

Anastasia's 50 Shades of Consent: The Movie's Influence on Perceptions of Sadomasochism

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This paper would not be possible without the help of Dr. Megan Yost, Department of Psychology, Dickinson College. Many thanks for supporting me in my decision to follow through with this research.

Thank you to my sisters, parents, and peers for supporting me in this endeavor and for providing an extra set of eyes when my own had gone cross.

## Abstract

The present study looked at how the film *50 Shades of Grey*'s ubiquitous popularity influenced people's perceptions about BDSM and their beliefs regarding SM situations and personal decisions as to whether or not to engage in such actions. This research speaks to the influence of mainstreaming a frequently stigmatized sexual preference and the impacts of positive or negative perceptions on this highly contested issue. Ten female students were interviewed to determine how the film impacted their own beliefs on BDSM and intentions of sexual behavior. The participants also filled out a self-reporting survey that determined their attitudes toward BDSM. On the basis of previous research, it was predicted that while *Fifty Shades of Grey* may have been successful in making BDSM more mainstream, the frequent misrepresentations of sadomasochism in the film and Hollywood's overdramatic tendencies have perpetuated the negative stigma associated with this queered sexuality. Analyses suggest that while participants were moderately accepting of SM, the movie's Hollywood adaptation misconstrued many healthy aspects of SM leaving viewers with a lasting negative impression and confusion on the concept of consent, thus negatively impacting beliefs regarding BDSM.

*Keywords:* media, sadomasochism, SM, BDSM, *Fifty Shades of Grey*

### Anastasia's 50 Shades of Consent: The Movie's Influence on Perceptions of Sadomasochism

Through the overwhelming increase in mainstream media representation of queered sexuality and queered sexual communities since 1983 (Falk & Weinberg), sadomasochism has been thrust into the public eye and has therefore been under the scrutiny of the general public whose limited understanding may impact their own receptions of such identities. This paper explores the representation of sadomasochism in the new film, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, released February 13, 2015. Sadomasochism, BDSM and SM will herein be used to describe sexual acts defined by<sup>1</sup> but are not limited to bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2008). Researchers have showed that media can impact the reception of queered identities (Weiss, 2006; Calzo & Ward, 2009; Wilkinson, 2009; Lee & Hicks, 2011; Reese-Weber & McBride, 2014), but there has not ever been a representation of sadomasochism as popular as the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. Topping charts in the UK (BBC, 2012), making the New York Times bestseller list (New York Times, 2012), and beating *Harry Potter* as the fastest selling paperback in all time (Daily Mail, 2012), the novel's popularity is unprecedented. The release of the film adaptation was primed by this nonpareil success and was released just in time for Valentine's Day, demonstrating its role in romantic popular culture.

And the film's release did not disappoint, topping charts as the highest grossing February release of all time along with breaking a number of other records (The Hollywood Reporter, 2015), the film was successful in thrusting BDSM into the public eye at the center of popular culture. Based on previous research regarding the discrimination against SM-identified individuals (Wright, 2006), there has been a cultural call to arms to accurately portray SM practitioners as previous representation has only emphasized stigma and pathologized SM even

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym "BDSM" stands for either "bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism" or "bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism", while SM stands for "sadomasochism" (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2008)

further (Wilkinson, 2009). Ironically, sadomasochism was still considered a pathological disease in the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., text rev.; *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) when *Fifty Shades of Grey* was released in 2011. It was not until May 2013 that the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., text rev.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) differentiated between paraphilia and paraphilic disorders (Wright, 2014), reducing the stigma of involvement in sadomasochism by small amounts. Based on these changes, there have been considerable changes especially within the court systems in understanding BDSM as a sexual preference rather than a disease (Wright 2014), but there is still a large amount of stigma that forces SM into the fringe. Through this, the purpose of this study was to look at how the film adaptation of *Fifty Shades of Grey* influences people's perspectives and understanding of sadomasochism. This study did not look to prove or disprove a hypothesis. This qualitative research aims to provide a basis of conversation regarding the influence of popular media on healthy depictions of SM.

In the past, researchers have compared SM behavior to same-sex sexual activity as a guiding force in our understanding in mainstream culture. At one point, homosexuality was also considered a disorder in the the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., text rev.; *DSM-3*; American Psychiatric Association, 1980), placing it in a similar position as BDSM, but with BDSM being far less accepted in mainstream culture (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2008). Researchers have engaged in the issue of homosexuality and media portrayals in order to understand the reception of such representations. Calzo and Ward (2009) found that exposure to same-sex media was influential in acceptance of homosexuality and that video viewing was the most influential way of mainstreaming homosexuality. More specifically, researchers looked at factors that affect attitudes toward homosexuality in terms of media

influence and found that a self-identified liberal political view allowed participants to be more open to media representations of homosexuality (Lee & Hicks, 2011).

Although currently not in the same sphere of acceptability in as homosexuality, research on the influence of sexually-explicit literature on women's personal behaviors and desires suggest that those who read *Fifty Shades of Grey* willingly on their own time reported higher personal interest in engaging in more sexually explicit activity (Reese-Weber & McBride, 2014), connecting to the media influence seen in studies regarding homosexuality. These studies demonstrate the powerful influence that media exposure can have on beliefs and understandings of queered sexual identities, thus creating a hopeful net from which the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie to use as a foundation.

Despite this hope and the increasing publicly visible existence of BDSM, Wilkinson (2009) explains that media representations of SM have only pathologized practitioners, objectified women, and led to a dominant image of heteropatriarchial SM, inevitably forcing true and healthy SM further into the fringes. Wilkinson (2009) acknowledges that these misrepresentations are in the hands of those in power, who capitalize upon such images, establishing the "otherness" of BDSM (Weiss, 2006). The book's adaptation to film left this power in the hands of producers and in Hollywood—known for over-glamorizing and misrepresenting even the most mundane of relationships (Lee & Hicks, 2011).

Despite this, there was hope for the representation of the relationship based on Deller and Smith's (2013) study on reader's responses to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novel. While reviews were mixed, *Fifty Shades* was praised for its use of women's voices to convey a traditionally feminist-rejected concept (Califa, 1980). Additionally, many other studies explained that *Fifty Shades* was empowering to women through Anastasia's role as narrator, guiding a primarily

female audience through a new view of female sexuality, and in a sense, female sexual empowerment (Attwood & Walters, 2013; Barker, 2013; Deller & Smith, 2013; Hunter, 2013; Martin, 2013; Tsaros, 2013; Whitehead, 2013; Reese-Weber & McBride, 2014). In conjunction with the impact that media can have on queered sexuality, the film's release was truly an opportunity to revolutionize the mainstream image of sadomasochism past being "mommy porn" (Attwood & Walters, 2013; Whitehead, 2013) and actually demonstrating that SM can be viewed from a feminist standpoint (Ritchie & Barker, 2005).

The biggest feminist critique of BDSM is that it upholds heteropatriarchial gender norms of the male being dominant and the female being submissive. However, this is under the stereotypical assumption that is the *only* way that SM can exist (Ritchie & Barker, 2005). Although *Fifty Shades of Grey* does depict such a scenario, the kind of female empowerment explained by a number of readers puts a large amount of power in the lead character, Anastasia's hands. Unfortunately, this power includes Anastasia's decision to engage in SM behavior and such a decision comes down to her giving consent. When asked directly, the issue of consent is explained in black and white terms, but it quickly becomes grey once asked for explanations of personal sexual involvement and experience (Beres, 2014; Hust et al., 2014; Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014). This is especially true when consent is the only thing differentiating BDSM activity from sexual assault (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006).

Barker (2013) explores this grey area of consent within the limits of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as one of the biggest critiques of the book and while also exploring concern that the film is that *Fifty Shades* is, in fact, a story of sexual abuse due to Anastasia's failure to explicitly give consent to the SM activity. Barker (2013) explains that heteronormative sexual scripts put the power to give or not give consent into the woman's hands. However, this is complicated by

modern understandings of what constitutes as consent. Substantial research has demonstrated that major gender differences exist not only between giving and receiving of consent, but also in understanding what consent is, and how media sources teach men and women differently in regards to their personal roles in giving or receiving consent (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Hust et al., 2014; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014; Jozkowski et al., 2014).

Although studies have focused on sadomasochism in general or on the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, this research was conducted soon after the release of the film, when SM was in a precarious situation at the forefront of media but still existing in the fringe. This research hoped to add to current literature regarding the mainstreaming or pathologizing of BDSM through the influence of film. This study sought to ascertain a number of both positive and negative reactions to the film through the qualitative method of face-to-face interviews with the ultimate research question: How did the film *Fifty Shades of Grey* influence viewer's perceptions of sadomasochism?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Ten female students who were enrolled in an introductory level psychology class at a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania participated in this study. Participant's age ranged from 18 to 20 ( $M=18.50$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ). Only participants who met the eligibility requirements of having seen the film *50 Shades of Grey* were allowed to participate in the study. The sample was predominantly white (90%) with one participant identifying as Asian. The sample was predominantly heterosexual (80%) with one bisexual identified individual and one questioning individual. Seventy percent of the sample was currently sexually active with men, and 80% had been sexually active with men in the past. None of the participants reported ever having been

sexually active with women. A majority of participants reported having liberal political views (50%), 40% reported having moderate political views and one participant identified as being very liberal.

### **Materials**

Each participant was interviewed face-to-face in a private research suite using a semi-structured interview. Upon completion of the interview, each participant was asked to fill out self-reported information regarding demographics and sexual activity and relationships. Participants were then asked to fill out a survey developed by Megan Yost (2009) entitled, “Attitudes about Sadoomasochism”. The survey had twenty-two items. Responses were measured on a 7-point scale indicating agreement or disagreement with the varying statements (1=*Strongly Agree*, 2=*Moderately Agree*, 3=*Mildly Agree*, 4=*Neither Agree Nor Disagree/Neutral*, 5=*Mildly Disagree*, 6=*Moderately Disagree*, 7=*Strongly disagree*). Informed consent protocol, script, interview items and surveys are included in Appendixes C-F.

### **Procedure**

After getting approval from the college’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct an exempt study, participants were recruited using the SONA participant pool. Upon meeting the researcher in the research suite, the researcher read an informed consent script and provided information regarding how the participant’s identities would be protected due to studying sensitive information. If the participant agreed and understood the information given to them, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview regarding the participant’s background, interest in the film, reactions to the film, assessment of major characters, perceptions of BDSM and intention in involvement and personal interest. The interviewer adopted a ‘talking back’ methodology (Griffin, 1990) when conducting interviews in order to create a dialogue that



expanded upon participant's reactions to the film. Questions were omitted, expanded upon, or changed based on the individual. Interviews took between 25 to 50 minutes. After completion, the participant was asked to fill out the short, five-minute survey through web service, Qualtrics, on a personal computer.

### **Data Analysis**

Immediately upon completion of an interview, the research assigned pseudonyms and filled out a post-interview reflection form, taking note of interesting topics, and impressions of the interviewee. Once all interviews had been conducted, the interviewer listened to and transcribed each interview, taking note of initial themes. Of the ten interviews conducted, only nine were could be transcribed due to an issue with recording participant 9. The researcher used an inductive process, thus allowing themes to come together rather than trying to fit them into a preexisting coding scheme. Using MAXQDA software, codes were identified by reading and rereading transcriptions and then checked for emerging patterns and themes. Codes were then grouped together to create two major themes with three to four subthemes. After creation of a thematic scheme, the researcher reread transcriptions and added codes that were deemed appropriate to the themes already created. Through this process, interrelationships between codes and themes became clear; the themes addressed the impact that the movie had on viewers while also taking note of personal reactions.

Although through inductive analysis, the researcher allowed themes to emerge outside of the context of the research question, it is important to note that researchers cannot detach themselves completely from personal belief or experiences. The researcher's intention in rereading and recoding transcriptions was to ultimately gain the most insight into the participant's responses through inductive analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

The analysis of participant's responses revealed two major themes that described their viewing experience of *Fifty Shades of Grey*: (a) Hollywood's censorship and (b) consent. The themes present in this study often overlapped with others and were expressed to varying degrees by each participant. The themes that emerged through the analyses were demonstrative of viewer's reactions to the film as a whole and speak to individual understanding of sadomasochistic relationships after viewing the film. To directly convey these expressions and beliefs, I have included transcription excerpts that address the prevalent themes.

### **Hollywood's Censorship**

This section was demonstrative of the impact that the creation of the movie had on the reception of BDSM. This theme of censorship was explored to varying degrees by each of the participants whether they had read the book and watched the film or only watched the film. Participants discussion of censorship was focused on three main sub themes: (i) film and director's choices that spoke to the evolving from book to movie, (ii) the censorship of the BDSM relationship, and finally, (iii) censorship of Anastasia and viewer's responses to her character. Ultimately, personal reactions to the film were influential in identifying Hollywood's role in the creation of the film.

### **Film and Director's Choices**

Much discussion has surrounded the mainstreaming of queered sexual practices and identities and whether these are accepted into the mainstream (Falk & Weinberg, 1983; Rubin, 1993; Weiss, 2006). In the same year as its 2012 release, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novel sold over 65 million copies worldwide (Deahl, 2012). This incredible feat of popularity brought *Fifty Shades* and themes of sadomasochism into the public eye. One of the most frequently expressed

reasons for going to see the movie for both those who read the book and those who did not, was simply interest in seeing how Hollywood could make such a popular sexualized erotic novel theater appropriate, an idea that mirrors many readers' decisions to read the book in the first place to see 'what the fuss was all about' (Deller & Smith, 2013). Even those who read the book acknowledged changes.

Yeah, I mean, like everyone was kind of curious as to how they were going to have... like how they are going to have two actors doing that and what they were going to do about the oral sex and stuff like that. (Julia)

I didn't know how they could just show a movie of an erotic novel without classifying it as porn. So it was interesting how they did that. (Madison)

Um, I... was really confused, like, how they were going to make it theater appropriate and kinda, like what they were going to show. So I expected it, I guess, to be, like, more violent than it was only because I read the books. (Allison)

Well they can't, like, show as much, so I think it's not as, like, descriptive, not as, like, intense as the book. (Samantha)

Although participants described the books as being "intense" and overtly sexual, research on readers reactions have found that many readers were accepting of the sadomasochism because it was a more "vanilla" or romanticized image of BDSM (Deller & Smith, 2013) and research has even explored how conservative evangelical Christian and Mormon women reacted to the novel (Whitehead, 2013). Although mixed, results from this study demonstrate the more accepting attitudes toward the themes within *Fifty Shades* due to their personal and religious significance (Whitehead, 2013). Despite this, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has been described as "mommy porn" with a negative association to sadomasochism (Attwood & Walters, 2013; Whitehead, 2013). Part of *Fifty Shades of Grey's* popularity was attributed to the rise of the Kindle that allowed for public

reading of erotic material without fear of discrimination (Deller & Smith, 2013; Happe, 2012). In her article regarding representing sadomasochism in media, Eleanor Wilkinson (2009) explains a sort of censoring of 'playing it safe' in efforts for sexual topics on the fringe to make it appealing to the masses.

Weiss (2006) also explains that mainstream audiences are more likely to be accepting of SM identities the more normalized they are depicted. She explains this is in order to engage through "distanced consumption" (Weiss, 2006, p. 114), creating a power differential between the viewer and the "other", or the SM practitioners. While the book's focus on Christian Grey's past history of abuse is an example of what Weiss (2006) calls "understanding via pathologizing", participants in this study acknowledged film and directors choices in censorship that she would explain as "acceptance via normalization" or making the SM relationship seem less taboo (Weiss, 2006, p. 103). Participants explained that the movie made the relationship seem more romantic rather than focusing on the BDSM relationship. After viewing the film, Allison explains that the SM depiction of the film was "stereotypical", while the book has been acclaimed for being anything but. Ultimately, the filming of the movie played a big role in the reception of the film as a whole. Madison explained that the filming made sex scenes "awkward", "weird", and "disjointed", but Matilda acknowledged a different aspect of these filming techniques.

I think that is kind of how they filmed the movie makes it, like, more romantic. And with the sex part, the beauty of the body maybe, or... I think in reality [the BDSM scenes are] actually going to be more ugly than that. Because [in the film] you see, like, the sunrise out the window and then the body... it's not that in reality. Because the shot makes it more easy to watch and I have never seen that before. (Matilda)

While these filming techniques seemed to have mixed reviews, the incredible success of the film further demonstrates *Fifty Shades*' attempts to transcend lines between the mainstream and fringe. Perhaps connecting to Wilkinson's discussion on media representation, the publicly tolerated versions of queered sexuality are "an extension of vanilla heterosex rather than a radical and oppositional alternative" (2009, p. 192) Participants expressed similar reactions to the film.

Like there is so much nudity now in, like, a lot of movies, so it wasn't as bad as I thought it was. [...]My first reaction was, "well, this isn't anything that I'm not used to"... you know, this is what happens in movies. And I thought, "you know, this won't be that bad". Um, but, I mean, it was pretty typical. I think there have been worse sex scenes in movies. (Ellie)

Connecting to this, the mixed reviews in regards to the sex scenes seemed to leave viewers wanting more. Rachel explains that the adaptation to film seemed "like it was just trying to be like romantic but not", expressing frustration in this censorship. Rachel even explained it as a "bad porno" demonstrating the poor acting, and ultimately poor nature of the sex scenes in general.

Samantha explained the film as being slow:

It was a little, like, less [sexual and erotic] and, like, I thought it was a little, like repetitive. It was just, like, a lot of the same thing over and over again.

Other participants also seemed to want more character development because these sex scenes didn't allow for great understanding of the characters.

**Interviewee:** I felt it was kind of a weird beginning... I don't know if I can explain it, but like, the way they just dove in but also, I feel like they didn't dive in enough... Um...

**Interviewer:** What would you have liked to see in order for it to kind of belong? Character development? Plot development?

Ellie: Yeah... like... maybe having Ana in class and then seeing Christian at work and then watching Ana come and meet Christian. (Ellie)

We wanted to leave halfway through just cause, like, I feel like after a while it was just like, every single scene they were having sex and they wouldn't even have a conversation, it was just sex. (Rachel)

Another participant expressed a desire to understand their relationship a bit more:

Maybe if they show their life outside of BDSM—or maybe they would take turns calling the shots. That would work too. [...] maybe they show their relationship outside of the bedroom and show that they are actually very kind to one another and they both have lives outside one another. (Laura)

Ultimately, the filming of the movie not only censored some key components of the plot in efforts to make it more digestible for the general public, it also left the audience wanting more. This is a point of contention with members of queered sexual communities as their practices and lives are frequently misrepresented due to the “Hollywood effect” or over glamorizing certain aspects. Weiss (2006) explains this phenomenon by use of the phrase “distanced consumption” (p.105) that allows mainstream members of society to get a glimpse of this otherness from the safety of mainstream media. The simply creation of the movie was inevitable in this censorship as participants explained more of a focus on romance with little to no understanding of characters individually, and acknowledgement of Hollywood’s influence on reception of relationships.

[It was] over dramatic, like him going where she worked at Home Depot or something... like that doesn't happen in real life. You know, like if you were working at the Snar<sup>1</sup>, the guy wouldn't come to the Snar<sup>2</sup> and like, you know, swoon you. (Julia)

They kind of calmed down Christian's actions a little bit so there were only a few kind of, like, red flags. So it was more of a romance than I was expecting after having read the book. (Madison)

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<sup>2</sup> “Snack Bar”, frequented by students of this particular college

I also wasn't expecting it to be as emotional as it was (Melissa)

Even participants who didn't read the book acknowledged the limitations of conversions into a movie or expressed feeling confused when viewing the film. When asked if having read the book would have provided more understanding about the movie, Laura responded, "Yes. Definitely about the plot. I felt a little lost". She continued to explain that she didn't feel that she understood the SM relationship as well simply by watching the movie. Other participants expressed interest in reading the books after seeing the movie to understand as well.

Like, I would read it um, just to, like compare it to the movie, because I hear, like, a lot of people say that they liked the book better and that happens a lot with, like books because I feel like people like the books more because, like, you're reading it and the author can get across exactly what they want and I feel like in movies, it's just, like, harder, so I would, like, read them for that aspect to, like, see how different they are. (Samantha)

Matilda explained that the SM was toned down to such an extent that it changed her reception of the film.

For me after seeing it, I was like, that's not an SM movie but more like a loving movie for me and I kind of like how the actress and actor acted in the movie. (Matilda)

Other participant's reactions were not so wholly positive and reacted with backhanded compliments about the movie's adaptation.

I mean... hey, with what you were given you did pretty well. It was still problematic but it was less so and I was impressed with how much more balanced it seemed in the film than in the book. It was still unbalanced but I was impressed so overall, I don't know. It's not my favorite film. (Madison)

When I saw it, it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. So it's like... I was impressed that there was, like, the contract. And like, Ana didn't sign it, but it existed and he did want it to be consensual. But at the same time, he was a little creepy with the showing up where she was and yeah. (Ellie)

### Censorship of Relationship

Ultimately this censorship made by the film opened the movie up to more negative reactions because as research has indicated, media cannot tell viewers *what* to think, but they can tell them what to think *about* and that participant's personal beliefs regarding queered issues may overshadow the influence of media (Lee & Hicks, 2011). While the participants were overall relatively accepting of SM attitudes (see Appendix A), many participants expressed beliefs regarding BDSM that influenced their own reception to the film as a whole.

Um, I just didn't approve of it really. (Allison)

Because I wouldn't... I wouldn't do that. (Matilda)

I don't really think it's healthy. I mean, I think, like, there are, like other ways to, like, have sex, then, like, that kind of, like... Like, more normal. (Samantha)

And you know, I would go to camp and do sports and stuff and I would get hurt and I would be like, "Why would anyone ever want this?!" (Melissa)

When they walked in and there were all those different tools and, like, belts and stuff, like, that would just freak me out. Like I wouldn't walk in there and be like, "I want to have sex" it would be like "I want to leave". (Rachel)

Through many of these negative reactions, participants continued to explain how unrealistic Christian and Ana's interactions were, a common theme in *any* media depiction about *any* relationship (Lee & Hicks, 2011).

It was just hitting. It wasn't accurate. It didn't show a real relationship. It wasn't realistic. (Madison)

Julia continues this idea by stating that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not as reliable of a source of BDSM as some research has suggested (Deller & Smith, 2013; Martin, 2013; Tsaros, 2013).



Furthering this idea of inaccuracy, only two participants acknowledged that *Fifty Shades* lined up to previous exposure (involvement as a “tween-ager”/comedy skits) and demonstrated why this was problematic.

You know, if this reminded me of things that I did when I was a teenager, when I was, like, stupid and naïve tweenager kind of age, and these are two adults engaging in BDSM, and supposedly, like, this person is an expert on it and the author like researched it, that makes me uncomfortable. [...] Yeah maybe if you know about as much as a 12 year old does, you’re not doing your job right. (Madison)

Usually like, general guesses made on my brief encounters with it through like comedy routines, and like, I was right? That doesn’t seem like how it would work. You know what I mean? Like that is just a general consensus of what one thinks it is. I mean, I would hope that a guess from an 18 year old wouldn’t be how it really is (Laura)

While these two participants were able to see the problematic side of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it is important to note, that not everyone had the same exposure. When asked if she felt that *Fifty Shades* accurately portrayed the BDSM relationship, Ellie responded, “Um, so, from what I read on Tumblr, it sounds like, no... that’s not actually what happens... But couldn’t really tell from just seeing the movie”.

This demonstrates the influence that the film has-- while the people on Tumblr were talking about how the relationship is abusive, the movie easily jaded and influenced people perceptions due to this romanticized image that it gave to the relationship in classic Hollywood fashion. This further demonstrates the limitations that media encounters through the influence of cultural lag, or the idea that technology moves too quickly for cultural understandings, thus causing many moral and ethical dilemmas in media portrayals (Tuchman, 1978).

Many participants reacted very negatively to the film's portrayal of the final scene when Anastasia asks Christian to show her the SM. In this scene, Ana is counting as Christian is paddling her; while definitely a scene that fits into the realm of sadomasochism, this is a scene that is arguably less vanilla than those previously seen in the film. While to SM practitioners, this scene was relatively mild, because it was more extreme than the others it was left up to the judgment of the viewers as to what the directors' intentions were. Even though Julia read the book, she explained that the movie left her and the rest of the audience with a negative lasting impression that she did not get from her own reading.

Because that just, like, makes you leave the movie like, "was he kind of raping her?" and then it just kind of makes you feel gross and kind of makes you, like, not... like, it wasn't the kind of cliffhanger when, like, "oh now I need to see the next one!" it was the type of cliff hanger where, like, [kind of grossed out] "...ohhh..." (Julia)

One researcher explains the difference in reaction based on severity by stating that only mild forms of SM will be publicly tolerated in order to maintain this sensation of "otherness", keeping SM on the fringes regardless of mainstream representations and asserting that anything past "mild" is a dangerous perversion (Wilkinson, 2009, p. 192). *Fifty Shades* demonstrates that they were successful in this depiction of anything past "mild" being unacceptable in the viewer's negative responses toward the final scene in the film.

### **Censorship of Anastasia and Viewer's Responses to Her Character**

As demonstrated through the changes necessary in creating the film in general, a major point of censorship was through Anastasia's character. Much of the research that exists on the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels focuses on the novel's role in empowering women and allowing for womanly sexual autonomy and agency (Attwood & Walters, 2013; Barker, 2013; Deller &

Smith, 2013; Hunter, 2013; Martin, 2013; Tsaros, 2013; Whitehead, 2013; Reese-Weber & McBride, 2014). Each of these articles explains such through Anastasia's identity. However, through the changes made in the film-adaptation, not only was Anastasia's character changed, but the way in which viewers perceived her changed as well. Allison was very persistent in her understanding of characters being hampered through this development in the movie. When asked if she felt that she was able to get to know the characters in the film, she replied "more so in the book" and explained that this negatively impacted her view of the characters as a whole. The censorship necessary in any film completely changed the reception of specifically Ana, from who's point of view the book is written.

Well, I mean, like, when I was reading it, it made me feel like that the stuff... like that she actually liked the BDSM stuff. Like it was making her, like, sexually aroused and giving her empowerment but in the movie she was just, like, extremely uncomfortable the entire time. (Julia)

Julia continues to explain that the film may have intended to create Ana as a damsel-in-distress character as Madison indicates the opposite.

Ana was just a more likable character in the film. They changed her character and made her less kind of damsel-in-distress that needs to be saved by him or something (Madison)

However, Madison continues by indicating being extremely frustrated with Ana's character in the book and proclaims that she probably felt this way toward Ana in the movie "Because I didn't have to read it", attributing her frustration to the widely acknowledged poor writing of the novel (Harman & Jones, 2013; Hunter, 2013).

Despite this "damsel-in-distress" persona that seems to have been created, people tended to report specific moments in which Ana acted in a powerful way. Because the book was adapted into the movie, the viewer lost Ana's inner dialogue, which then forces the viewers to rely solely

on her actions, emphasizing the frequent proclamation, "actions speak louder than words". Participant, Madison, remarked that when Ana showed restraint to Christian, she felt "happy" and claimed "that was good". Melissa indicates, "I liked the fact that at the end, she, like, left". In addition to Melissa, participants Samantha and Allison sang praises for Ana when she left Christian and Matilda described her as being "rational" and "smart".

Because viewers only had Ana's actions upon which to base judgments, participants were forced to take note of minor changes that would have otherwise been explained in the book's narration. Madison explains that as the BDSM continues, Ana's personality seemed to change. Matilda and Laura both explain that Ana's character changed by the end of the film:

Then she's brave enough to try it and then she figures out she can't take it so she's not just going to keep that relationship for money or for anything else and she knows she has to quit them so she did. (Matilda)

[Ana is] shy and timid and like that fades a little in the end (Laura)

Madison explained that this change in character may have been due to a change in confidence. Samantha confirms that this may have been due to confidence in a shared secret between her and Christian.

As the movie went on, she started, like, dressing differently and, like, weirdly getting confidence from it... I think she, like, felt like she had something the rest of the world, like, he own little secret, like, and that secret would, like, bring power to her, like, in a way. (Samantha)

Despite these few mentions of positive characteristics seen by participants, reactions toward Ana in the film were overwhelmingly negative. The most reported adjective or feeling regarding Ana's personality in the film was that she was not powerful or was vulnerable under Christian's gaze. One article, although they fail to differentiate between BDSM and intimate

partner violence, suggests that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is just another source of media perpetuating dangerous violence standards in relationships (Bonomi, Altenburger, & Walton, 2013).

Participants seemed to pick up on these traits. Christian had an over-dominating power over her that Madison describes as "manipulative" and continues by saying, "Like she says, 'I want to sleep in the same bed as you after we have sex' and he says, 'no' and she says, 'okay'". Connecting to this, Melissa continues by explaining Ana as being "selfless, but not like positive selflessness like offering stuff, it was more like a lack of self-respect" and explains that Ana had no spine. In their article regarding women's roles in sexual relationships and negotiations of consent, Burkett and Hamilton (2012) may give some insight as to why this "spineless" vision of Ana exists. They explain that modern day sexual assault awareness programs put power in women's hands to be autonomous beings with free sexual agency and the power to say "no". Despite this, an odd mix of both feminist and anti-feminist beliefs continually put women in situations where they may view themselves as having power, but then perpetuate the terms of heteronormative sexuality by submitting to a man's wants and desires. This article explains the dissonance that exists between ways women see themselves as being empowered and the ways that they act in actual sexual situations based on the influence of societal contexts, especially gender norms. As one of the biggest feminist critiques of SM, this upholding of gender norms seen in stereotypical depictions of sadomasochism explains BDSM as anti-feminist and pathological (Rubin, 1993).

Characterizing Ana as a damsel-in-distress with no spine, fitting into gender norms seems to negatively impact viewers reception of her as previous researcher's heroine of revolutionized feminist sexuality (Attwood & Walters, 2013; Barker, 2013; Deller & Smith, 2013; Hunter, 2013; Martin, 2013; Tsaros, 2013; Whitehead, 2013; Reese-Weber & McBride, 2014). Julia

explains, "in the movie she was just, like, extremely uncomfortable the entire time." Perhaps which is connected to the overt power that Christian held that almost all of the participants acknowledged, thus further perpetuating the presence of gender norms of male dominance and female subservience.

The presence of such roles further depicts Ana in a negative light as she becomes more and more dependent on him—a factor that researchers demonstrate plays a part in women actively participating in unwanted sexual activity (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Ana is dependent on Christian for a number of things. Part of Hollywood's role here is simply in the unrealistic nature that a billionaire would sweep a virgin off of her feet and expose her to her own sexuality.

She starts out as a virgin, she's never been kissed and he kinda steals that away and takes her down this road of sexuality[...] like she wanted more but she wanted more but she didn't understanding that, like, it was based solely on a contract and how like, he really was using her just to have sex in my opinion and she didn't really understand that so it was, like, a constant power struggle.  
(Madison)

This power dynamic, albeit inherent in SM relationships (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006), causes Ana to become more vulnerable in her lack of understanding and thus become dependent on Christian. Melissa explains this power struggle in terms of Ana's innocence and Christian's power.

She had never done anything with anyone and then she loses her virginity to him and he mentioned that he never sleeps with girls after the fact and then slept in the same bed as her and made her think it was something real and then completely dumped the idea. (Melissa)

On top of this initial vulnerability due to first sexual exposure, Hollywood's over glamorizing of the entire situation revolved around the material aspect of Christian being a billionaire through his giving of elaborate gifts and extravagant dates.

So I think it gave her, like, this unrealistic idea about relationships, and, you know, she thought that was normal and very flattering, and um, yeah. I think it made her more, like, willing to see him and talk to him and consider participating. (Ellie)

It was really materialistic and that in turn made her, like, feel like she was, like, part of this thing that she could get material things from. [...] I feel like, it, like, wouldn't be as, like, accepted, just because, like, the fact that he was, like, able to, like, shower her, like, with all these things, like, all these presents and stuff, like that made people, like, thing, like, "oh, this is nice", like, like, like, he was able to, like provide for her too. (Samantha)

Ana's virginal vulnerability in conjunction with the influence of materialistic wealth seemed to completely change the way that their relationship was perceived.

There was that joke on the media that if Christian Grey was poor and living in a trailer it would be seen as him kidnapping a woman and raping her. And I think that is very true[...]I just feel like, with the whole, like, average girl being taken by, like, a millionaire and being swooped into this extreme sexual relationship, like I feel like that doesn't really happen (Julia)

Pulling these negative characteristics together, many of the participants attributed these into negative judgments of value or of Ana as a person. They judged her for liking Christian in the first place due to participant's reporting his lack of personality and apparent connections to characters such as Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*:

She was like, "Oh, you have your little, like murderer kit" and he's like, "yup"... and you like him? You're going to have a crush on him? Like, I mean it's not, I don't know. The way that whole thing was. Like it's not weird to buy cable ties.

But the way the whole scene was treated was just weird... things he did were....  
Ew. (Madison)

Madison described feeling incredulous that anyone would be as ignorant as Ana, "when he pulled off into the woods and asked her to walk with him, I laughed at that. I was like, 'No one would be that stupid' and then she walks!" Laura explains further,

Not having much of a personality outside of the guy, not having, like any other thoughts or hobbies or interests or... I mean even not too many female friends, male friends, like not having a life outside of a guy is... that's just not a good person. (Laura)

Concerns regarding the upholding and reinforcing of gender roles seem to play a large part in this negative judgment as well. As well as describing Ana as a bad role model and bad person, Laura demonstrates the common double standard between genders.

It's setting a bad example for, like, women. How it's not okay. It's okay for him to have had sex with fifteen people but it's not okay for her to ever had sex.  
(Laura)

Ultimately, through this data analysis, it has become clear that Hollywood's role in censoring Ana's character and inner dialogue left her up to the scrutiny of critics and viewers alike. Although only those participants who had read the book were able to speak on the issue of Ana's inner dialogue, referred to as her "Inner Goddess" in the novel, it is interesting to think of how this completely revolutionized the perception of Ana as a character and the SM encounters. Going into it, Madison and Julia expected this translation from book to film.

Yeah, um, I mean, the books were written from the perspective of, like, Ana, and, um, she finds the whole thing... she kinda finds the whole thing... she finds it sexy and scary at the same time so I don't know because the film is about Ana, I was expecting them to, you know, because the film is portrayed through the main characters emotions about the thing so if they think something is scary, they are



going to portray it as scary. If they think something is sexy, they are going to portray it as sexy, you know? (Madison)

I thought that the film was going to be a lot more... I thought it was going to revolve a lot more around BDSM, um, because in the book it was really about that and there was a certain aspect in the book, like with Ana's inner goddess but in the movie they didn't talk about that at all and I thought that was really interesting because that was a really big part in the book. (Julia)

The role of her inner goddess was clear to participants that it was an empowering force in the novel as insight into Ana's mind. Julia explained that if the movie were from her perspective, not only would it be totally different, but it would have made accepting the BDSM a little bit easier.

In the book it was just very clear, like, when they have, like the dialogue between, like, her and her inner goddess, it's, like, very clear that she's enjoying it. (Julia)

These responses to the lack of ability to understand Ana line up with research regarding the effects of sexually explicit literature on women. This research indicates that a greater ability to understand and identify with Anastasia in *Fifty Shades of Grey* would thus result in higher levels of sexual self-esteem, sexual behavior, and sexual desire (Reese-Weber & McBride, 2014). However, this research found higher levels in these areas of interest only in those who had read the book previously and not as part of the experiment, thus indicating the influence that the book itself had on participants, particularly participants' abilities to connect with Ana through means such as her inner dialogue.

Although she barely read the book, even Allison acknowledged: "I think it was, like, easier in the books to relate to a character because you can, like, see inside their brains."

Ellie (Who didn't read the book) highlighted the importance of the inclusion of her inner monologue. She indicated that viewers "didn't really get a feel for either of them without the other one there".

In the book, Ana's inner monologue was successful in actually making the plot about Ana and giving the insight that we needed in order to understand their relationship and the SM relationship as *mutual* rather than *abusive*. The narration that was praised by researchers for demonstrating feminist sexual autonomy in new and exciting ways was completely abolished in the film, thus completely altering the reception of the relationship as a whole. The movie revolved around this SM relationship with no real insight as to what they were thinking and rather leaving the interpretation up to the viewer.

One of the most compelling differences in reception was to the final scene of the movie. Without having read the book, the final scene was left to the audience's judgment as they were left to interpret this dramatic ending, and thus interpret what Anastasia was thinking and feeling solely on her actions.

It was toward the end where she was, like, lying on the table and he was, like, whipping her and she had to count with him when she, like, finally realized, like, "what am I doing?" I think that that was the most memorable part because I think that even before she realized it was wrong, she was like, why would anyone do this? Like, she's literally counting and crying (Rachel)

Despite this, participants who had read the book were able to draw from that knowledge to give insight into Ana's character that is inaccessible to other viewers.

She's not freaking out because she's afraid, as a reader it's more clear she's freaking out because she's like, "oh my god, I'm so ashamed" like blah blah blah, it just, like, makes it more obvious that she has come to terms with, like, this is what she likes, you know? (Julia)

Despite this ability to see the difference, as previously indicated, Julia stated that the movie left her feeling "gross" and that she felt that the audience also felt this lasting negative

impression thus demonstrating Hollywood's censorship and the negative influence that it had on viewer's perceptions.

### **Consent**

This section illustrates the role that consent plays in the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*. As a major point of contention since the film's release, participants had mixed reactions to the role of consent in the film. Participant's discussion of consent was focused on three main sub themes: (i) main character's roles in consent, (ii) negotiating consent, and finally (iii) roles of consent in healthy SM. Ultimately, although mixed, participants focused on the many ways in which consent was perceived, thus complicating our own understanding of roles of consent in vanilla and sadomasochistic relationships.

### **Roles in Consent**

The relationship between sadomasochism and consent has been a tumultuous one for years. While consent is ultimately what differentiates BDSM from sexual abuse (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006), this is frequently disregarded in the court of law due to the belief that one cannot consent to bodily or mental harm (Klein & Moser, 2006; Ridinger, 2006). Despite this, consent is an incredibly important aspect of any sexual encounter and is mandatory in sadomasochistic relationships (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, this importance is demonstrated through the presence of the contract that Christian wills Anastasia to sign, however the controversy regarding whether their interactions were consensual lies in Ana's failure to sign the contract throughout the film. Within participant's responses regarding BDSM, there was a focus on mutuality and concern that both parties had some type of power in the end. When asked to define BDSM, many participants stated that consent was a mandatory aspect.

I would say that BDSM is like... consensual, um, power-play between consensual partners where, I don't know, physically one is dominant over the other or has more control than the other. (Madison)

I think that does require a very mutual even ground[...] if there is actually a relationship there and care and it's more mutual then it's not as scary I guess. (Allison)

Um... definitely that its consensual and that it's for both of their pleasures. It's not just for one person's...[...]Um, and the submissive does everything that the Dominant wants for both of their pleasure and it's consensual and they have an agreement that if the submissive ever feels uncomfortable, he or she is willing... is able to stop wherever and whenever. (Ellie)

Um... probably, like, a consensual fantasy between two people (Laura)

Participants expressed more of a sense of comfort in mutuality in engagement in consensual sexual endeavors.

There was just this mutual thing between them. They were both feeling at the same time and they were both in the mood and they were both like consenting at that point. And they both just seemed happy and healthy together. Ana knew what was happening. (Madison)

If you agree to do it, I wouldn't say that it is the one person's fault because, like, it takes two (Melissa)

Although there was a sense of mutuality in roles of consent, much research has been conducted to look at differences in the perception, acknowledgement, understanding and communication of sexual consent (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Beres, 2014; Hust et al., 2014; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014; Jozkowski et al., 2014). Although consent does need to be mutual by definition, partners involved may have different perceptions of their own and their partner's consent.

Once we begin dissecting the roles in consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it becomes clear that gender roles and norms play a large part not only in consent but also in understanding the power dynamics also definitive of sadomasochism (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006).

Like, [men are] the ones in charge, like, when I think of it, I never think of a man being tied up. I always think of the woman being tied up and blindfolded [...] Yeah, like the man having control over *everything* and the woman not being in control. (Allison)

Research regarding gendered and neoliberal norms in college sexual experiences explains that traditional sexual scripts, by which we determine and understand sexual encounters, demonstrate that men are always in the role of the pursuer, interested in engaging in sexual acts, while women lack independent sexual interests and are expected to please their sexual partner, thus given the role to give consent or not (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008), and setting up power inequalities before sexual contact has even begun. This places the intent of consent in the male's hand as the Domme. The role of these sexual scripts is seen in other media outlets such as magazines. Hust et al. (2014) explored the differences in portrayals of sexual scripts in terms of consent between men's and women's magazines. Their findings contribute to these understandings of a women's role to allow sexual activity to occur through the giving (or not giving) of consent, and the man's role in actively pursuing sexual activity. Their conclusions begged for better representation of realistic portrayals of sex and sexual consent in entertainment (Hust et al., 2014), which arguably, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (especially the film) has failed to do.

Madison explores the nuances of this by indicating, "But it was his job as the dominant to say, 'no, this isn't safe, you're not in the right mindset to do this'" directly putting a certain amount of pressure on him as the more experienced and dominant one to teach and guide and understand his submissive. Despite Madison's desire for Christian to do so, in her own

exploration of consent in the *Fifty Shades* novels, Barker (2013) explains that the role of consent as a whole is complicated in the novel (and the film) by the assumption that Ana doesn't know or understand her sexual desires as an inexperienced virgin and yet, Christian does as an experienced Domme and an apparently skilled sexual partner who knows exactly what they both want. Connecting back to Freud's monumental question, "what do women want?", it seems through research on gender norms in consent, men tend to assume women want whatever they do not explicitly deny verbally (Hust et al., 2008; Jozkowski et al., 2014), with the majority relying on non-verbal cues.

In comparison, women reported to look for more verbal cues, but research has demonstrated a number of dissonances in women's intentions and actions in regards to sexual consent (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). These researchers demonstrate that while women are expecting to give verbal cues as to whether or not they consent to sexual activity, frequently and for a number of reasons, women engage in unwanted sexual activity due to men's frequent assumption of non-verbal cues.

I think that that is the problem with consent a lot of the time. Um, you know, your body can say one thing but your mind can say another. (Ellie)

Recognizing these differences in both gender norms and in intentions and actions, consent in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film was confused even further than as described by Barker (2013) in the books. Without Ana's inner dialogue, we are not meant as viewers to understand what her thought processes are regarding consent unless verbally given. Through this, participants were reliant on non-verbal cues to determine if consent was ever actually given or if *Fifty Shades* is actually a depiction of abuse.

I wouldn't make her the victim when she first decided to go into it because I think that was her choice (Melissa)

It was her job not to say that and to say, "hey, I'm not actually comfortable with this". (Madison)

Based on these two different interpretations of Anastasia's consent, it becomes clear that unless explicitly stated "yes", consent is up to the negotiation of a partner or in this case, viewers, complicating our understanding even further. Without Anastasia's "Inner Goddess" who frequently makes clear Ana's excitement regarding her sexual activity with Christian, not only is our understanding of Ana's character censored, but so too is understanding of functioning SM relationships.

Due to these differences in roles in consent and the lack of understanding in the film of where the two characters stand, many participants described their relationship as potentially abusive.

Um, the general consensus was that it was abusive (Madison)

They said it kind of showed a negative light on BDSM and there were lots of, kind of, grey areas, um, and Christian, you know he kind of sought Ana and did things that were, like, very, you know, it was much like an abuser, and so it was very negative. (Ellie)

If its one person the entire time being, um... like, being the submissive and the other person always being the dominant without any confidence to say stop it just becomes very one sided and very abusive and dangerous (Melissa)

Connections were thus drawn to shows like "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" that specialized in sexually based offences, frequently casting sadomasochism in a poor light.

I watch a lot of Law & Order SVU and it makes me think when people are abused and then they become abusers, that's the kind of parallel that I see there. (Ellie)

Because consent is what differentiates BDSM from abuse, it is no wonder why this has been such a heated topic. Many people may point to previous research that indicates that women are subjected to unwanted sexual activity due to a feeling that saying “no” would be inappropriate and other anti-feminist discourses that assert on female culture that we as women are meant to make men happy despite our own post-feminist beliefs of sexual autonomy (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). However, Hollywood’s influence on our own interpretations of not only individual characters but also their relationship as a whole leave questions unanswered: Did Anastasia actually consent? If she did, how did she consent? Was it abuse or was it true SM?

### **Negotiations of Consent**

To answer these questions, we must look at the main characters negotiations of consent in the film. While Barker (2013) does attempt to explore the “grey areas” of consent within the novel, there are even more nuances in the participant's explanations of consent in the film. Many participants explain their understandings of such negotiations as being nonconsensual:

It was largely nonconsensual [...]She doesn’t really consent, she doesn’t know what’s going on. (Madison)

Um, yeah, like she never did give consent because he never asked. Um, well, I feel like the first time she didn’t really give consent, but after that, I feel like she wanted it most of the time. (Allison)

I didn’t think it was one hundred percent (Laura)

These quotes indicate the many complications that there are in the giving and receiving of consent. In her article, Barker (2013) explains that if Christian pursues any kind of sexual activity, without a verbal “no” from Ana, they end up doing whatever he wants, only reinforcing the heteronormative roles of consent previously addressed and emphasizing the woman’s belief



that verbal consent or non-consent is a necessity. However, Ana's frequent failure to speak up is demonstrative of the neoliberal complexities that exist within a feminist-viewed empowerment through antifeminist-submission (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Many participants attributed this confusion of whether or not consent was given to Ana's perceived inability to stand up for herself.

I get kind of uncomfortable not with the sexual part but when people, like, have no spine for themselves and I think that made me not like her because it was, like, so many times when I wish she could have said something but she just didn't (Melissa)

I think the fact that she was, like, sucked in made her, like, not able to, like, think about what she was doing and, like, she was there in the moment when, like it was happening. (Samantha)

Yes. And she has every right to say no at any moment that she didn't want to do it but she didn't (Matilda)

Ana, she wasn't a strong female character so maybe she was scared to say no. (Laura)

As explored through the number of articles already cited, this lack of verbal communication clarifies what many young women experience in their own negotiations of sexual consent. Reasons behind not verbally consenting (or safewording<sup>3</sup>) include attributing such to a lack of female empowerment or weakness, feeling as though a woman had implicitly given consent and therefore did not want to act inappropriately or feel guilty. Women then prioritize men's sexual pleasure especially in a relationship. This can be explained through the post-feminist assumption that sexual autonomy in deciding to pleasure one's partner is satisfying to oneself and to their relationship as a whole (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> "Safewording" refers to when a submissive uses a previously agreed upon word to indicate he or she is near or at his or her limits, thus ceasing SM play.

Despite these numbers of reasons why viewers may have attributed Ana's actions as being non-consensual, many viewers claim that Ana did give consent. The main difference between these participants' responses is that only two reported verbal consent.

There is, like, one scene in the movie that I can think of where he said, "do you want this?" and she said, "yes". [...] Um, she's on her back on the bed and he's, like, kneeling in front of her and then he has his tie that he likes to tie her up with in his pocket and then he says, like, "Is this what you want" and she, like, holds out her wrists and nods. (Madison)

With the, like, the first time that he tied her wrists with his tie, she did say yes. Like he asked, "are you okay with this" and she said "yes". So I think it's difficult because in the end she said, "no" and she left. Um, so I think she did give consent for the most part, but it went too far (Ellie)

Because women supposedly put more pressure on verbal consent than men (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Hust et al., 2014; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014; Jozkowski et al., 2014), it is shocking that the film did not allow Ana to explicitly give consent. Within the film, the lines of consent were blurred due to verbal and non-verbal cues. As demonstrated, there was a major lack of verbal cues demonstrating consent and without insight into Ana's mind, the viewers are left to interpret her non-verbal cues as either giving or not giving consent. While I have shown that some people viewed *Fifty Shades of Grey* as being nonconsensual, the majority of participants struggled with this black and white image of consent, leaving most of them, ironically, in the grey.

Personally, I think... she kind of... she did. Just because if she didn't want to do it, she didn't have to go, she didn't have to message him and he, I think, made that clear. Um, but yeah, I guess she didn't officially sign the consent form." [...] "And like, he was very straight forward about the safe-word and all that stuff. I don't know I would say she definitely consented." [...] 'But at the same time, I think that she gave consent in that even though she didn't sign it, and kept him waiting for

so long she kind of gave in eventually with, like, messaging him and ending up going over to his apartment (Melissa)

Um... I think she gives consent. [...] I don't know maybe I'm thinking too much of the book but in the book she gives very clear consent and so maybe that is carrying over for me. (Julia)

"Um... I feel like she *kind of* gave consent, like they talked about, like the form, and like, I guess, um... like, she... like, the fact that she, like, went back kind of, like, showed that she, like was not, like, against it. (Samantha)

when she lost her virginity with him, she, at least I thought she clearly wanted it, but she never explicitly said, "Yes, I want this" (Ellie)

Um, well, I feel like the first time she didn't really give consent, but after that, I feel like she wanted it most of the time. (Allison)

I mean, he ask her out every time and she say yes. So it's kind of like she agree with how the relationship is going to go. She didn't say yes but her actions say yes. (Matilda)

She, I think, enjoyed it. I think that's the main difference. Also, I don't think he was harming her, um, in a way that would disrupt her psyche. Um, it seemed more consensual with the BDSM than it was with [his history of abuse]. Um, and I think that is a pretty key (Laura)

I mean, I guess that legally she didn't consent, but, like, I think that she was still definitely into it because she was so drawn to him. (Rachel)

These reactions to the film's depictions of consent can be used in support or against Anastasia and Christian's sexual encounters. However, Hall (1998) demonstrated that the level to which consent is verbalized is contingent on the intimacy of the actions. Because BDSM is arguably one of the most intimate forms of sexual expression and requires the sort of mutuality previously explained by participants, verbal (and/or written) consent is a necessary and obligatory part of BDSM. As a result, this demonstrates that the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film was unsuccessful in accurately and healthily portraying sadomasochism.

### Role of Consent in Healthy SM

Interestingly enough, many of the participant's focus on positive reactions to the film were about aspects of what a healthy SM relationship *might* look like. Madison explained, "Thank you to the book and the movie for teaching me what it should not look like" demonstrating her beliefs that the SM relationship depicted in the film was not SM at all, but rather, abuse.

Many participants stated that more consent was an imperative part in the understanding of BDSM and of making Ana and Christian's relationship healthier.

[The film] Influenced... my... interest in consensual, safe BDSM. (Madison)

I think that it would look like both people consenting (Julia)

Interviewer: So you think it's a little more acceptable if they focus on the relationship?

Interviewee: Right, the consensual relationship. (Matilda)

Um, and obviously the consent. They need to show more of that. Like, maybe they show, maybe them planning out the fantasy together, and maybe they show their relationship outside of the bedroom and show that they are actually very kind to one another and they both have lives outside one another (Laura)

Hesitantly, after explaining that she didn't think it was possible for a sadomasochistic relationship to be healthy, Rachel explains,

Um, yeah. Yeah I think it could be healthy if, like, both the partners are—it more of like, I know it's not based on equality at least in my opinion but like, if the partners can somehow find that balance, I think it could be a healthy thing. (Rachel)

In addition to wanting to see more consent, participants were interested in understanding more intricacies of BDSM relationships and how the participants might feel, an explanation

purposefully left out along with Ana's inner monologue. Due to this Hollywood decision, the film left viewers uneducated, confused, and with little depiction of healthy consent.

One participant stood by her beliefs that it could never actually be consensual.

It says that it's supposed to be mutual but it doesn't usually... it doesn't seem like it would be mutual. Like, I don't... and like, they made an agreement where it would be but I don't ever see how that could be mutual, I guess.(Melissa)

The mixed understandings of consent and the roles of consent in healthy SM have been altered and changed based on the acceptability of Hollywood's public eye, ultimately jading viewers perceptions of consent as a necessary component in any sexual activity. Because there is confusion as to what the role of consent in *Fifty Shades* is, many participants voiced concerns about people's exposure to the "BDSM" in *Fifty Shades* and fear it will teach people the incorrect use of consent and incorrect functioning of BDSM relationships.

I'm scared that they are going to do the practices in the film which are not consensual or not safe and they are going to hurt each other. And that, that scares me. (Madison)

It is more than, like, a sexual, carefree thing and there is more emotion involved and I can imagine there are a ton... like a ton of abusive relationships because of that where people think its fine and it's not. (Melissa)

If I had not known anything [about BDSM], I don't think I would have known. Like, I don't think I would know if it had been accurate. (Julia)

It wasn't like totally explanatory. It also didn't focus a lot on consent which I think is a huge part of any sexual activity, um, much less, tying someone up. So I think it was a fun movie, but I don't think it was super educational. (Laura)

Much of the literature surrounding this idea of BDSM and consent warn against narrations that actively reinforce the potential pathologies associated and stigmatized in culture

today (Barker & Langdrige, 2007; Tsaros, 2013). However, viewers' responses regarding using *Fifty Shades of Grey* as an educational outlet demonstrate the ultimate negative impact that such mainstreaming has reached due to incorrect information. An article regarding the explosion of *Fifty Shades of Grey*-themed sex toys demonstrates that this allows the layperson to bring their own *Fifty Shades* fantasies into the bedroom. The article continues to explain that *Fifty Shades* has become its own brand from which sex stores capitalize. Products and toys use excerpts from the book on tags as descriptions (Martin, 2013). It is worrisome for SM communities and SM supporters that a form of entertainment that clearly has gaps in correct information has been capitalized upon for the sake of the general public who may not have any other exposure to SM, and may "do the practices in the film which are not consensual or not safe" about which Madison worried.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to observe how the film *Fifty Shades of Grey* impacted the viewer's perceptions on BDSM. Although we did not aim to provide explicit answers to a hypothesis, this research can be used as a step towards understanding media influences on queered sexual communities and other queered identities. The themes and subthemes in this study demonstrated the potentially negative influence that Hollywood's depictions of concepts on the fringe in understanding intricacies and real-life functioning of such matters. Specifically, this research demonstrated censorship necessary for creation of any film has the potential of completely altering the reception of plot, characters, and concepts within the topic of interest. This can be seen through the censorship through director's choices in filming an explicit movie and thus censorship of the depiction of the relationship and also censorship of main character's personas, thoughts, and ideas. As demonstrated in this research, it is possible that these

censorships led to a failure in depicting a true and healthy relationship with the necessary consent that defines BDSM.

Ultimately, through these redactions from book to film, inaccurate portrayals of SM relationships, and functions of consent, it becomes clear that, as explained by Weiss (2006), distancing the viewer through “acceptance via normalization” has allowed for this incredible popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* even with all its inaccuracies and flaws. Although this censorship has allowed for some form of acceptance, the overwhelmingly negative reactions of participants in this study seem to have expected and therefore desired more from the film. The existence of *Fifty Shades of Grey* sex shops indicates a general public desire of involvement and to take part in the depictions in the book and the film (Martin, 2013). SM, although more prevalent in media now than it has been in the past, is notoriously one of the most stigmatized and yet arguably one of the intriguing forms of queered sexuality. The *Fifty Shades*’ novel’s popularity is demonstrative of a possible underlying desire to gain insight into this world of pain and pleasure while also remaining in the mainstream. As a critique of the frequently compared film, *Secretary*, Weiss (2006) explains that popular culture is disappointed in these “vanilla-ized” versions of SM because “viewers want to see something dangerous, something transgressive, and something outside the machinations of normalcy” (p. 126).

Despite this, however, Wilkinson, (2009) warns that increased visibility of SM behaviors and relationships may influence the general public to mistake SM representations for SM itself. While participant’s responses to the “Attitudes about Sadomasochism” (Yost, 2009) survey varied, overall, participants seemed to hold moderately accepting views toward BDSM (see Appendix A). Participants still expressed concern regarding *Fifty Shades of Grey*’s representation. Particularly, participants were focused on the failure to explicitly consent to SM

play, therefore making it sexual abuse. And such concerns are not voiced in vain. Since the release of the book in 2012, sex-toy related injuries have skyrocketed resulting in all-time high admission into hospitals (Washington Post, 2015). Although correlational so no causation can be drawn from such figures, a number of news reports since the movies release have reported severe injuries, assaults, and even deaths resulting from attempts to directly reenact scenes from *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Chicago Tribune, 2015; Trending Now, 2015; News AU, 2015). By assuming the content in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film is correct, an obscenely large amount of people are being exposed to not only incorrect information regarding the functioning of BDSM relationships, but also the stigmatization and further pathologizing potentially healthy SM practices due to news reports such as these. While *Fifty Shades of Grey* was successful in bringing BDSM into the public eye, regardless of its inaccuracies, it also was successful in bringing further stigma and discrimination upon its practitioners. Wilkinson (2009) begs readers in her article regarding representations of sadomasochism that viewers be aware of who has control over broadcasting such images of SM. Through this research, it becomes clear that Hollywood cannot be held as a reliable source for such information. Therefore, a negative cycle continues (Wright, 2006). SM practitioners are forced into closeted practice while simultaneously failing to educate mainstream laypeople on a subject that they have the potential in which to be interested (Weiss, 2006, Wright, 2006).

In the end, based on previous research, the adaptation to film, and reactions to the film we much ask society if we are ultimately ready for the kind of SM depiction that is “truly outside, disobedient, and undisciplined: something that can break the rules and transgress the bounds; something hard enough to leave marks” (Weiss, 2006). In today’s society, understandings of consent exist within the contradictions of heteronormative neoliberalism (Bay-



Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008) and are reproduced by Hollywood adaptations such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Barker, 2013). Needless to say, our attention must turn to the greater cultural influences that queer such practices as SM in the first place. As similarly voiced by Barker (2013) in her discussion of consent in the *Fifty Shades* novels, on the broadest level, this study and its implications based on inaccuracy speak to our own roles in perpetuating this lack of understandings on an individual level rather than a community and cultural level.

While able to draw some implications from the current research, there are also a number of limitations. The most obvious limitation is the small sample used. Future research may seek to use a larger sample size in order to have more diversity not only in demographic background and responses, but also background and experiences. This would be influential as previous research on media influence on reception of queered identities explains that exposure may play a large role in response to media representations (Lee & Hicks, 2011). As a result of our small and most homogeneous sample, our findings and reactions may be incredibly limited, a frustration that I experienced as the researcher seeing similar responses across all participants. Because only one participant explicitly expressed previous experience in SM behaviors, her reception of the film may have differed greatly from the others. A more heterogeneous sample is needed to understand how experience and exposure may play a role in these understandings. One suggestion for future research may be to conduct a similar form of research or potentially a replication of the research within SM communities, in order to gain insight about the impact of *Fifty Shades of Grey* on those communities. This would be beneficial in taking an initial step in breaking the negative cycle perpetuated by discrimination, prejudice, as well as lack of education and correct exposure (Wright 2006). Another frustration that I experienced at the level of coding was that my prerequisite for participation was simply having seen the film, not reading the books. However,

with the emerging theme of Hollywood's censorship, a larger sample of people who had both read the book and viewed the film would allow for deeper analysis of Hollywood's influence on viewer's perceptions.

Despite these limitations, I found this research to be incredibly rewarding and eye-opening. Having gone into the research with the explicit belief that *Fifty Shades* was entirely negative, literature review and also participant's responses reminded me of what we, as a culture, can learn from listening to others and simply attempting to educate ourselves. While, ultimately, this research pointed to the inaccuracy of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, there were many nuances that I had not considered before my own experience in coding and closely analyzing others responses. Through this, it becomes clear that we must urge not only individuals, but also communities to educate and question both the mainstream and queered communities around them and their own beliefs regarding such controversial topics. We must also take greater note of the dissonances that might exist within our own understandings of queered sexuality and especially within our beliefs and actions of giving and receiving consent. In a culture where the world is at our fingertips, but men and women are being told two completely different things, it is imperative that we develop the ability to look at things in the culture around us retrospectively and critically.

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*Appendix A: Participant's "Attitudes about Sadomasochism" (Yost, 2009)*

Viewer's attitudes toward sadomasochism were averaged based on individual responses on the scale used in the 2009 survey (1= Strongly Agree, 2=Moderately Agree, 3=Mildly Agree, 4=Neither Agree Nor Disagree/Neutral, 5=Mildly Disagree, 6=Moderately Disagree, 7=Strongly Disagree). Average scores were based out of 7, indicating pro-SM attitudes, 4 indicating neutral or indifferent attitudes, and 1 indicating anti-SM attitudes.

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Average score on "Attitudes about Sadomasochism" scale</b> | <b>Qualification of score</b> |
|--------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Madison            | 6.95  | Pro-SM                        |
| Rachel             | 5.86  | Moderately pro-SM             |
| Laura              | 5.31  | Moderately pro-SM             |
| Matilda            | 3.45  | Mildly anti-SM                |
| Allison            | 4.45  | Mildly pro-SM                 |
| Ellie              | 5.41  | Moderately pro-SM             |
| Samantha           | 3.81  | Mildly anti-SM/Neutral        |
| Julia              | 5.86  | Moderately pro-SM             |
| Melissa            | 5.36  | Moderately pro-SM             |

*Appendix B: Thematic Structure*

| Theme                           | Subtheme  |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Theme 1: Hollywood's Censorship | Subtheme a) Film and Directors Choices<br>Subtheme b) Censorship of Relationship<br>Subtheme c) Censorship of Anastasia and Viewer's Responses to Her Character |
| Theme 2: Consent                | Subtheme a) Roles in Consent<br>Subtheme b) Negotiations of Consent<br>Subtheme c) Role of Consent in Healthy SM  |

*Appendix B: Informed Consent Document*Informed Consent Document (to be given to each participant)

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE:** You are being asked to participate in a research study to help us understand your perceptions about the *50 Shades of Grey* film. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

**RESEARCH TEAM:**

Megan Yost, Psychology Department  
Charlotte Taylor, Psychology student

717-245-1357

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to explore how the film *50 Shades of Grey* influenced your perceptions on consensual sadomasochism

**PROCEDURES:** In this study, you will be asked to answer a set of interview questions, which will take approximately forty-five minutes.

**RISKS:** There is minimal risk associated with participation in this research. Some of the questions may cause a feeling of discomfort or embarrassment because they are personal (sometimes sexual) topics.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse participation in any portion of the study, or withdraw from the study altogether without penalty.

**BENEFITS:** This research will help us understand the impact of popularity on understanding stigmatized sexual preferences and assess whether the film *50 Shades of Grey* has a more positive or negative influence on viewer's understanding of consensual sadomasochism. This research will allow the student researcher to refine data collecting skills.

**COMPENSATION:** As a student in a 100-level psychology course, you will receive 2 credits towards completing your research participation requirement. You are free to refuse participation in any portion of the study, refuse to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with, or withdraw from the study altogether without losing credit.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** You understand that every attempt will be made by the investigators to maintain all information collected in this study strictly confidential. Authorized representatives of the Dickinson College Institutional Review Board (IRB), a board charged with protecting the rights and welfare of research subjects, may be provided access to research records that identify you by name, solely as a participant in this study. In other words, the IRB will never ask that your individual interview be reviewed.

Your data will be kept in a secure system, accessible only by the researchers, and you will not be identifiable in any way. We will retain your interview sound file only long enough to transcribe the interview; only the student who interviewed you will have access to the sound file. After the sound file has been transcribed, we will destroy the sound file so there will be no lasting recording of your voice. At this point, only the student members of your research team will be able to read the transcript, but again, there is no information in the transcript that could identify you. Your transcript will be completely anonymous.

**WITHDRAWAL:** You understand that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and that you have the right to refuse to participate, as well as to withdraw at any time. You understand that your right to refuse to participate or to withdraw will not prejudice your standing within Dickinson College or within your course.

**CONCLUSION:** You have read and understand the consent form. You agree to participate in this research study. This is your copy of the consent form to retain for your records.

Please report any concerns or problems during this research project to the Chair of the Dickinson College IRB, Andy Skelton. He may be reached at 717-245-1309 (skelton@dickinson.edu).

*Appendix C: Informed Consent Script*Informed Consent Script (to be read at interview sessions)

Welcome to the study on the film, *50 Shades of Grey*. My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am an undergraduate research assistant working with Professor Megan Yost. Thank you for signing up to participate. Before we begin, I would like you to know that this session will be audio taped. Do I have your permission to tape this?

OK, please read over the informed consent form on the desk.

[Pause to let them finish reading.]

The purpose of this study is to look at \_\_\_\_\_. You are free not to answer any questions that you don't want to, and you are free to leave at any time without penalty. Because BDSM is a sensitive topic, we are very concerned with your confidentiality, and have taken a number of steps to make sure that your responses to this study will remain confidential.

First, you will complete the interview and survey in here, alone, in complete privacy. Hopefully being away from other people will help you feel comfortable answering all these questions honestly.

Second, although I will be audio recording the interview, this recording will be destroyed as soon as your answers have been transcribed into a word document. There will be no lasting recording of your responses.

Third, this research is anonymous. We have no way of knowing your name or the identity of anyone who participated. Your credit has been given and your ID number can never be associated with this interview transcript.

Again, remember that you can refuse to answer any interview questions if you want. Of course, there are no right or wrong answers, just your opinions and experiences.

Do you understand the information given to you on the consent form?

Are there any questions?

Do you agree to participate in this research study?

*Appendix D: Interview Items***Research question 1:** *How did 50 Shades of Grey (film) influence viewer's perceptions of SM?***Domain 1:** background, interest in film/book

1. From where did you hear about the film/book?
2. What piqued your interest in seeing the film?
  - a. If read the book, what piqued your interest in reading the book?
  - b. If read the book, have you read a romance novel in the past?
3. What discussion regarding *50 Shades of Grey* did you have before seeing the film?
  - a. If read the book, specify about the book
4. What were your expectations for the film?
  - a. Did those expectations involve you thinking the film was sexy?
5. Were you familiar with BDSM before *50 Shades of Grey*?
  - a. ( no follow-up)
6. Before you saw the film, what images came to mind when you thought of SM?
7. What would you posit as the key definition of BDSM?
8. How would you explain a “typical” SM relationship?

**Domain 2:** reactions to film, assessment of Christian/Ana

1. With whom did you see the film?
2. Overall, were your reactions to the film more positive or negative?
  - a. Humorous, boring, exciting, etc.
3. If you read the book, do you feel that the movie was true to the book?
4. How was Christian Grey depicted?
5. How would you describe Christian Grey?
6. Did you find Christian Grey as a likable character?
7. Would you say that Christian Grey is a typical depiction of someone who participates in SM?
8. How was Ana Steele depicted?
9. How would you describe Ana Steele?
10. Did you find Ana Steele as a likeable character?
11. Would you say that Ana is a typical depiction of someone who participates in SM?
12. What adjectives would you use to describe Christian and Ana's interactions?
13. When Ana and Christian were having non-SM vanilla sex, what was your reaction?
14. When Ana and Christian were engaging in sexual SM play, what was your reaction?
- 15.** Did you find the SM scenes erotic/sexy?
16. Knowing that the film/book suggests that Christian is involved in SM due to a past history of abuse, do you think that this is a common way that people become involved in SM?

17. Some critics have suggested that Ana never actually gives consent to the SM relationship with Christian. Do you agree with this or not?
  - a. (If agree) do you think that this is a common way that people are involved in SM (in other words, without really consenting to it)?
18. Did you laugh while viewing the film? At what? What was funny about that moment?
19. For you, what was the most memorable scene in the film? Why?
20. Did you find yourself identifying with the characters in the film?

### **Domain 3:** perception of SM

1. Did you learn anything about SM from the film?
2. How has your perception of SM changed after viewing the film?
3. Do you think that *50 Shades of Grey* was successful in accurately portraying SM? Why or why not?
4. How influential was the depiction of the SM relationship in your judgment of the film as good or bad?
5. Do you think that there is such a thing as a healthy depiction of SM?
  - a. If so, is *50 Shades* successful in their depiction?
6. Do you think that you have received enough information about SM in order to understand it after seeing the film?

### **Domain 4:** Personal involvement and interests

1. (Follow up on previous item: Were you familiar with BDSM before *50 Shades of Grey*?)
  - a. Earlier you said that you had been familiar with BDSM before *50 Shades of Grey*. Can you tell me what your what exposure was?
  - b. What were your initial reactions?
  - c. Have you ever seen BDSM portrayed in other films/books/TV?
    - i. Pornography? (get details)
2. Do you personally know anyone who is involved in sadomasochism?
3. Do you have prior experience with SM?
4. Have you engaged in SM with a partner?
5. Do you consider yourself a sadomasochist?
6. Has your interest in participating in SM increased, decreased, or stayed the same?
7. Has your interest in SM as a topic increased, decreased, or stayed the same?
  - a. Positively influenced or negatively toward SM behaviors after seeing the film?
8. Has your interest in reading other books increased, decreased, or stayed the same? Why or why not?
9. Has your interest in reading the *50 Shades* books/watching other films regarding SM increased, decreased, or stayed the same? Why or why not?
10. If you are in a current relationship, do you intend to engage in SM behaviors? Have you since seeing the film?

11. If you are interested in engaging in such behaviors, where might you go for more information? Do you think that you have enough information?

**Final Items**

1. Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you would like to share about these topics?
2. Do you have any questions for me?
3. Would you like to receive a copy of our results after the study is complete?



*Appendix E: Survey***Survey**

---

Please complete this survey and return it to the researcher. Thank you!

Please take a moment to help provide us with some demographic information

**General**

---

What is your sex?

- ☐ Man  
☐ Woman  
☐ Transgender  
☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your age?

- ☐ \_\_\_\_\_

What is your racial/ethnic background? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ African American/black  
☐ Asian American/Asian  
☐ Hispanic/Latino(a)  
☐ Caucasian/white  
☐ Multiracial  
☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your class year?

- ☐ First-year  
☐ Sophomore  
☐ Junior  
☐ Senior

Where is your permanent residence?

- ☐ PA  
☐ Northeast US  
☐ Southeast US  
☐ Midwest US  
☐ Southwest US  
☐ West US

Country: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your major or intended major?

- ☐ \_\_\_\_\_

In what kind of area did you grow up?

- ☐ Rural  
☐ Suburban (around a major city, but not in it)  
☐ Urban

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation

- ☐ Heterosexual (straight)  
☐ Gay  
☐ Lesbian  
☐ Bisexual  
☐ Queer  
☐ Questioning  
☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

| When it comes to politics, how would you describe your position? (circle one) |              |               |                   |                        |
|---|--------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1<br>Very liberal   | 2<br>Liberal | 3<br>Moderate | 4<br>Conservative | 5<br>Very Conservative |

### Sexual Activity and Relationships

Are you *currently* sexually active with men?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

Are you *currently* sexually active with women?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

Have you ever been sexually active in the *past* with men?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

Have you ever been sexually active in the *past* with women?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

Please check all that apply:

- ☐ I am not currently dating  
☐ I am dating only one person  
☐ I am not married but am in a long-term relationship.  
☐ I am dating more than one person.  
☐ I am not married but am in a long-term, live-in relationship  
☐ I am engaged to be married  
☐ I am married (or remarried)  
☐ I am separated from my spouse  
☐ I am divorced  
☐ I am widowed  
☐ I am involved in a polyamorous relationship  
☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions: For the statements on the following page, please use the following definitions when considering your responses:**

Sadomasochism: sexual practices that involve dominance and submission (the appearance that one person has control over the other), sometimes involve role-playing (such as Master–slave or Teacher–student), are always consensual (all partners participate willingly and voluntarily).

Sadomasochist: someone who deliberately uses physical stimulation (possibly pain) and/or psychological stimulation and control to produce sexual arousal and to achieve sexual pleasure

Dominant: someone who always or mostly is the person in control during an SM sexual encounter

Submissive: someone who always or mostly is the person who does not have control during an SM sexual encounter

| Please check the box that best indicates your attitudes on the following statements:         | Strongly Agree | Moderately Agree | Mildly Agree | Neutral | Mildly Disagree | Moderately Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|------------------|--------------|---------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Practicing sadomasochists should not be allowed to be members of churches or synagogues.     |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Sadomasochism is a perversion  |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Sadomasochistic behavior is just plain wrong.  |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Sadomasochism is a threat to many of our basic social institutions.                          |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| I think sadomasochists are disgusting.   |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Sadomasochistic activity should be against the law.  |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Parents who engage in SM are more likely to physically abuse their children.                 |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Sadomasochism is an inferior form of sexuality.  |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be a Dominant, I would feel uncomfortable.   |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| SM rarely exists in a psychologically healthy individual.                                    |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be a Submissive, I would feel uncomfortable. |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| People who engage in SM are more likely to become involved in domestic violence.             |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| A Dominant is more likely to rape a romantic partner than the average person                 |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| A Dominant is more likely to rape a stranger than the average person.                        |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| A Dominant is more likely to sexually molest a child than the average person.                |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| A variety of serious psychological disorders are associated with sadomasochism.              |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Sadomasochists are just like everybody else.   |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Sadomasochism is erotic and sexy.  |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Many sadomasochists are very moral and ethical people.                                       |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Sadomasochistic activity should be legal, as long as all participants are consenting adults. |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Submissives are passive in other aspects of their lives (besides sex).                       |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |
| Dominants are aggressive and domineering in other aspects of their lives (besides sex).      |                |                  |              |         |                 |                     |                   |

