* were also assessed as both a quality and a drawback of the book.

Another important answer to the question of what they liked about the book was "the reader is taken to a different world". This shows some women escaped from their everyday life into the realm of the book, which is a frequently reported motivation for choosing erotic books (Radway, 1991). Going into the world of make-believe has its bright and dark sides. Some readers escape to the imaginary

world to compensate for the deficiencies in real life they would not be able to make up for otherwise. For instance, a study by Wu (2006) showed that the readers of romantic fiction had fewer sexual partners than those who did not. On the other hand, some women reading the description of Christian Grey may develop excessive expectations towards their current or prospective partner. This may have an effect similar to the one observed by sexologists in relation to the popularity of pornography for many years. This frequently leads to high and unrealistic expectations about their own sexual activity and appeal, which in turn leads to the lessening of sexual satisfaction or to sexual dysfunctions. The growing popularity of labiaplasty, which is usually justified solely by the wish to resemble porno film actors (Rogers, 2014) is also a result of the popularity of a specific type of film. Studies by Kenrick et al. (1989) presented interesting findings, this time related to men looking at photos of attractive women in erotic magazines. Having looked at such photos, men rated photos of ordinary women lower than did men who had not looked at the magazine photos beforehand. Other studies showed that men had a worse opinion of their own relations when they had been exposed to physically attractive women (Kenrick et al., 1994).

The readers' answers to the question of what they disliked most about the book also provide interesting information. For instance, the answer "excessive number of detailed, repeated and exaggerated erotic descriptions" shows that the pornographic aspects of the book were not an attraction for all the readers. The group of answers that included "Objectification, ill treatment, brutality towards a woman" showed that not all the readers liked the BDSM aspect. In this context, the result of studies by Reese-Weber and McBride (2014), where a decrease in sexual behaviours was observed in women who did not identify themselves with the female protagonist, is interesting. It is possible that the women who did not identify themselves with the female protagonist could judge her or have a negative opinion about her sexual behaviour. This could have resulted in the lower frequency of their own sexual behaviour.

The book's correlation with femininity is equally interesting. It can be connected with the female protagonist of the novel, who embodies many stereotypical feminine features. These include, e.g., tenderness, thoughtfulness, gentleness and submission. This can be related generally to the stereotypical femininity in Western culture, according to which a woman should be modest, submissive and have no sexual experience, which is the case of Anastasia Steel. The male protagonist also displays many important aspects of stereotypical masculinity in Western culture. It is he who initiates the woman into the world of sex, being an expert, guide, teacher and the main initiator of sexual activity (Mandal, 2008; 2012; Brannon, 1999). The



more the respondents' picture of themselves matches the cultural stereotype of femininity, the higher they assess this book, which presents highly stereotypical protagonists, in terms of sexual and gender roles. It may be that women who identify themselves more with the stereotypical role of the woman find the stereotypical masculine features displayed by Christian Grey more attractive.

The negative correlation between the assessment of the book and the emotional satisfaction of the respondent is worth stressing. The higher the book assessment was, the lower was the reported emotional satisfaction in the respondent's sexual relationship. Perhaps those with lower emotional satisfaction in their current sexual relationship treated the book as a substitute. While reading, they escaped to a world where their needs were satisfied. This is suggested by the answers to the question of what they liked about the book. This is a significant result which further emphasises the difference between those who have not read other books of that type and those who have. Namely, those who habitually chose such literature had a significantly lower reported level of emotional satisfaction than the remaining ones. Studies by John Bancroft (2009) reveal that the factor most important for the sexual satisfaction of women is the sense of emotional intimacy with partners. Presumably, by reading romantic and erotic literature people with lower levels of emotional satisfaction meet their needs which cannot be satisfied in the real world. This is why they choose this genre.

Another factor contributing to the success of such literature and this book is the female readers' identification with the female protagonist, who appears to be a powerful and fascinating object of male desire inasmuch as the male protagonist devotes so much effort and trouble for her sake. The female protagonist controls the man in sexual terms, as his unrestrained passion is a guarantee of his sexual faithfulness. The male protagonist becomes dependent on the female, who controls him in the sexual realm but also in other ways (Ellis, Symons, 1990). What is more, the power held by the heroine is strengthened by the features of the man who loves her, such as his handsomeness, his strong, masculine body, his high social position and great wealth. He can be said to possess all the virtues important for women throughout the history of human evolution (Buss, Meston, 2009). These postulates are evidenced by the low assessment given to the female protagonist by most female readers. Some readers could be irritated by the female protagonist because they would like to imagine themselves in her shoes or because they suppose they could do better and be better partners if they were her.

## **Conclusions**

The majority of the reader-respondents judged the book positively. The elements of it that most appealed to them were the erotic scenes, the plot, and the character of Grey. The aspects that seemed to be least appealing to them were the clumsy language, the prevalence of detailed, repetitive and overdrawn descriptions of erotic encounters, and also plot contrivances that were improbable and unrealistic. A positive assessment of the book was negatively correlated with reported emotional satisfaction and with femininity. The respondents who reported reading more literature of a similar type assessed *Fifty Shades of Grey* higher, but also reported lower levels of satisfaction in their emotional life, than did the respondents who did not report reading similar literature. It remains to further investigate the connections between the reading of erotic-romantic literature, chosen psychological and sexological variables, and their effect upon readers.

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