

The influence of the movie entitled *Fifty Shades of Grey* on attitudes towards BDSM practices and sexual behaviors

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Abstract

Introduction: Recent years saw phenomenal sales of the novel entitled *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This success was replicated by its screen adaptation in 2015. The cultural phenomenon of *Fifty Shades of Grey* brings about questions regarding its causes and consequences.

Materials and methods: The study comprised two parts, namely: before and after watching the movie. The first part was carried out on a sample of people who were planning on seeing the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie ($n = 398$). The second part was carried out 1.5 month after the movie premiere ($n = 111$). The first part employed a demographics section, a self-made survey on sex life and BDSM as well as the Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire. The second part employed additional questions concerning the movie. One hundred and eleven subjects (including 106 females) took part in the 1st and 2nd part of the study.

Results: After watching the movie, more people were aware of what BDSM was. However, more subjects declared being unwilling to practice BDSM in their sexual lives. Higher sexual satisfaction was also observed after watching the movie. The film was positively rated by 47% of the participants. Negative correlations between the movie rating and inclination to initiate sexual activity as well as sexual satisfaction were observed. The subjects who liked the movie revealed lower satisfaction with their relationships.

Conclusions: Watching the movie increased the subjects' sexual satisfaction. However, this was not due to practicing BDSM. Although the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie did not cause the subjects to practice BDSM in their sex lives, it increased their knowledge with regard to this phenomenon's meaning.

Key words: sexual satisfaction, BDSM, attitudes, erotic content, pornography

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Introduction

Recent years have seen phenomenal sales of the novel entitled *Fifty Shades of Grey* [1–4]. This success was replicated by its screen adaptation in 2015. In spite of receiving mixed critical opinions, the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey* immediately turned out to be a financial blockbuster breaking numerous records earning over \$ 569,000,000 worldwide. This phenomenon stimulates reflection on its causes and consequences. The movie's popularity may be linked with the influence exerted on the viewers, in this case mainly women. An additional factor that encourages carrying out psychological and sexological analysis

is the aspect of BDSM that was presented both in the book and the movie.

Literature presenting various types of romance constitutes a market worth over a billion dollars. In 2004, this type of book constituted 55% of the paperback sales in the US [5]. Although few studies have explored the influence of erotic contents in literature and movies on psychosexual functioning, the existing ones are highly interesting. A study by Carroll et al. [6] revealed a relationship between watching pornography and engaging in risky behaviors in adult women. Pornography turned out to be linked with frequent, fleeting sexual contacts and a higher number of sexual partners. However, the

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study did not establish the nature of the cause and effect relationship between these variables. A study by Reese-Weber and McBride [7] provided salient information on the influence of reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* on the level of sexual desire. Women who strongly identified themselves with the main female character declared an increase in sexual desire, while women who did not identify themselves with this character while reading the book did not report any desire level increase. This may suggest that a crucial factor was the reception of the book and picturing oneself in the main character's shoes.

The influence of watching the erotic content and pornography also has consequences for the evaluations of one's own attractiveness as well as that of one's sexual partner. This may be the same effect that has been observed by sexologists for years with regard to the consequences of pornography. It often leads to excessively high and unrealistic expectations regarding one's own activity and sexual attractiveness and results in a lack of satisfaction or sexual dysfunction. This effect is confirmed by the growing popularity of labiaplasty, whose sole justification in most cases is a wish to look like the actresses who star in pornographic movies [8]. A popular study by Kenrick et al. [9] provided data on the effect of men looking at pictures of attractive women taken from erotic magazines. Having seen such pictures, the men evaluated pictures of ordinary women lower in comparison with the men who had not seen such pictures originally. A study that followed showed that men evaluated their own relationships in a less favorable manner having been exposed to physically attractive women [10]. Having considered the results of these studies, it may be expected that women who are familiar with the story of Christian Grey would evaluate ordinary men or their own partners low.

The analysis of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie's and book's success should not neglect the sadomasochistic aspect. One of the elements of sexual preference may be related to domination or submission, which is also referred to as BDSM. The acronym stems from the terms bondage and discipline (B&D), domination and submission (D&S, D/S) and sadism and masochism (S&M). Although some behaviors are connected with coercion, BDSM is not a form of sexual abuse, as these practices take place upon all participants' consent. Usually the parties involved take pleasure in such an activity, in spite of the pain or humiliation that are distinctive for these activities and which could be perceived as unpleasant in other circumstances. These practices may employ various forms of sex, which, however, is not their most significant element [11]. BDSM is most often practiced in the form of playing specific

scenes where certain rituals are present. In some situations, BDSM is employed in daily life. The history of this phenomenon goes back relatively far: these behaviors and relationships were first mentioned in the 9th century BC in the region of ancient Sparta. Subsequent reports can be found in almost all centuries [12].

A screening study by Richters et al. [13] on BDSM practices revealed the phenomenon's popularity: 2.2% men and 1.3% women admitted having been involved in BDSM in the previous twelve months. However, the sample did not include participants who had been coerced into sexual activity. The subjects who engaged in BDSM practices did not significantly differ with regard to the frequency of experiencing anxiety or being unhappy. Moreover, these people scored significantly lower on a scale of psychological suffering than did the remainder of the subjects. Practicing BDSM was not significantly linked with any sexual difficulties [13].

The popularity of both the movie and novel entitled *Fifty Shades of Grey* indicates a certain social phenomenon. In 2013, the *Sexualities* magazine published a special issue devoted specifically to this phenomenon [14]. The influence of erotic and pornographic content is significant, yet ambiguous. Hence, the changes that may occur after watching the movie deserve attention.

The aim of this study was to analyze the influence of the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey* on attitudes towards BDSM practices, sexual satisfaction, sexual frequency and various sexual behaviors (pursuing sexual fantasies, dominating within sex life, using sex gadgets).

Material and methods

The study was carried out in Poland. It was composed of two parts. The first part was carried out in December 2014 and January 2015 on a sample of people who were planning on seeing *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Three hundred and ninety-eight subjects participated in this part. The second part was carried out 1½ months after the movie premiere. At that time, invitations to complete the second part of the survey, 'after watching the movie', were sent to the subjects who had participated in the first part of the study. The second part involved 111 subjects.

The first part, 'before watching the movie', contained a demographics section and a self-constructed survey on sexual life and BDSM. The second part contained additional questions concerning the movie.

Measurement instruments

Survey on attitudes towards BDSM. The instrument comprised three questions: 1. Do you know what BDSM is? (possible answers: yes, no); 2. Would you like to

practice BDSM in your sex life? (possible answers: yes, no, I don't know); 3. Do you practice BDSM in your sex life? (possible answers: yes, no, I don't know).

Survey concerning the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

The instrument comprised questions on the movie's rating (Rate the movie: 1. I liked it very much, 2. I liked it, 3. I have no opinion, 4. I disliked it, 5. I strongly disliked it), identifying oneself with the main women character (Did you identify yourself with Anastasia?) and the movie's potential influence on the viewer (Has watching this movie influenced your life in any way? If so, in what way?)

Survey on selected aspects of sexuality. The instrument comprised multiple choice questions on the frequency of sexual activity (What is the frequency of the intercourse or sexual activities between you and your partner) 1) more frequently than once a day, 2) once a day, 3) three or four times a week, 4) twice a week, 5) once a week, 6) once a fortnight, 7) once a month, 8) less than once a month, 9) no contacts, initiation it (Who usually initiates the intercourse or asexual activity?) 0) does not concern, 1) always my partner, 2) usually my partner, 3) me and my partner equally often, 4) usually me, 5) always me, sexual satisfaction (evaluate your relationship using this scale: does not concern; very unsatisfying, unsatisfying, I do not know, satisfying, very satisfying) pursuit of sexual fantasies (Do you satisfy your sexual fantasies? 1) never; 2) very rarely; 3) rarely; 4) sometimes, 5) often; almost always), domination within sexual life (Do you like being a dominating party in a sexual activity? A) no; b) I do not know; c) yes), fantasizing about having sex with another person (How often do you imagine having sex with a person other than your current partner? 1) never; 2) rarely; 3) sometimes; 4) very often) and use of erotic accessories (How often do you use erotic accessories, lubricants (moisturizers) or other erotic accessories? 1) never; 2) rarely; 3) sometimes; 4) very often; 5) each time I have sex).

Demographics contained questions with respect to age, gender, education, place of residence and closeness in relationships.

Sample

One hundred and eleven subjects took part in the second part of the study, including 5 men. For the sake of methodological correctness, the men were excluded from the sample. As a result, the final sample comprised 106 women. The mean age was 24 (SD = 4.74). The majority of women had secondary education (64 women, 60.37%), 37 women had university education (34.91%) and 5 women had primary education (4.72%). Most of the women originated from mid-size and large cities (n = 73; 68.87%). Twenty-seven women were single (25.47%), 18 women had remained in a relationship for less than a year (16.98%), 47 women had remained in a non-marital relationship for longer than a year (44.34%), while 14 women were married (13.21%).

Results

Table 1 presents the differences in subjects' attitudes towards BDSM before and after watching the movie.

Before watching it, 25.47% subjects did not know what BDSM was while 34.91% of the subjects indicated willingness to practice BDSM, 10.38% admitted to having practiced it.

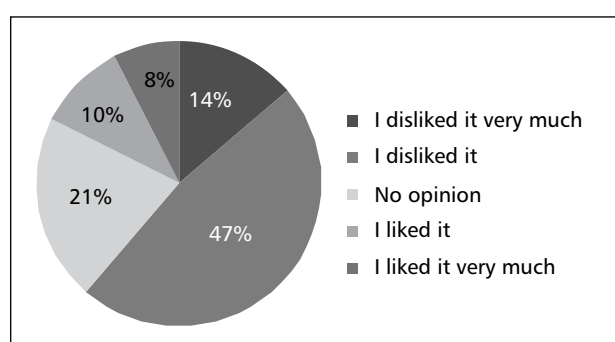
After watching the movie, more people were aware of what BDSM was. However, more subjects declared that they were unwilling to practice BDSM in their sexual lives. With regard to the question 'Do you practice BDSM?' before watching the film, more subjects indicated that they 'did not know' if they practiced it as they did not know what the acronym meant. Hence, having

Table 1. Attitudes towards BDSM before and after watching the movie

Questions concerning BDSM	Before		After		z	p
	n	%	n	%		
Do you know what BDSM is?						
Yes	79	74.53	96	90.57	3.076	0.002
No	27	25.47	10	9.43	3.076	0.002
Would you like to practice BDSM in your sex life?						
Yes	37	34.91	31	29.25	0.883	0.377
No	19	17.92	31	29.25	1.941	0.052
I don't know	50	47.17	44	41.5	0.829	0.407
Do you practice BDSM in your sex life?						
Yes	11	10.38	14	13.21	0.639	0.523
No	66	62.26	75	70.75	1.31	0.19
I don't know	29	27.36	17	16.04	1.999	0.046

Table 2. Variables describing sexuality before and after watching the movie

Variables describing sexuality	Before watching the movie		After watching the movie		z	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Current sexual frequency	4.774	2.527	4.745	2.504	0.487	0.627
Pursuing sexual fantasies	3.726	1.508	3.689	1.400	0.401	0.689
Inclination to initiate sexual activity	3.075	1.270	2.991	1.283	1.035	0.303
Inclination towards sexual domination	1.960	0.790	1.991	0.770	0.189	0.850
Using sex toys	1.991	1.056	1.962	0.984	0.320	0.749
Fantasizing about sex with a person other than one's partner	1.915	0.977	1.906	0.911	-0.154	0.877
Relationship satisfaction	4.019	1.857	4.189	1.908	1.750	0.080
Sexual satisfaction	3.925	1.814	4.180	1.766	2.507	0.012

Figure 1. *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie ratings

watched the movie did not encourage the subjects to include BDSM practices in their sex lives; at best, it increased their knowledge of this phenomenon.

The only changes in the subjects' sexuality observed after watching the movie were concerned with their sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction (both on a trend level). Higher levels of these variables were noted after watching the movie. There were no other apparent differences with respect to the remainder of the variables describing sex life (Table 2).

The mean rating of the movie on a 1 to 5 scale was 3.21 ($SD = 1.14$). The film was positively evaluated by 49% ($n = 52$) while 34% ($n = 36$) rated it negatively. Detailed results of the movie ratings are presented in Figure 1.

In the subsequent analysis, two groups of subjects were formed, namely: subjects who did not like the movie (answers: I strongly disliked it; I disliked it) and those who liked it (answers: I liked it very much; I liked it); the subjects who did not have an opinion were not included. Then comparisons between the two groups were made. The subjects who liked the movie revealed a lower inclination towards initiating sexual activity, lower satisfaction with their relationships and sexual satisfaction. On a trend level, the subjects who liked the film revealed a lower current sexual frequency. The results are presented in Table 3.

The subjects' identification with the main women character was also controlled for. Comparisons were made between subjects who identified themselves with Anastasia ($n = 28$) and those who did not identify themselves with her ($n = 78$). Significant differences were observed only for the movie rating. Subjects who identified themselves with the main character rated the film higher. Results are presented in Table 4. No differences were observed for the remaining variables.

Having been asked if watching the movie influenced their lives, 11% ($n = 12$) responded that it did. Most of the answers to the question on how the movie changed the subjects' lives were connected with improving their sex lives. For instance: In my relationship, [since watching the movie] I have focused more on the physical aspects between me and my partner. I have used a lot of tricks from the movie; My sex life is more colorful; I have observed that sex doesn't have to be boring—it can be diverse, obviously if two people agree to that and take pleasure in it; My courage in the bedroom sphere has increased.

More general responses were also obtained, for instance: I am now more motivated to take actions—work on myself (do physical exercise) in order to look better and maybe experience a similar adventure in the future. To put it simply—in order to stand a chance with a guy like Christian Grey.

Discussion

Higher sexual satisfaction was observed after watching the movie. Such a result may seem to be attributable to viewers 'drawing inspiration' on the topic of BDSM from the movie, particularly in the light of recent results of research on the benefits of practicing BDSM, conducted by Hébert and Weaver [15]. However, after watching the movie more subjects declared that they did not want to practice BDSM in their sex lives. What increased was the subjects' knowledge of what

Table 3. Variables describing sexuality with the subjects grouped in 2 categories, namely: ones who liked and disliked the movie

	Subjects who disliked the movie (n = 36)		Subjects who liked the movie (n = 52)		U	Z	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Current sexual frequency	5.444	2.171	4.385	2.665	736.5	1.689	0.091
Inclination to initiate sexual activity	3.389	1.103	2.692	1.292	659.5	2.342	0.019
Inclination towards sexual domination	1.972	0.845	1.942	0.752	919.5	0.136	0.892
Pursuing sexual fantasies	4.000	1.146	3.500	1.489	769.0	1.413	0.158
Using sex toys	2.083	0.996	1.923	0.967	852.0	0.709	0.476
Fantasizing about sex with a person other than one's partner	2.083	0.906	1.807	0.908	771.5	1.392	0.164
Relationship satisfaction	4.917	1.317	3.673	2.112	650.0	2.423	0.015
Sexual satisfaction	4.639	1.496	3.827	1.897	698.0	2.016	0.044

Table 4. Identifying oneself with the main female character and movie rating

	Subjects who identified themselves with the main character		Subjects who did not identify themselves with the main character		U	Z	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Movie rating	3.893	1.875	2.962	1.133	594	-3.565	< 0.001

BDSM was, not their desire to practice it. Therefore, the increase in sexual satisfaction after watching the movie is not linked with practicing BDSM. At this point it is worthwhile to stress the negative correlation between the movie rating and subjects' sexual satisfaction. Thus, the subjects who did not like the movie demonstrated higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Perhaps this was due to the sad movie ending or the portrayal of BDSM practices as being partly pleasant, but also complicating relationships within a couple. The subjects may have also learned to appreciate their own sex lives to a larger extent. The results may also be explained in the light of the downward comparisons' phenomenon [16]. These comparisons improve one's mood and cause a better frame of mind.

Having been asked if watching the movie influenced their lives, 11% claimed that it did. Most of the answers to the question of how the movie changed the subjects' lives were connected with improving and diversifying their sex lives. In a study of the perception of the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, some of the female subjects described changes in their sex lives caused by the book: they opened up to new possibilities, experimented and, thus, improved the sexual relations in their relationships. The approach to BDSM that is presented in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and movie frees sexual games from the sadomasochistic flavor, or BDSM in general, from being labelled as a 'deviation', 'something wrong' or 'something that normal women should not do'. Owing to that, a part of the readers changed their attitude towards this type of behaviors and started practicing

them, which they evaluated positively [17]. Detailed research on the influence of pornography that was carried out in a large Danish sample demonstrated elements of both positive and negative influence of pornography on women and men. However, the positive influence was somewhat higher [18].

The mean rating of the movie on a scale from 1 to 5 was 3.22. The movie was rated positively by 47% of the subjects, while 33% rated it negatively. Negative correlations were observed between the evaluation of the movie and subjects' inclination to initiate sexual activity. Such results are connected with stereotypical femininity. In the study by Kocur [17], the subjects who liked *Fifty Shades of Grey* scored higher on a scale of psychological femininity. This is linked with the main characters — the roles of Anastasia and Christian conform to gender stereotypes. According to the theory by Bem [19], individuals who associate themselves with the traditional elements of their gender role represent a range of stiffer behaviors. Feminine women prefer behaviors that are typical and conform to their sexual role, such as the classical position and being the passive, submissive party. Masculine men also demonstrate a preference towards sexual behaviors that are typical for stereotypical masculinity, such as: the classical position (once again), being the initiating party and playing an active role [20]. Psychological femininity and stereotypes concerning the women sexual role involve submissiveness and lowliness within sexual relationships. Initiating sexual activity is stereotypically restricted to men [21, 22].

Research by Altenburger et al. [23] conducted on a sample of 715 women aged 18-24 analysing the relationship between the readership of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the basic sexist notions, revealed relationships between the variables subject to examination. Female subject who read the novel displayed a higher level of ambivalent, beneficial and enemy sexism. Additionally, female readers who perceived *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a "romantic novel" represented a higher level of ambivalent and benign sexism. These results emphasize a link between a positive evaluation of the book and the traditional, or stereotypical perception of the male and female social and sexual roles.

The subjects who liked the movie demonstrated lower satisfaction with their relationships and sexual satisfaction. On a trend level, they also demonstrated a lower current sexual frequency. Such results may indicate that some of the subjects transferred themselves from their daily lives into Grey's story. A study by Wu [24] revealed that women who read romance stories had had fewer sexual partners than other women. Some of the recipients of books and movies of this kind escape into the world of fantasy and, as a result, make up for existing lacks within their daily lives such as the shortcomings of their relationship or sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, some of the women who are fascinated with the character of Christian Grey may hold excessively high expectations of their current or potential partners. If these women are in relationships, their expectations may hinder their satisfaction; if they seek a partner, these exorbitant expectations may impede forming an intimate relationship. These elements may also reduce the frequency of sexual activity.

Conclusions

1. After watching the movie, the subjects' knowledge of BDSM has improved. However, it did not encourage them to practice BDSM in their sex lives.
2. Higher sexual satisfaction was also observed after watching the movie.
3. The female subjects who liked the movie were less inclined to initiate sexual activity, declared lower satisfaction with their relationships and sexual satisfaction.
4. The female subjects who identified themselves with the main character rated the movie higher.

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