

Fifty Shades of Grey: Representations and Merchandising

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Abstract

This article interrogates the ideological messages concerning alternative sexuality furthered through *Fifty Shades of Grey* merchandise. Using critical political economy of media and feminist political economy of media as frameworks, the analysis is framed within a discussion regarding women's empowerment and sexual wellbeing. The corporate interests producing both the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film trilogy, the narrative's representation of BDSM relationships, and the official merchandise are examined to determine how the franchise reflects corporate interests and ideological goals. Next, exemplary merchandise is analysed to question how the products may or may not support the ideological and financial goals of corporate interests. The conclusion finds that the merchandise, working in tandem with the texts themselves and corporate intentions, spreads potentially dangerous misinformation about alternative sexualities (e.g. BDSM), reifies consumption as the avenue toward empowerment and sexual satisfaction, and highlights dangerous heteronormative ideologies which marginalize non-normative sexualities and romance.

The *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise, with three films released since 2015, has grossed over one billion dollars worldwide ('*Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015)'; '*Fifty Shades Darker* (2017)'; '*Fifty Shades Freed* (2018)'). This is from the films alone and does not include revenue from the books or any of the official merchandise. The massive sales of the book helped make E. L. James the highest paid author in 2013 (Bury, 2013). The first book in the franchise, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, sold over five million copies, making it the best-selling novel of all time (Singh, 2012). As these numbers indicate, these texts have found an extremely passionate audience, making it especially attractive to a studio or any other multi-platform content production company. *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its sequel texts tell the story of Anastasia Steele, a shy English Literature university student with no sexual experience, who meets a billionaire Green-tech entrepreneur, Christian Grey, on a fluke. Christian becomes infatuated with Anastasia, and eventually Anastasia enters a BDSM (bondage,

dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) relationship with him. Over the course of the trilogy, they overcome various external and internal threats to their relationship and eventually marry.

Fifty Shades of Grey first debuted online in 2009 as a *Twilight* fan fiction under the name *Master of the Universe* (Sales, 2013). In 2011 *Fifty Shades of Grey* was self-published online as a work of original fiction, with *Fifty Shades Darker* self-published online that fall and *Fifty Shades Freed* published online in January of 2012 (Sales, 2013). Vintage Books (a division of Random House) purchased the rights to the trilogy in 2012 and released paperback versions of the novels (Sales, 2013). In March of 2013, Universal Studios purchased the film rights for *Fifty Shades of Grey* for US\$4 million (Fleming Jr., 2012). The first film in the series was released in February of 2015. Also in 2015, a version of *Fifty Shades of Grey* was released under the name *Grey*. This novel was a retelling of the first book's narrative from the perspective of Christian instead of Anastasia. The film adaptation of *Fifty Shades Darker* was released in February of 2017. This was followed in November by the release of *Darker: a novel retelling the events of Fifty Shades Darker from Christian's perspective*. The final film in the trilogy, *Fifty Shades Freed*, was released in February of 2018. A novel telling this narrative from Christian's perspective has not been released at the time of writing.

The money to be made from *Fifty Shades of Grey* does not end simply with books sold or movie tickets purchased; revenue comes in from other products including wine, makeup, games, apparel, and sex toys. The *Fifty Shades* brand has been used to sell almost every type of product imaginable. If there is a way to brand a product with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, someone has found it. Synergistic marketing has been a staple of the motion picture business for some time; however, because of the blatant and reductive gendered messages within the brand's subtext, a critical consideration of the official merchandise is necessary.

This article examines the problematic ideological implications of the brand's merchandise using a critical political economy approach. The *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise, on a scale unlike any other media text in recent memory, capitalizes on the commodity market of female consumers. By creating a diverse line of tie-in products, the text works in tandem with physical cultural goods that are full of dangerous misinformation regarding sexual health and well-being in the name of "empowerment." I will examine the ideological messaging of the *Fifty Shades* merchandise by conducting a critical political economy analysis of the products at the intersection of discourse surrounding BDSM. My purpose is to critique the systems that capitalize on the feminist rhetoric of empowerment to further subordinate women both ideologically and economically. This argument has three parts: an examination of BDSM and its representation in the texts and popular culture, corporate financial interests including their ideological ties with the film merchandise, and the implicit sexism within the officially licensed products. In regard to the production of the *Fifty Shades* brand, this article focuses upon the use of merchandise to promote the brand. By looking at this aspect, we can examine and critique the ways in which this text and its underlying ideologies concerning issues of alternative sexualities and sexual empowerment are intimately involved in the lives of the audience.

BDSM relationships

BDSM is a sexual lifestyle/preference, practiced in private or public, restrained within a specific time (a 'scene') or an agreed-upon dynamic lasting extended periods of time. It revolves around sexual activities including the negotiation of power dynamics and the administration of physical or

psychological pain (Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin and Matuszewich, 2009). Within the BDSM community there is a great deal of emphasis on the importance of consent (Connolly, 2006; Pitagora, 2013). A common mantra in the BDSM community is ‘Safe, Sane, and Consensual’. Dunkley and Brotto (2019: 5) describe the function of consent within BDSM: “Consent represents an ongoing interactive and dynamic process that entails several precautionary measures, including negotiations of play, open communication of desires and boundaries, mutually defining terms, the notion of responsibility and transparency, and ensuring protection from harm through competence and skill (Holt, 2016).” Thus, a healthy BDSM relationship mandates consistent communication between members involved, honest conversations about desires and expectations, a lack of coercive behaviour, a respect for the autonomy and desires of each individual, clearly delineated ‘lines’ which party members will not cross sexually or otherwise, and the ability to talk through instances in which an individual or individuals become uncomfortable in any aspect of the relationship. Unhealthy BDSM relationships, similar to conventional sexual relationships, occur when consent is not observed and emphasized, boundaries are not discussed, and coercive actions are exercised in an attempt to dictate the actions others (either sexual or otherwise).

While both conventional and BDSM relationships can be unhealthy in similar ways, consent within BDSM is negotiated often and clearly (Fascio, Casini, and Cipolletta, 2014: 753) whereas, in conventional western sexual relationships consent is often assumed rather than explicitly expressed. The importance of explicit consent in BDSM is emphasized by community members to ensure the physical and emotional health of participants, as acts practiced within BDSM can be dangerous to the mind and body if not practiced properly. When BDSM is represented incorrectly and unrealistically in media texts it can create misunderstandings concerning the dynamics of the community, the navigation of consent and sexual ‘play’, and the construction of personal boundaries when entering these kinds of relationships. *Fifty Shades of Grey* and other such texts, by relying on the audience’s understanding of traditional sexual relationships, dating rituals, and heterosexual romance, fail the audience by not depicting BDSM as an alternative sexuality that must be approached differently than sanctioned heterosexual relationships. While this does not prevent the text from presenting audience members with a potentially freeing narrative (insofar as it may be one of the few mainstream representations of BDSM), it is problematic because its representation of the BDSM community is incomplete and misleading. Further, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* films, as corporate texts with official brand merchandise, represent BDSM as a luxurious lifestyle choice more than an alternative sexuality practiced by people. The sexual play is diminished by the luxury goods within the films and the film merchandise reifies consumption as the primary avenue toward sexual liberation; a direct contradiction to BDSM practices that place importance on people and connections, not on objects or luxury goods (Dymock, 2013).

Feminist political economy and research methodology

In the popular press, the phrase ‘mommy porn’ was popularized post-*Fifty Shades of Grey* to describe a genre of romantic fiction that is widely believed to cater to female audiences (Helmore, 2012). While erotic fiction has existed as long as the written word, works of gothic romance became popular in the 1960s (Radway, 1984: 31), and the beginnings of what we know as traditional ‘erotic’ romance emerged in the 1970s (Radway, 1984: 40). While it is clear that ‘mommy porn’ existed long before the *Fifty Shades* brand, this franchise reached a new level of market saturation. In researching the history and literature on the romance genre, Radway breaks

her study (1984) into three distinct parts: the production of the text, the text itself, and the audience's reaction to the text. I will focus upon the production of the *Fifty Shades* franchise and the extra-textual marketing of related merchandise. A full ideological analysis of how BDSM is represented within the *Fifty Shades* novels and films is outside the scope of this article (see: Barker, 2013; Bonomi, Altenburger and Walton, 2013; Comella, 2013; Downing, 2013; Leistner and Mark, 2016; Srdarov and Bourgault du Coudray, 2016; Tripodi, 2017). However, I will address aspects of the narrative to illustrate how BDSM is represented in the film and to explain how consumption is reified as the path to sexual liberation.

A political economy of communication approach seeks to analyse media by identifying and critiquing the market structures and conditions within which texts are produced. It is "the study of social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources, including communication resources" (Mosco, 2009: 24). On this basis, critical political economy "describes a tradition of analysis that is concerned with how communication arrangements relate to goals of social justice and emancipation" (Hardy, 2014: 3). In other words, political economy serves as a tool of analysis to examine the relationship between media, money, and power. It does this in order to challenge these relationships and instigate change. By using critical political economy, we can more effectively engage with the impact that *Fifty Shades* products may have on consumers regarding their sexual health and wellbeing.

Feminist political economy employs the critical tools and methodologies of media-political economy approaches to critique and challenge the structures that subordinate women within a patriarchal society. At the same time, it also analyses how media systems function to "reproduce capitalism" (Riordan, 2002: 7). Capitalism, constituted as an economic hierarchy of individuals and groups, is reproduced in the media through positive representations (e.g., the myth of the American meritocracy that is highlighted in many popular media texts). The system itself is propelled by the sale of pop culture media commodities. The reproduction of capitalism in this way is intimately involved with systems of gender. If capitalism is a system that serves to legitimize lifestyle and consumer choice for the populace, then associated media images of gender work to subjugate women. Riordan states: "a feminist political economy also looks to the meso-and micro levels of capitalism as they shape women's day-to-day interactions" (2002: 8). In this regard, media texts are examined to highlight and critique the way in which they impact upon our lives in a pragmatic yet fundamental way. Thus, specific messages are examined in terms of the ideological positions they elicit and the parties that may stand to benefit from the propagation of such messages.

Commodity audiences and the production of a franchise

In her essay, 'Gendering the commodity audience: Critical media research, feminism, and political economy', Meehan argues that because the audience is the actual product of media (2002: 211), markets of consumers are engineered and broken up into demographics that are then valued or devalued according to gender, race, and socioeconomic status (2002: 216). Thus, the young, white, affluent male audience is decidedly overvalued compared to virtually any other audience demographic (2002: 220). This has a tangible impact on what media content is produced. A system based on demographic profiling of the audience also means that advertisers cater to other groups as well, such as women or ethnic and racial minorities. However, a white and male patriarchal hierarchy is implicitly built into this system as illustrated by the financial value assigned to, for instance, thirty seconds of commercial airtime on The CW Network (which hosts programs geared

toward young women) as opposed to football games on broadcast TV (Steinberg, 2017). The premium price tag will be placed on the airtime that has the greatest likelihood of attracting the prime audience (i.e., young, white, affluent men), while airtime catering to all other groups can be purchased at a discounted (devalued) rate. At the end of her essay, Meehan argues that by segmenting consumers into demographics and devaluing non-prime categories as subordinate groups, advertisers and media organizations are being 'bad' capitalists by limiting their potential for revenue (2002: 220).

While Meehan is certainly not advocating for *more* capitalist advertising ventures, she is simply highlighting that prejudice has so infiltrated the ideology of even the media content makers that they are potentially letting their bottom line suffer. More recently though, the perceived lack of content geared toward women has been redressed by a slew of young adult fiction and erotica inspired by young adult fiction. However, this is not a new phenomenon; this is simply being *perceived* as new. The highly visible popularity of erotic franchises marketed toward the gendered commodity audience begs the following questions: If female audiences are being catered to, does that necessarily provide these groups with media products that depict positive life practices and healthy values? Is the audience being given any new insight into what it is to live in an inherently gendered world? Does the audience see themselves reflected in the media they consume? For Meehan, these questions may be less relevant as starting points as we are still functioning within the *structure* of the commodity system. The ideological critiques of media texts that feminists within cultural studies conduct are valuable, but, for Meehan, they accomplish little toward dismantling the economic structure that allows women to be commodified in such a way.

While texts catering to the female commodity audience typically cater to heterosexist stereotypes whereby women find initial sexual gratification and romance but land in constricting relationships with domineering men, Radway (1984) recognizes that readers of these texts often find restorative ways to read "against the grain" of the text, or in opposition to the heterosexist themes. Radway's ethnographic study of female readers of romance novels highlights that women use romantic texts as an escape from the reality of daily life (1984: 117-118). Thus, the act of reading romantic fiction becomes a subversive act as it allows women moments of emotional pleasure on their own terms, away from their traditional concerns. While the narratives maintain the patriarchal structure, readers are using the texts as a form of wish fulfilment or imaginative play to subvert the texts (Radway, 1984: 118). Those who consume *Fifty Shades of Grey* may also use the text in a subversive, escapist manner. What sets *Fifty Shades of Grey* apart from its counterparts in the romantic fiction genre is that it integrates BDSM as a key part of the narrative. But, by doing so, it misrepresents alternative sexuality to the audience and is a showcase for a lavish consumptive lifestyle. BDSM can become a liberating sexual space when negotiated in places that are focused on people and relationships, not the sales of products. While many pulp romance novels often have touches of taboo sexuality, *Fifty Shades of Grey* hinges upon the representation of taboo sexuality, making it necessary to examine these ideological representations further.

Returning to the topic of the construction of romantic fiction as a genre, Radway sheds light on how the industry was established and flourished. The technological advancements of the publishing world lay the groundwork for the romance genre; technology such as mechanical typesetting, machine-made paper, and new varieties of printing presses became widespread (Radway, 1984: 22). In the mid to late 19th century when these innovations were occurring, producers of mass-market books began selling them in magazine stands to reach a broader audience (Radway, 1984: 28). However, this caused logistical problems, leading producers to conclude that the mass-market

publishing industry had to depend on accurate predictions of cost and demand (Radway, 1984: 28). This allowed for formulaic literature, with its dependable audience, to flourish and, some one hundred years later, we have the birth of the modern romance genre in the 1970s (Radway, 1984: 33).

In a contemporary context, this topic is complicated by the advent of the eBook as a vehicle of popular fiction dissemination. Bestselling books are products of cultural discourse (Colbjørnsen, 2014). Further, eBook bestsellers (as they appear in the *New York Times* bestseller list) are not printed with their list price. Thus, the lay reader would not see “that the list typically features a high number of very cheap self-published titles and discounted older titles” (Colbjørnsen, 2014: 1105). This undermines the perceived cultural values of texts that appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list, as a dramatically lower price may be associated with lower quality. However, this incongruence in the distribution of the titles is not included in the cultural conversation around the texts appearing on bestseller lists. At the same time that the cultural value of eBooks may be in question, the democratization of the publishing process allows for voices at the margins to find a platform much more easily than before. In other words, while the mainstream publishers are focused on printing content for a general audience or more generic content for a niche audience (such as the romantic fiction genre), self-publishing and eBooks allow for otherwise niche content to be accessible to a much larger consumer base. For *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the traditional process of text-to-print-to-digital text was violated, as it began as a digital work of fan fiction before it ever became a printed text or an eBook. Perhaps this allowed a more seamless integration into the world of eBook publishing as it had already penetrated segments of the digital market before it was properly distributed as an eBook. Nonetheless, the cultural value of the title ‘bestseller’ cannot be underestimated when evaluating the franchise’s success and influence on popular discourse. Additionally, the marketplace was only introduced to this niche content because of the democratization of the publishing platform, allowing James to circumvent the traditional publishing gatekeepers.

BDSM and popular culture

Thinking of *Fifty Shades* in the larger context of contemporary feminist theory and debate, there has been much said in both popular discourse and the academic literature. In both *Fifty Shades* and its source material *Twilight*, some have argued that there is a tension between a desire for sexual liberation and a gothic vision of female sexuality that mirrors the contemporary resurgence of the ‘sex wars’ (Srdarov and Bourgault du Coudray, 2016). The role that Christian plays in the franchise as the ‘dominant’ or ‘sadist’ is also a contentious topic (Al-Mahadin, 2013). Drdová and Saxonberg (2019) examined how BDSM practitioners feel that their community is represented by the texts and media coverage surrounding the franchise. Additionally, the important topic of violence within the romantic relationship is discussed, with one study concluding that signs of intimate partner violence are rampant throughout the first novel (Bonomi, Altenburger and Walton, 2013).

These themes are represented frequently in the film through representations of Christian circumventing social boundaries in his pursuit of Anastasia. Upon first meeting her, he appears uninvited at her place of work (a local hardware store) to purchase cable ties and jokes about being a serial killer. This overbearing and threatening behaviour, which Anastasia did not ask for nor encourage at this point in the narrative, continues throughout *Fifty Shades of Grey* as Christian appears out of nowhere to take her home from a bar after she has too much to drink. This

controlling behaviour carries over into their sexual relationship, with which Anastasia has vocal concerns. The films explain that Christian is a victim of childhood psychological abuse and rape. Anastasia spends the rest of the trilogy ‘fixing’ him by showing him the kind of love he ‘deserves’ but has been denied.

Some feminist theorists have moved beyond doing only ideological critiques of the *Fifty Shades* franchise and have conducted audience research as well. According to one survey, women who self-reported reading *Fifty Shades* scored higher on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory scale. Those who found the series romantic scored higher on items measuring ambivalent sexism (the perspective that there is a power hierarchy benefiting men which can result in both hostile or benevolent acts committed toward women) (Glick and Fiske, 1996) and benevolent sexism (the idea that women complete men, should be protected, and are beautiful (Rudman and Glick, 2008)) (Altenburger, Carotta, Bonomi and Snyder, 2017). Similarly, a focus-group based audience reception study was conducted that asked young women what their thoughts were on the romantic relationship in the franchise. Overall themes indicated that women found many aspects of the relationship (such as stalking and threats) dangerous, but were excited by the explorative nature of the sexuality portrayed in the film (Bonomi, Nichols, Carotta, Kiuchi and Perry, 2016). Thus, it seems that female audiences are not consuming the texts wholly uncritically, but there is reason to be concerned from a health and wellness perspective.

There is a large body of literature dedicated to the study of BDSM and a number of works that address the problematic relationship between the *Fifty Shades* brand and the BDSM community. One content analysis of all three books in the series coded for sexual health and wellness messages, then conceptualized those messages within the existing sexual wellness literature (Leistner and Mark, 2016). The authors found that, while many instances of sexual exploration were framed positively within a wellness context, there were many instances of ignored non-consent, poor sexual communication, pathologized sexualities, and confusing visions of BDSM relationships (which were ‘unhealthy’ according to contemporary health research) (Leistner and Mark, 2016). Importantly, the authors note that the relationship at the heart of the narrative does not, in fact, reflect the reality of the average BDSM relationship, but a “24/7 slave contract” in which the slave is subject to the wishes of the master at all times. This is much more uncommon and difficult for non-community members to understand (Leistner and Mark, 2016: 482).

These issues are specifically important because of the way in which BDSM situations are framed within the films. Christian introduces Anastasia to alternative sexuality from his own perspective, which is very manipulative and controlling. Christian, who identifies as a dominant, requires that his submissive sexual partners sign a contract agreeing to abstain from sex with other partners, refrain from drinking to excess, obtain oral contraception from a doctor of his choosing, and agree to a list of sexual activities (that are open for negotiation at the time of signing). This gives him consent to engage in these activities for the duration of the relationship. Although Anastasia never signs this contract, this is the way that alternative sexuality is normalized in the narrative. In real-world BDSM relationships, this kind of agreement is much closer to the aforementioned ‘master-slave’ dynamic, which is rare in the BDSM community and does not universally represent the dynamic of people interested in bondage, power dynamics, and ‘impact-play’ (e.g., whipping), which are the activities that Christian carries out. Further, the films portray BDSM as a pathologized sexuality by attributing Christian’s kink desires to the abuse he experienced at the hands of his childhood rapist and the psychological damage weathered from his birth mother’s life as a prostitute. The narrative that practitioners of BDSM arrive at their sexual

preferences as a result of childhood abuse or trauma and may become abusers themselves is a tired stereotype. In fact, studies (Connolly, 2006; Rogak and Connor, 2018) showcase that across most psychopathological measures, BDSM practitioners score no differently than members of a control population.

The dubious issue of consent lies at the heart of much of the academic discourse surrounding how the franchise is unrepresentative of the BDSM community. What goes unsaid in the narrative of the franchise is that consent functions differently in BDSM relationships than it does in “vanilla” heterosexual relationships (Tripodi, 2017: 94). Further, discourses surrounding issues involved in consent within vanilla heterosexual relationships are forced upon BDSM relationships where they do not belong (Barker, 2013). Within BDSM, there is a larger understanding of the necessity of consent within the community and the responsibility of consent is not placed on one individual within a relationship, but on the community itself (Barker, 2013). This concept is furthered by ethnographic research into BDSM communities and their ‘culture of active consent’ (Tripodi, 2017). This refusal to view BDSM as something that functions outside of mainstream courtship traditions enables the franchise to use BDSM as a scapegoat for many of the problematic aspects of the primary relationship (Downing, 2013).

Because BDSM is so taboo, it is sparsely represented in film. A few notable examples of films that showcase BDSM are, Luis Buñuel’s 1968 *Belle du Jour*, Just Jaeckin’s 1975 *The Story of O*, Stuart Urban’s 1997 *Preaching to the Perverted*, and Steven Shainberg’s 2002 *Secretary*. Within these examples, the main characters (with the exception of *Preaching to the Perverted*) are represented as either weak or psychologically damaged by their past, reinforcing the false conception that BDSM is a sexual inclination caused by pathology. Films like *Secretary* and *Preaching to the Perverted* showcase the ways that BDSM can be liberating, especially outside of a commercial-capitalistic context, such that emotional and physical connections with people can be mutually negotiated. However, BDSM narratives in film often represent sexual liberation at the expense of pathologizing practitioners (Weiss, 2006). As digital media continues to change the corporate and alternative media landscapes, alternative, more genuine representations of the BDSM community may come to the fore outside of the heteronormative understanding of romance and sexuality. But because of corporate control of digital media, many crackdowns on sexual expression online continue to take place (Wilkinson, 2009), extending even to the discussion of non-heteronormative life (Dry, 2019).

Corporate interests and sexual products

Universal Pictures, one of the ‘big five’ Hollywood studios, was in a unique position to profit off James’ dubious use of BDSM in her books and purchased the film rights to the *Fifty Shades* franchise in 2012 (Bosman, 2012). On the nature of the books, James Schamus, CEO of Focus Features (a division of Universal), said: “At its core, this is a romance of the most emotionally resonant, but delicate, order” (Bosman, 2012: para. 4). Beyond the ability to tap into a built-in audience with a film adaption of the books, the franchise does fit in with the studio’s existing catalogue of romance films. Universal has been responsible for salacious cinematic fair since its inception. Historically known for its classic “monster movies,” 1931’s *Dracula* is brimming with sexual imagery. In the midst of the 1940s Film Noir movement, Universal released what has come to be the most famous example of the genre, *Double Indemnity* (1944), which pushed the limits of the production code with its double entendre-laden dialogue. The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of

the sex comedy, and Universal released *Pillow Talk* (1959) starring Rock Hudson and Doris Day, staples of the romantic comedy genre. More recently, *Bridget's Jones's Diary* (2001), *The Breakup* (2006), and *Girl's Trip* (2017) have been added to its catalogue. For almost 100 years, Universal has paid special attention to the romantic and (somewhat) sexually explicit material in its library, staying at the forefront of social trends regarding the representation of sexuality in popular culture texts. The *Fifty Shades* films fit squarely into this historical precedent.

The two primary corporate parties that benefited financially from the success of the *Fifty Shades* franchise are James's Fifty Shades Ltd. and Comcast. Universal Pictures is a division of Universal Studios, which is part of NBCUniversal, a subsidiary of Comcast (Universal Pictures, n.d.). Comcast, one of the largest media companies in the world, posted earnings of US\$84.5 billion in 2017 with US\$33 billion of that coming from NBCUniversal (Comcast Reports 4th Quarter and Year End 2017 Results, 2018). NBCUniversal states its values as follows: "We understand the power and possibilities of media and technology. As a company uniquely positioned to inform, empower and inspire, we embrace the opportunity to create conversation and mobilize action to address some of the world's most critical issues" (Values, n.d.). One could argue that the *Fifty Shades* franchise hits a few of these self-proclaimed values: informing the audience about BDSM, empowering women to pursue sexual gratification, and creating a conversation around sexuality in the contemporary era. Whether or not the film is actually informative or empowering is up for debate, but the franchise certainly *has* created much conversation. Fifty Shades Ltd. does not have a webpage nor a values statement, but James's personal website is branded with the phrase "provocative romance" (About Me, n.d.), which seems to be a representative statement of the author's values as well as a description of *Fifty Shades* itself. As the franchise aligns with the self-described goals and values of both companies with large stakes in its success, whether or not the film merchandise also coordinates with these goals should be examined in order to acquire the fullest possible picture of the franchise's production.

While the merchandise ranges from seemingly ideologically benign nail polish, to household goods like laundry detergent, to BDSM bondage products, all these products correspond to the goals of both companies. For Universal, its limited range of licensed products, such as OPI nail polish and a Make Up For Ever cosmetic line with product names including 'Shine for Me' or 'Desire Me', correspond with the idea of empowerment that it espouses in its values statement. In turn, it benefits from the increased publicity generated by the much larger selection of products that are licensed by Fifty Shades Ltd. such as the Mr. Grey teddy bear, jewellery collections, and much more. The products whose revenue goes solely to Fifty Shades Ltd. aligns with the author's 'provocative romance' brand through the emphasis on the romantic aspects of the relationship between the franchise's two main characters as well as the deeply sexual aspect of their relationship as well. This shows that the merchandise is made simply to sell, but also that it is created with specific ideological goals meant to accord with those of the parent companies in order to sell a corporate image.

The values of James's corporate self can be better understood through an exploration of the *Fifty Shades* franchise origins. Fan fiction, as a style of writing, is usually communal, involving the work of unpaid readers and editors within the same fan community (Brennan and Large, 2014). Thus, when works of fan fiction are published, this becomes problematic from both an ethical and economic standpoint. Is credit given to these contributors when publishing the work? Are they financially compensated? In the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which originated as a work of *Twilight* fan fiction by the name of *Master of the Universe I and II*, no credit or compensation was

distributed to anyone except James, who wrote the original fan fiction under the pseudonym Snowqueens Icedragon (Brennan and Large, 2014). This highlights a further aspect of the commodity audience: the devaluing of the labour of women. As fanfiction is largely seen as an undertaking of female fans, it follows that the fans contributing to these texts are not properly credited or compensated. When looking at the merchandise associated with Fifty Shades Ltd., this same disregard for ethics and the devaluing of communities of women can be seen through the consistent emphasis on consumption and commodification as an answer to issues of sexual dissatisfaction. In other words, the women who helped create the *Fifty Shades* franchise do not matter to James compared to the potential profit.

This valuing of profit over individuals' well-being is apparent in others involved in the production of the franchise as there was controversy surrounding the representation of BDSM by the actors involved. Like any series with a large fan community, the production of the *Fifty Shades* films was plagued with tabloid and public gaffes, the most notable of which is Dornan's statement regarding his reaction to visiting a BDSM sex dungeon: "Then going back to my wife and newborn baby afterwards... I had a long shower before touching either of them" (Bailey, 2014: para. 2). Many in the BDSM community took offense to this comment and publicly criticized the actor, claiming that his statement was akin to homophobia (Shechet, 2014). This created an odd contradiction around the films; the text was marketed as one of sexual liberation and freedom for women, yet one of the stars openly expressed a negative, moralistic view of BDSM practices.

Yet, despite (or perhaps due to) the controversy, all three *Fifty Shades* films proved to be box office successes, with U.S. domestic revenues of US\$166,167,230 ('Fifty Shades of Grey (2015)', n.d.), US\$114,581,250 ('Fifty Shades Darker (2017)', n.d.) and US\$100,407,760 ('Fifty Shades Freed (2018)', n.d.). Even more impressive is their modest production budgets, which never rose above US\$55 million per film ('Fifty Shades of Grey (2015)', n.d.; 'Fifty Shades Darker (2017)', n.d.; 'Fifty Shades Darker (2017)', n.d.). Advertising budgets for the films are hard to acquire, but the estimated amount spent on TV spots for *Fifty Shades Darker* was US\$49.07 million (iSpot.tv, 2017), an amount nearly equal to the US\$55 million production budget for the latter two entries into the franchise. Additionally, this figure is for TV spots alone and does not take into account the comprehensive marketing materials that Universal deployed for each of the films. This strategy included sleek print campaigns (James, 2015) and very successful soundtracks, with the first film's soundtrack debuting at #2 on the Billboard 100, selling 258,000 units in its first week of release (Caulfield, 2015). Notably, the soundtrack included a remix of Beyonce's hit 'Crazy in Love' that some claimed was better than the original version (Singleton, 2015). The unique soundtracks to the films, which are full of popular and noteworthy artists, were curated to 'eventize' the songs on the album, making it marketable to both younger and older women (Stutz, 2018); another example of the sprawling marketing strategy.

Due to James's deal with Universal, the studio had very limited rights to licensing products with the *Fifty Shades* brand, as James retained licensing rights for the franchise (Ford, 2015). Universal did have the ability to produce small, limited edition product lines with beauty companies, but the majority of brand-licensed material is overseen by James's Fifty Shades Ltd., with revenues going directly to the author (Ford, 2015). Nonetheless, while the revenue from merchandising may have gone to two separate companies, both corporate entities worked in tandem to create a consumer marketplace flooded with franchise-branded products that served to fuel interest in the film and vice versa.

Tie-in merchandise is a strong marketing tradition in the film industry, but it has not previously expanded into such intimate products as the *Fifty Shades* franchise has produced. However, this is becoming more common, as is exemplified by a recent collaboration between sex toy company LoveHoney and the Comedy Central show *Broad City* (Katz, 2017). LoveHoney, an online retailer branded as ‘the sexual happiness people’ (About Lovehoney, n.d.), also sold official *Fifty Shades* merchandise ranging from black silicone vibrators emblazoned with the name of the film, dark lavender rope designed for bondage play, to a gold cock ring fashioned to mimic a wedding ring with the inscription “I want you. Now.” written in calligraphy on the inside (Thomas, 2018). These are exemplary of the *Fifty Shades* branded merchandise.

There is no available data on the revenue brought in from tie-in merchandise such as the sex toys or other products. However, LoveHoney’s profits skyrocketed after the *Fifty Shades* product line (and other similar collaborations such as the *Broad City* line mentioned above) was introduced to the market. In 2017, LoveHoney’s pre-tax revenue rose 76% higher than for the previous year (Stevens, 2017). The revenue boost is not enjoyed by LoveHoney alone. The *Fifty Shades* franchise is widely attributed to lifting the entire sex toy industry out of the shadow of pornography, with expectations that it could grow to be a US\$52 billion industry by 2020 (Passy, 2015). The founder of one sex toy company noted that products featured in the books and films quickly sold out on the company’s website, something that had never occurred before (Burns, 2016).

The branding of the merchandise highlights the *Fifty Shades* preoccupation with consumption. BDSM is not an inherently consumptive lifestyle. Many practitioners purchase play items from hardware or home improvement stores. High-end items used in BDSM scenes can be cost-prohibitive, but they are not inherently luxurious. The *Fifty Shades* merchandise, such as the vibrator, lavender rope, and cock ring, were priced well-above comparable products in the market at the time. While this is not unusual for official film merchandise, it is ideologically problematic because it extends the concept that BDSM is a luxury lifestyle, not an alternative sexuality, and that you can buy this sexual freedom for a price, instead of doing the work of negotiating it with a partner.

This issue becomes further muddled by the narrative’s problems with portraying healthy alternative sexual relationships. When Christian explains the BDSM dynamic in more depth to Anastasia in *Fifty Shades Darker*, he states: “I’m a dominant. It means I want you to surrender yourself to me.” Anastasia asks why she would do that. Christian responds: “To please me” and states that all she will receive in exchange is “him.” What is not expressed in this scene or elsewhere in the trilogy is that in a BDSM relationship, the submissive individual is often the one with more power in the relationship than the dominant. The submissive truly has control over a scene or a power dynamic as they have the ability to tell the dominant to stop at any point. The dominant also traditionally strives to provide a pleasurable experience for the submissive, not the other way around. By portraying the dynamics of BDSM incorrectly, the emphasis is shifted to the toxic romance and the BDSM toys themselves (which can be purchased in the extra-textual ‘real world’).

Franchise products and implicit sexism

Given the franchise’s relationship with Comcast and Fifty Shades Ltd., questions about the messages of the products must also be asked. What are consumers being sold at the level of ideology? First, given both the nature of the products and the values of both corporations selling

them, the idea is proposed that sexual empowerment and objectification are interrelated. Second, and following from the first, is the conception that consumption and consumerism are avenues to achieving sexual desirability.

The structural issue at the heart of consumer commodification is especially apparent in the *Fifty Shades* brand. Studies have shown that children can recognize logos and request specific brands before their second birthday (Bettig and Hall, 2012: 209). Media makers have created a landscape wherein we are so saturated with brands and characters that we then desire those brands and characters, and this becomes an endless feedback loop of consumption. It is within these spaces of commodity and consumption that *Fifty Shades* appears. An entire empire of merchandise has been produced piggybacking off the commercial success of both the books and the films.

This merchandise is heavily crafted around the concept that women should desire to be looked at or acknowledged by men. Many films have cosmetic brand tie-in lines; however, they do not have collections with names such as ‘Give in to Me’ or ‘Desire Me’ (Muse, 2014). Similarly, most films do not have their own signature scent of laundry detergent, filled with “sensual oils,” that brings “a touch of naughtiness to the bedroom” (Drohan, 2015). These products, and many others like them, further contribute to the female commodity audience that is the target demographic of the *Fifty Shades* brand. Many of the products could be deemed not just silly and over the top, but ideologically harmful in that they revolve around assisting the woman with the creation of a material body that is attractive to the men through the purchase of consumer goods. This merchandise exists in an explicitly capitalist heterosexist paradigm where it is presumed that: the body of a woman exists to be attractive to a man, that a woman inherently desires to sexually interest a man, and that a woman needs to purchase products to attract a man. This paradigm is not simply ubiquitous but also extremely limiting and dangerous for people who do not want to or cannot adhere to its conventions. This subtext exists in the merchandise despite the theme in the books of the ‘inner goddess’, who, presumably, does not need laundry detergent with jasmine and rose oil to be attractive. However, this element of the books is both absent from the films and the official merchandise as well. This thematic exclusion serves the merchandising very well as it removes the innate, inner attractiveness of the female protagonist. What remains is an attractive body that *could* belong to the reader if they purchase the right products. While this clearly is not explicitly stated, it is an implicit theme in the merchandise.

The official brand merchandise goes further than just selling the idea of desire. There are several official lines of *Fifty Shades* sex toys. After the success of the books and the novels, there was a noted rising interest in kink-related paraphernalia and sex toys in general (Comella, 2013). Women were looking to ‘spice things up’ or to simply explore new sexual experiences in the wake of exposure to this style of erotica. Comella calls this kind of woman the “*Fifty Shades* consumer” (2013). Through targeting the commodified audience of women, the producers behind the distribution of the books and the making of the films also created a niche kind of consumer, willing to seek out brand-related merchandise to fulfil the curiosity that the texts stoked. They were willing to pay large sums of money to do so, with many sex-toy companies reporting profits tripling in the wake of the brand’s success (Ford, 2015). Many retailers encouraged the overlap between *Fifty Shades* and BDSM activities, offering their own franchise-inspired product lines and even in-store classes (Martin, 2013).

While consumer/audience reception studies on the merchandise would have to be conducted to fully understand the impact that these products have on the consumer, there is some anecdotal evidence of the effects of the merchandise on the public. One BDSM mistress stated that she had

seen an increase in mild BDSM-related injuries amongst inexperienced practitioners (Chang, 2018). This alone is not alarming, but it does emphasize that consumers go to these products and texts for information regarding alternative sexualities. This is the aspect that ultimately makes these products dangerous. As noted in the literature review, the texts do not reflect the actual reality of alternative sexual relationships within the BDSM community (Leistner and Mark, 2016) and neither do the implicit ideological values of the products. Thus, this can lead consumers to hold misguided conceptions of alternative sexualities; a basis for building unhealthy sexual relationships.

Neither the impact nor the effects of the franchise are of any import to the corporations responsible for its success, as the products (including the books and films) are ultimately crafted to showcase and sell a glamorous way of life, not a fringe sexual lifestyle. The films noticeably emphasize the lavish lifestyle that Christian uses to seduce Anastasia, sometimes more than the sexual aspects of the story. As one author states: “[*Fifty Shades Freed*] reveals that the series was never about the overhyped sex but rather the glamorous lifestyle that ostensibly comes with taming and keeping a rich, handsome man” (Pickett, 2018: para. 3). This brings a new lens to the products and marketing of the film. If one examines the franchise through a capitalist, commodity lens, the ideological themes much more clearly align with the values and goals of both Universal and Fifty Shades Ltd. Universal, not being able to license much official merchandise for the films, prominently showcases brands associated with a lavish lifestyle in all three films. For example, in *Fifty Shades Darker*, there are at least 39 instances of product placement in the film (*Fifty Shades Darker* (2017) Product Placement Examples, n.d.). While this is not abnormal for a film, many of the products shown in the trilogy are not accessible to a majority of the audience, such as Cartier jewellery, Audi cars, and Christian Louboutin shoes. Thus, the ‘*Fifty Shades* consumer’ is shopping for much more than sex toys and laundry detergent: they are shopping for Anastasia’s lifestyle. The lifestyle of this aspirational character just happens to include products such as riding crops and dildos.

Conclusion

In both the text and film versions of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, sex, romance, and a lavish lifestyle are sold to consumers. Outside of the texts, the *Fifty Shades* brand further commodifies what it views as romance and sexuality through goods sold to consumers who want to embrace the lifestyle that the franchise glamorizes; a lifestyle filled with adventure, luxury, and love. While love and healthy sexuality cannot be bought, this has never stopped corporations in a capitalist marketplace from selling them.

Hollywood has always sold love and sexuality; ‘sex sells’ is a common refrain in the industry. What makes the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon unique is its framing of alternative sexualities as a glamorous lifestyle choice. The franchise conveniently prepackages products for purchase that (theoretically) will give the consumer a chance to experience this rich life. For example, the audience can purchase an advent calendar of sex toys that will give them a glimpse into the life and sexual adventures of Christian and Anastasia for 10 days (Hsieh, 2017). But this is simply a shallow sales pitch. A whip will not bring one love, happiness, or even sexual well-being on its own, especially in a vacuum of educational information regarding its use within a healthy BDSM relationship.

What these toys and other branded merchandise do accomplish is the generation of revenue and publicity for the stakeholders and associated companies. LoveHoney, the sex toy company selling

Fifty Shades branded toys, experienced a huge increase in revenue after the debut of the line (Stevens, 2017). Other adult companies have experienced similar revenue boosts without even carrying any of the branded merchandise (Adams, 2015). *Fifty Shades* consumers are spending a lot, and many different corporations are profiting from them. In the end, however, the consumer is left with an overpriced, branded product about which they have never been properly educated. This is dangerous and dishonest.

The corporate entities who produce and sell *Fifty Shades* merchandise not only sell sexual goods in an educational vacuum, they also implicitly support harmful heteronormative ideologies. These ideologies are dangerous for female individuals as they create a sexual environment wherein the man is dominant and the female body is meant for him. Additionally, these ideologies are dangerous because they exclude queer people and non-traditional sexualities and romantic preferences from the social narrative, rendering them invisible or irregular. While sex toys and sexual wellness merchandise surely have the potential to be progressive and enrich the lives of many, products associated with the *Fifty Shades* franchise miss this opportunity in favour of supporting old social scripts which encourage women to consume goods in order to make their bodies more alluring to men. There is no encouragement of the communicative connection that is essential to a BDSM relationship.

This analysis of the ideological messages implicit in the *Fifty Shades* merchandise, the trilogy's representation of BDSM practices and dynamics, and the examination of the corporate production of the franchise as a whole, highlights the need for increased sexual education among the general population as well as a concerted effort to ensure that the public understands basic conceptions of media literacy. When these are not provided to the audience, specifically in this context, the results can be negative. Abuse and physical harm can occur. NBCUniversal claims it understands its role as a media-creator and embraces its ability to create critical dialogue in the world. However, the creation of the film texts and merchandise does not reflect these self-proclaimed values. Media makers need to be held publicly accountable for the dangerous messages they espouse. The *Fifty Shades* franchise is an example of one such harmful text.

Author Bio

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