Analysing agency: reader responses to *Fifty Shades of Grey*

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**Abstract**

This article analyses online reader responses to the erotic fiction series *Fifty Shades*, and queries whether fans gain agency by talking about the books. Through the use of queer critical discourse analysis, we argue that fans of *Fifty Shades* typically acquiesce in the normative gender roles portrayed within the books, but that this facilitates their agency as sexual beings. In particular, we show how the readers in our sample do identity work around their own experiences as heterosexual women. Rather than focusing on representations of gender and sexuality in the novels, then, we argue that representation is best analysed not from a top-down perspective, but through an investigation of how discourses within texts are negotiated and put to use by their readers.

**KEYWORDS:** AGENCY; DESIRE; HETRONORMATIVITY; QUEER THEORY; REPRESENTATION

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1 Introduction

In this paper, we focus on the ways that the Fifty Shades novels have enabled women consumers to discuss sex and sexuality. We consider the representation of sex and gender in the books, and query how some readers have negotiated and utilised the discourses which enable this representation. Through examining how Fifty Shades is discussed by fans of the series on social networking sites, we outline the different stances and personas that consumers construct, particularly in relation to love and sex, and challenge the contradictory, media-applied label ‘mummy porn’ (or ‘mommy porn’). We then analyse whether the readers are challenging or acquiescing in what are essentially quite conservative sexual and gender roles, albeit while discussing non-normative, queer sexuality, and whether women’s discussions of the books have allowed them to gain some agency as sexual beings. Our analysis of the Fifty Shades discourse is guided by the cues of its consumers rather than by a predefined set of linguistic themes or trends, enabling us to engage in a ‘bottom-up’ analysis which is informed by the Fifty Shades fan. We combine approaches developed by feminists, queer theorists, film and media analysts, critical discourse analysts and sociolinguists, with the aim of contributing towards the growing concept of a queer critical discourse analysis. In doing so, we hope to objectively assess the extent to which the series enables agency in its readers.

1.1 Fifty Shades and ‘mummy porn’

The Fifty Shades trilogy is a series of novels by E. L. James (2012a, 2012b, 2012c), which tell the love story of two main characters: student Anastasia Steele and millionaire businessman Christian Grey. Anastasia is a naive 21-year-old virgin who falls in love with Christian, a sexually experienced man in his late twenties, who only has sexual relationships that involve bondage, domination and sadomasochism (BDSM) where he plays the dominant role. Throughout the novels, Christian teaches Anastasia about BDSM and Anastasia learns what her limits are (in terms of the amount of pain she will endure and what she finds pleasurable). Throughout the books, Anastasia and Christian are in conflict over his need for their entire relationship (both sexual and non-sexual) to be based on dominant/submissive roles; she refuses to submit to him fully, while he insists that this is the only way that they can be lovers. Towards the end of the trilogy, Christian has been changed by Anastasia; he consents to a conventional relationship based on love and equality rather than domination and submission. In the final book, the couple are married with children, thus conforming to an ideologically heteronormative ideal.
Anastasia’s refusal to take a submissive role that goes beyond their sexual relationship, and her achievement in making Christian fall in love with her, may be perceived as empowering. However, Anastasia is also portrayed throughout the books as the recipient of Christian’s desires and as the subject of his domination; he stalks her, insists on paying for unwanted and expensive gifts, and buys the company that she works for so that he can control who her colleagues are. Furthermore, Anastasia does submit to him sexually and, in doing so, fulfils her needs and desires. In this sense, Anastasia arguably reflects the ideal of the passive female in a heterosexual relationship; as Downing (2013:93) puts it, despite the ‘kinky’ element of BDSM, the books are essentially a ‘classic romance … in which the female protagonist ostensibly “tames” the wild, dangerous hero’. Anastasia repeatedly asks Christian for traditional ‘hearts and flowers’ romance; love that is compassionate, caring and gentle, not based on submission, pain and dominance. Eventually, of course, she achieves this, and is presented as having won that most vital prize in a woman’s life – the love of a good man.1

Despite the enormous international success of the novels (topping the British book charts in April 2012 and the New York Times bestseller list in March 2012), they have been largely dismissed by the mainstream media. Claims that the books are only read by bored, suburban housewives who enjoy the sexual content of the books led to them being labelled ‘mummy porn’ (e.g. Berrill 2012; Bosman 2012; Goudreau 2012); this term seems to index a woman whose identity as a mother usually overrides any sexual desires she may have, but who has been awakened by the series. This paper queries whether the books operate as ‘mummy porn’ in this way; are they facilitating the construction of a reader identity which is liberated, and sexually free? Do readers challenge the label ‘mummy porn’ itself, by projecting their identity as women with sexual desires as being legitimate and ‘natural’? How do they negotiate the heteronormative gender stereotypes put forward in the book – of the man being ‘changed’ by the woman for the better, and the woman desiring love and romance above all things? Through a linguistic analysis of fans’ responses to the books, we endeavour to answer these questions.

2 Representation and readership

To explore how readers of Fifty Shades interpret the discourses emergent within the books, we must first draw out those discourses. This may be achieved through a consideration of how the books represent the sexual and emotional roles of women and men. Approaches to representation include the ‘images of women’ model, developed by feminist theorists who draw links between the representation of women in visual culture and the status
of women in the real world (see Mills and Pearce 1996), and an Althusserian approach. Within the Althusserian model, theorists such as Butler (1990, 1997) have argued that social actors negotiate their own identities in line with ideological representations, which include ideas about what is appropriate for individuals based on their gender. Taking this approach, one may argue that cultural representations of women and men both restrict and facilitate the ways in which we may project or construct our identities. Within film theory (Stacey 1994) and media/popular culture analysis (Gill 2010; Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Whelehan 2000), theorists have considered what impact representations of women and men have on individual readers, consumers and viewers; it may be argued that women are represented largely in terms of their appearance or their relation to males and family, rather than their professional status or their actions (Walsh 2001). Arguably, this has an impact on what social goals women feel that they can achieve.

Such approaches to representation do not necessarily take the reader or consumer to be passive and compliant, however. Rather, theorists have endeavoured to view the reader as an active participant in the process of making sense of texts, by mapping out what options there are for readers to contest stereotyped or constraining representations (e.g. S. Hall 1973). Similarly, in our approach to *Fifty Shades* in this paper, we hope to show women’s agency in negotiating the discourses that are prevalent in the books while also acknowledging that the way Anastasia is represented may be constraining female fans’ identity construction. Theories of readership have shown us that not all texts will be interpreted in the same way by all readers, but that take-up will vary depending on the readers’ social background (Christie 1994). Furthermore, readers are often resistant; while a text may proffer particular ideological stances, and it will be assumed that the reader is in agreement with them, the ‘resisting reader’ (Fetterley 1978) may produce a further reading of a text which challenges those stances and thus takes an alternative position.

In the case of romance literature, a genre within which we would argue that *Fifty Shades* is placed, the notion of the resisting reader has been important. During the 1980s and 1990s, and particularly in response to the success of novels published by Mills and Boon, a great deal of feminist theorisation took place (Fowler 1991). Critics of the romance genre frequently argued that these formulaic books kept women ‘in their place’ by representing them as passive and subservient, but some theorists suggested that the books could be used in a resistant way. For example, Modleski (1984) suggests that the women who read Mills and Boon novels are not dupes of an insidious ideology, but are active and questioning, using these books to
challenge their own identities and relationships. Similarly, Radway (1987) charts how women use such novels in order to consolidate friendships with others, as well as a way of getting through mundane household tasks. Thus, rather than seeing romance novels as ‘containing’ certain retrograde messages which women readers simply accept, feminist theorists have tried to develop a way of analysing women readers without judging them as passive, stressing instead their agency in the uses to which they put the novels. While it is not in the remit of this essay to revisit in depth these earlier theoretical perspectives on women readers, we approach our own analysis of *Fifty Shades* readers’ discussions in this spirit.

### 3 Analytical approach

In order to interpret the responses of *Fifty Shades* readers to the representation of sex and gender in the novels, we draw on recent advances within critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1989, 1992; Thornborrow 2002), a form of linguistic analysis that has ‘the explicitly political agenda of raising awareness about the ideological frameworks informing language choice, and the way that subjects may be constructed, represented and positioned by discourse’ (Benwell and Stokoe 2006:44). Explicitly feminist approaches to CDA are principally concerned with the analysis of texts which reproduce and sustain hegemonic, patriarchal and pervasive ideals such as that of the gender binary (Lazar 2005:3), though such work tends to be focused on close readings of the text (e.g. Wareing 1994; Mills 2011; Burton 1982) rather than the interpretation of a text’s readers. In contrast, in the analysis below we aim to bring the experience of the readers to the forefront of our analysis. In doing so, we hope to avoid making ‘top-down’ claims about the relevance of given representations to the books’ readers, and to instead critically analyse the discourses within *Fifty Shades* in light of how they are negotiated by the consumers themselves.

Our analytical approach extends upon traditional feminist CDA not only in its focus on reader interpretations, however, but in its critique of the essentialist nature of the discourses that the readers are drawing on. We make use of queer theory in our analysis, an approach which is centred on a poststructuralist understanding of society and culture, and central to which is a critique of notions of ‘normality’ (including binary gender and heterosexuality). Within linguistics, queer theory has been applied to the analysis of discourses which ‘other’ non-normative sexualities and genders (e.g. Peterson 2010; Provencher 2010), and those engaged in language and sexuality research have employed its theoretical underpinnings in order to explain the construction of non-normative identities and challenge an
essentialist perspective (e.g. Barrett 1999; K. Hall 2003; Jones 2012; Thorne 2013). Queer theory may also be employed in the analysis of ostensibly heterosexual discourses, in order to deconstruct heteronormative structures and essentialist gender categories (Baker 2008; Sauntson 2008). In the analysis that follows, we take a queer approach in order to provide a more critical understanding of how norms of gender and sexuality are perpetuated in the text; as well as the critique of the ideals put forward in the books, this involves the deconstruction of the Fifty Shades fans’ own claims to essentialist identity categories.

To enable this analysis, we focus on how fans of Fifty Shades use language to construct stances in relation to both the novels and to other readers. By stance, we refer to the process of aligning oneself with or against concepts, utterances, roles, evaluations, subjects or ideas (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009). By focusing on the stances taken by individuals on social media sites which are dedicated to the discussion of the Fifty Shades trilogy, it is possible to document the ways that speakers evaluate concepts related to, or emergent from, the books. In turn, it is then possible to draw conclusions about how the stances taken index broader, yet relevant issues related to sex, womanhood and femininity. It will be shown below that the stances taken by fans of Fifty Shades allow them index their own identities as heterosexual women, but also that they do this via the negotiation of broader ideologies and stereotypes surrounding female sexuality.

4 Methodology

Data for this research was collected from two social media sources. By ‘social media,’ we refer to websites and applications, such as Facebook or Tumblr, that are dependent on the collaboration and contribution of a community of users (Page 2011:8). Social media allows users to create blogs, forums and online communities in response to the things that they care about; for those interested in how responses to phenomena such as Fifty Shades are delivered and mutually negotiated, social media offers a rich resource for the analysis of audience responses. Despite this, there is not – as yet – a large body of research combining CDA with social media. Unger (2012) suggests that part of the reason for this is that social media ‘texts’ are not static entities; they are constantly altered and revised, added to and edited down, and the original tools of CDA cannot be applied to them in a straightforward way. Unger argues that we must consider not only the texts themselves, but their ‘co-texts’; those other posts online which feed into and from the original text. This would mean, for example, considering not only a blog post on a particular issue or topic, but also
reviewing posts from Twitter (tweets) that arise from or refer to that topic, Facebook groups that are set up to celebrate it or complain about it, and other blogs that talk about it. Unger (2012) argues that such work is not only feasible for CDA scholars, but that it matches perfectly the aims of the CDA tradition to consider the ideologies surrounding a text’s production. In an online setting, this may be achieved in part by reviewing associated posts, streams, and other texts.

Fans of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy have produced a range of such texts via social media, many of which are freely available to the analyst. On Facebook, for example, fans have posted photos, opinions, links and other content about *Fifty Shades*, interacting together within a given ‘group’ or on a dedicated ‘page’ even if they have no other connection in real life. The nature of social media, then, facilitates a view of *Fifty Shades* readers as collaborative and actively engaged in their responses to the books. At the time of data collection (late 2012), there were 164 Facebook groups dedicated to the series and 65 pages – the most popular page had more than 813,000 followers. The data that we deal with below comes largely from these Facebook spaces, though tweets concerning the series were also considered. Some fans had created their own Twitter profiles specifically to talk about the books and these also had large numbers of followers. While Facebook operates in a similar way to a forum, with users interacting together in a linear, shared space, Twitter users tend to post short messages (often called ‘micro-blogging’), which are then ‘retweeted’ by others.

All data included below was, at the time of its collection, publically open and available, but the names of those included in the data have been removed to protect their identities. The nature of the data collection means that we are unable to categorise participants based on given demographic features, as this information was not always available to us. Although it would be interesting to identify patterns in the discourses different women draw on, particularly in terms of age or socioeconomic status, we cannot offer that analysis here. Assuming that the names given by users of these sites reflect their true identity, the individuals engaging with the *Fifty Shades* sites were female, based all over the world, and of varying ages and ethnicities. Based on their contributions and self-categorisation as fans of the books, we make the assumption that the women are all heterosexual.

Our data collection involved the selection of posts from members of relevant groups and pages on Facebook; often, posts were in response to a question or comment written by the owner of the group or page, or a fellow member, such as ‘who do you think should play Christian [Grey] in the movie adaptation?’ Often, comments chosen for analysis were made in response to links that other members posted, such as to relevant stories
on different websites, or clips of interviews with E. L. James on YouTube. Posts collected in this way date from June to November 2012. In following the practice of the members, we also posted a question of our own on the pages with the greatest numbers of followers: ‘I’m doing some research into the phenomenon that is Fifty Shades, and would love to know: in your own words, why did you love the series?’ This question was designed to elicit unambiguous stances towards the books, from fans of the books, and the responses to it are included in our analysis. A version of the same question (shortened to fit Twitter’s maximum number of characters per post) was sent to those operating the fan-based Twitter profiles: ‘Doing some research on #fiftyshades – would love ppl to tell me: why did YOU love the books so much? Thanks!’ We requested that these users retweet the question to all of their followers, several of whom did, which resulted in responses which came directly to us. These responses are also included in our analysis below.

5 Reader’s interpretations of the books

The analysis which follows is led by the themes that emerged from the data collected. Two key themes that emerged were, first, that of female agency (in terms of how much power or control the female protagonist, Anastasia, has) and, second, the fans’ response to the romantic storyline of the books.

5.1 Female agency

The Fifty Shades fans who featured in our sample frequently commented on Anastasia’s role in her relationship with Christian Grey. This is unsurprising; their relationship is far from equal, at least during its early stages, as Christian refuses to submit to Anastasia’s desires for traditional romance instead of a largely BDSM relationship. As mentioned above, however, by the end of the novels, this is no longer the case. The readers in our sample tended to evaluate this positively, and as a result of Anastasia changing Christian: one reader states that Anastasia’s ‘pure love changed him [Christian] for the better’, while another suggests that ‘she made him see the world differently’. As another put it: ‘I read it as a beautiful love story about a man who is damaged and learns to love when the right woman comes into his life.’ In these examples, the fans clearly position Christian as a man who needed a woman to help him and, ultimately, to change him. They also clearly evaluate Anastasia positively in terms of her ability to change Christian; her ‘pure’ love may allude to her virginal status, or may simply be a reference to the fact that Christian was her first love. Either way, one might read into this that a particular sort of love is best for a woman to give
to a man. In terms of stance work, we can see that the fans are positively aligning themselves with a notion that is prevalent in western culture: men are not naturally hard-wired for love and romance, and women have to convert them to it. In taking this stance, the women both reinforce and reproduce the concept of binary gender, and clearly align themselves with the female rather than male protagonist. Part of the identity work that we can see taking place in the fans’ use of social media to evaluate *Fifty Shades*, then, is the positive alignment of themselves with Anastasia’s thoughts and actions.

This is also evident from the way that the readers respond to Anastasia’s submissive role. In the first novel in particular, there are many examples of her being dominated by Christian, and she is shown to take pleasure in this. When he rescues her from a near-accident in the first novel (in a scene reminiscent of Mills and Boon), the character (who is also the narrator) says ‘for the first time in twenty-one years, I want to be kissed. I want to feel his mouth on mine’ (James 2012a:47). Throughout their encounters together in the first book, Christian is agentive and Anastasia experiences his actions; she is shown to enjoy being acted upon. In the later books, this develops into Anastasia taking pleasure in BDSM itself (whereas she seems to tolerate it for the sake of their relationship, during the first book); she begins to take the initiative in being dominated, and gains agency in the sense that she asks Grey to dominate her. In our data, however, the fans of the books do not discuss Anastasia in terms of her pleasure in being dominated by Christian; while the books seem to be presenting a male actor and a female recipient, the readers of these books instead define the relationship in terms of passion. For example, one reader says ‘I realise how much I have missed that kind of passion in my marriage. I mean you have it at first then after the kids and all the stress. It gets put on the shelf.’ Another says ‘If more people had intense passionate relationships like this (sub/dom or not) A LOT more marriages would be healthier and happier.’ The consumers of the books, then, seem not to specify the different roles that each character takes when they refer to the sex scenes in the series. If they do refer to these roles, they tend to frame Anastasia as being in control, saying that ‘she sets the boundaries’ or ‘treats him like a man’, as two other readers comment. Thus, these fans are reading the books in such a way that Anastasia is viewed as being in control of her own sexual choices, or where control itself is not even at issue. It seems, then, that it is possible for women readers to gain a sense of agency in talking about these novels; though they may regret that their own relationships are comparatively stale, they do not describe Anastasia’s role as a passive one. Instead, they credit the female protagonist, with whom they identify, with agency.
5.2 Romance and narrative

Another common theme in our data concerned the women’s discussions of the books themselves. Despite the media furore surrounding ‘mummy porn,’ and the foregrounding of explicit sex in the books, our sample of Fifty Shades fans frame the series as fundamentally about romance. The books are described by one reader as ‘a great love story,’ for example, while another fan states ‘I love the love story in it,’ and ‘it’s about love and it’s bold.’ Certain clichés from the romance genre are applied by the women in constructing a positive stance towards the books’ quality, as they position Christian as a hero who would do anything for his true love: ‘he would give her the world,’ says one of the readers. The stances that these women positively take frame the novels as a love story, then. In addition to the more generic romance genre, the success of the books themselves is evident in the fans’ use of phrases and notions specific to the Fifty Shades trilogy to describe their affection for the novels. For example, one fan describes the overall story as ‘a wakeup call for every inner goddess in every woman and every heart in a man,’ and another described the books as having ‘awakened my inner goddess.’

It is interesting that the fans of the books tend not to describe them in terms of their sexual content, given their explicit nature. The disparity between the books’ sexual content and the readers’ interpretation of them as a love story seems to mirror the gap between the female and male protagonists’ experience; in the first book, for example, Anastasia represents Christian as ‘here to fuck me,’ to her flatmate. She says ‘He’s just looking for a new toy … that he can bed and do unspeakable things to,’ to which her flatmate responds ‘Who said romance was dead?’ (James 2012a:201). In this moment, sex and romance are presented as opposites. Similarly, Christian describes sex as ‘fucking’ throughout, while for Anastasia it is ‘making love.’ By taking stances towards the series which frame it as a love story rather than erotic fiction, then, it may be argued that the fans of Fifty Shades are indexing a ‘romance fan’ persona that is quite clearly linked into their identity as women. To describe the books in terms of love and romance rather than sex, perhaps, enables them to perform an identity relevant to their status as heterosexual women, in line with broader cultural expectations of women as opposite to men – as predisposed to the need for love and affection.

The women’s stance-taking in favour of the books also involves the framing of them as being well written. One fan comments ‘I haven’t read a legit book in almost 4 years … best and most engaging story line … couldn’t put it down!’ to which another reader responds ‘It’s been over 6 years for me, I read all 3 in 6 days I just couldn’t help myself!’ and another fan replies
‘I have not read a book like it in like 15 years but once I picked these up it was like a drug they were so amazing every emo [emotion] you can have are in here.’ Thus what is focused on by these readers is not the sexual content, but the quality of the writing; they state that it is the account itself that they are enjoying, and they emphasise the fact that they have not read a book of such narrative quality for a long time. It is the emotional content rather than the sexual content which they stress and, combined with the hypnotic, addictive quality that the books are ascribed (considered in more detail below), the experience of reading the books is framed as being an unstoppable process. As one reader puts it, ‘Christian Grey is stuck in my head big time’.

To emphasise the books’ romantic quality or literary strength not only allows the women to draw on normative, acceptable expectations about what it means to be a heterosexual woman (to be swept up in a good love story), though; it also arguably enables them to reframe what has patronisingly been termed ‘mummy porn’. Given that the two characters’ relationship is a sexual one, that their entire relationship is framed by sex in the first novel, and that sex features in almost every chapter, the absence of a discussion of the book’s erotic aspects is rather marked and may, therefore, in itself be viewed as a significant identity move away from the persona attributed to fans of the books by the media. If we consider what might be indicated by the absence of sex talk, here, we might reasonably suggest that the women wish to project a persona of literary critic, or ‘old romantic’, in order to actively dispute the relevance of sex to the relationship between Anastasia and Christian. We might feasibly argue that these women are constructing a fundamentally heteronormative, feminised persona, perhaps even one who considers sex to be a male concern rather than a female one. It is paradoxical that this seems to be the case, given that the books are ultimately about Anastasia’s discovery of her own sexuality and desires, but it does allow the fans to draw on, and thus reproduce, broader ideologies surrounding womanhood and femininity. We consider the women’s discursive construction of gender roles further, in relation to sex and romance, in the following section.

6 Reader’s negotiations of sex and gender

As stated above, the response to Fifty Shades by the mass media has been largely negative. Many commentators feel that the books reinforce a male-oriented model of sex whereby women are encouraged to accept objectification and dominance, and ultimately to find fulfilment through the entrapment of and submission to a successful man (e.g. Alibhai-Brown 2012 and Davidson 2012, both cited in Eshghi 2012). Another of the criti-
cisms often levelled at the series has been its apparently unrealistic depiction of the female orgasm; the character of Anastasia has multiple orgasms almost every time she has sex with Christian, often through penetrative sex or without genital stimulation. Since the 1970s, however, popular discourse surrounding the female orgasm – particularly discourse within women’s magazines – has emphasised the importance of clitoral stimulation for a woman’s sexual climax, rejecting the ideals of pornography and erotica that seem to be mirrored in the Fifty Shades novels (see Lavie-Ajayi and Joffe 2009:104). In this sense, the depiction of sex in the books seems to be at odds with wider – modern – discourses of sex and sexuality, and may be viewed as promoting an unrealistic concept of what sex ‘should’ be like, reinforcing ideals of female sexual passivity.

Despite this, the books have also been credited with bringing women together to talk about sex. For example, Eshghi provides accounts from journalists, sex therapists and authors who argue that the series has promoted camaraderie among its fans, who talk freely and openly about their sex lives, enhancing relationships with each other (Eshghi 2012:3–4). We therefore ask whether, despite the apparently passive role of the books’ protagonist, readers are using the books to construct a much more agentic identity as heterosexual women. A key theme emerging from the data collected was, as mentioned already, the discussion of sex. In this section, we consider how the fans orient to the role of the female and male characters in the books, in terms of broader gender roles and sex itself.

6.1 Sex and desire

Though our discussion of the depiction of sex in the books has so far focused on BDSM, another prevalent theme that the women in our data set identify is Christian’s concern that Anastasia reaches orgasm. It is rare for heterosexual erotic fiction to focus on clitoral orgasm or non-penetrative sex, but – problematic as their representation may be – these books foreground Anastasia’s orgasms as well as Christian’s sexual pleasure. A great deal of the sexual description is focused on the lingering care that Grey takes to ensure that Anastasia has an orgasm as, page after page, he is represented as lavishing attention on Ana’s body:

He trails kisses up my belly, and his tongue dips into my navel … He lies down beside me and his hand trails up from my hip, to my waist, and up to my breast. He gazes down at me, his expression unreadable, and gently cups my breast … He blows very gently on one as his hand moves to my other breast … His lips close round my other nipple and when he tugs I nearly convulse. … His teeth close around my nipples and his thumb and finger pull hard, and I fall apart in his hands, my body convulsing into a thousand pieces. (James 2012a:114–15)
Thus, in many of the sexual encounters, while the focus is clearly on BDSM practices, it is also largely about Anastasia’s sexual pleasure. The fans of the books clearly identify with this; one fan writes that ‘Christian Grey is probably going to be at the base of every woman’s fantasies’, while another states ‘I like the way that he knows his way round a woman.’ Such stances not only imply a homogeneous, heterosexual woman, they suggest that it is the apparent equality in terms of sexual gratification that these women find pleasurable in Fifty Shades. Of course, in discussing the sexual elements of the books, the women are expressing a fundamentally oppositional identity to men; this enables them to produce a specifically female persona, illustrated by the comment ‘Men don’t get that by pleasing women we are ten times more likely to go above and beyond to please them.’ It is apparent, from this, that the social networking pages enable the women to achieve female solidarity in the way that they talk about sex; they position themselves as fundamentally different to men, but also as being ultimately pleased by men.

However, the above three examples are the most explicit examples of sex talk that we found within our corpus. More typically, a euphemistic style is employed, where the women hint at the sexual content of the books and at their own sexual feelings as a result of reading them. For example, one reader uses the phrase ‘inner feelings’ to describe her sexual desires: ‘makes you challenge your inner feelings which you can’t be bold about.’ Similarly, another fan says ‘I’m re-reading the books so I can have Christian in my dreams.’ The implicature behind both of these stances seems to be that the women were aroused by the books, but they are seemingly unwilling or unable to say this explicitly. More examples of euphemism come from a fan who says that the series ‘gives me goose bumps’, and another who requests ‘cold shower please!’ At no point in our corpus did women more explicitly describe their sexual feelings, or state in a direct way that they were aroused as a result of the novels. One possible reading of this is that such euphemistic constructions allow the women to index an ideologically feminine persona, with ideals surrounding ‘ladylike’ behaviour being relied upon to avoid the negative stereotypes of whores and vixens that may be attached to women who overtly state that they enjoy sex.

When the women do allude to their sexual enjoyment of the books, they very frequently align this with their role as wives. Interestingly, fans who mentioned their relationship status were only ever married or single (in which case they were often ‘looking for my Mr Grey’); women often mentioned husbands, but not boyfriends. For example, one reader states that ‘if [my husband] was like Christian Grey, I’d have soooo many kids!’ Here, this fan implies, rather than states, the link between being attracted to Christian
Grey and getting pregnant; she avoids mentioning having sex, but clearly alludes to it. In talking about her husband, and in framing sex itself as for the purpose of procreation, her positive stance towards the books’ sexual content is firmly rooted within a framework of heterosexual marriage and, thus, socially acceptable female desire. Other examples come from a reader who says that ‘my husband is so happy I read this book, the sex is so good’; this is an unusually direct construction, as the fan openly refers to sex itself. More consistent with the typical euphemistic practice of the other women are comments like ‘there are a lot of happy husbands out there,’ ‘my husband approves’ and ‘my hubby doesn’t complain no more.’ The positioning of the women’s own arousal as a benefit for their husband seems to effectively categorise the books as a marital aid, and thus the stances that the women are taking seem to positively evaluate them in this guise. This is, perhaps, rather a conservative way of thinking about sex, though it does allow the women in question to reinforce their own heterosexuality and normative femaleness by foregrounding their roles as married women. Further consideration of how the women’s discussions of sex allow them to produce a fundamentally female persona is made in the following section.

6.2 Heteronormativity and gender roles

As argued in the previous section, the approach that the women in our corpus took to the discussion of sex seemed to allow them to project a normatively feminine persona. It also, however, allowed them to put themselves in the position of Anastasia or, at least, of Christian’s partner. The women frequently refer to the male protagonist as being a dominant force in their lives, for instance, or as prevalent even when they are not reading the books. As mentioned above, for example, one reader says ‘Christian Grey is stuck in my head big time,’ while another feels more strongly that ‘Christian captured my heart and reigns over my fantasies!’ While the women are talking about their fantasies, and arguably gaining some agency in doing so, they are also apparently casting themselves in a rather passive role in comparison to Christian. This is accentuated further when the women talk more specifically about the books; one says that they were ‘like a drug’ to her, while another says ‘I’m addicted’ and ‘I can’t stop reading – I need an intervention!’ The use of the drugs metaphor seems to imply that they could not help but read the novels, thus ascribing the books an active role and positioning themselves, by contrast, as a passive recipient. In doing so, it is perhaps the case that the women are aligning themselves against the characterised ‘mummy’ who is turned on by this ‘porn’; while they are not actively seeking out this erotic fiction, they simply cannot resist it. If they are positioning themselves as not being sexually proactive,
in this way, perhaps the oppositional persona that they are indexing is a more respectable, proper one. We might reasonably argue that the women’s reluctance to acknowledge their own sexual desires in this moment reflects the ideological structures governing our understanding of how a woman should relate to sex: two available choices (‘the slut’ or ‘the virgin’) tend to be ascribed. Similar to their reluctance to admit to their own enjoyment of the sexual content, the women’s positioning of themselves as passive in this moment might again indicate their concern to reflect the ideological prevalence of the chaste, ladylike woman.

The relevance of the fans’ gender is again clear when they position themselves, as women, in direct contrast to men. Traditional, heteronormative gender roles are particularly evident in the women’s descriptions of Anastasia and Christian’s relationship, for instance, as the fans take positive stances towards the couple’s dynamic. One reader enjoyed the books because ‘he took care of her’, while another felt that ‘he made her feel like she was the only woman on earth’. These constructions again place Christian as the active subject with Anastasia as the passive recipient, and the consumers’ positive evaluation of these roles again allows them to produce personae in line with expectations for heterosexual women. This reading is reinforced when we consider that fans described themselves as ‘Team Grey’ or ‘in love with Christian Grey’, or even that they are ‘in search of my Mr Grey’. Despite the fact that their heterosexuality is implicit when positively evaluating these books, the women make their sexual orientation explicit in these moments. It seems that, in doing so, the fans are able to express their solidarity with the character of Anastasia and, importantly, with other women on the social networking sites; their normative heterosexuality is, in this context at least, fundamental to their identity as women.

Also of relevance, however, is the fact that the women reproduce particular assumptions about normative womanhood; they tend to presume that they are part of a homogeneous group, that all women (clearly excluding lesbian women) feel the same as them. This is evident in comments like ‘every woman needs a little dominance’, ‘[Christian]’s everything that a woman wants’, and ‘we appreciate a strong man that will ... make us feel sexy’. To ascribe heteronormative, ideological traits such as strength to men is, of course, in itself significant in the production of a contrastingly feminine persona, but of more interest in the latter example is the fan’s use of the collective pronoun ‘we’. Like the use of ‘every’, above, and the indefinite article ‘a’ to modify ‘woman’ in the last example, there is a clear presumption that all women will respond similarly. In positioning themselves in this way, the women are arguably putting forward the stance that there is a particular kind of ‘real woman’ who desires a ‘real man’; the construction of ‘every woman’ needing to be dominated and ‘a strong man’ being able
to make ‘us’ feel sexy seems to be indicative of this. In taking this stance, the fans may be actively aligning themselves with an ideologically feminine woman, one who exists in perfect opposition to the ideologically masculine man. The use of adjectives such as ‘strong’ as opposed to ‘sexy’ further constructs this opposition, and provides a very clear construction of the self in line with normative, binary gender roles and practices. It therefore becomes clear why the women rely on the overt production of their heterosexuality in this moment; there is a clear need to position themselves as opposite to men in order to reinforce their supposedly inherent femininity.

These findings conflict with much of the research carried out with heterosexual women (or women presumed to be heterosexual) in the language and gender literature. Women have largely been shown to index their femininity through the taking on of specific conversational roles, such as being supportive, apologetic or complimentary (see Holmes 1995), rather than by their sexual orientation. In contrast to this, normative (heterosexual) male identities are often achieved by overtly expressing their desire for women (e.g. Coates 2003; Kiesling 2007), or indeed via the discursive construction of their non-homosexuality (Cameron 1998; Pujolar 1997). Furthermore, whereas heterosexuality, for these women, is framed in terms of their legitimacy as a loyal wife, heterosexuality in men has often been shown to concern a lack of monogamy (e.g. Kiesling 2002). The women’s sexuality is relevant here, of course, because of the topic under discussion; there are perhaps fewer situations more pertinent to the construction of heteronormative femininity than in response to a love story. The social media context within which these women are interacting is also of central importance to this analysis. The women are interacting in spaces where they can presume that their interlocutors are straight women who are fans of Fifty Shades, and so they may feel assured that their contributions to the discussion will be taken seriously and not derided. Furthermore, the women do not typically know one another and, though their contributions are not anonymous or private, they are contained within a very specific sociocultural context. The women are thus able to perform a persona which is unique to the moment at which they post their comment; it may, therefore, not reflect the subject position that they put forward within the boundaries of their usual ‘real-life’ social relationships.

7 Conclusions

In taking a queer CDA approach to the data above, we have aimed to highlight the ways in which heteronormative structures of gender and sexuality are reinforced or challenged by fans of Fifty Shades. Our data have shown how women readers of the books may construct a coherently heterosexual
identity by indexing traditional models of femininity; the women rely on stereotypes of binary gender, for example, positioning essentialised notions of a homogeneous, ideal woman as opposite, in terms of sexual needs and gendered roles within a relationship, to the ideal man. They use euphemistic expressions, seemingly to avoid appearing to be a slut, or index a ‘good wife’ persona when discussing their sexual desires. They adopt an overwhelmingly passive role in response to the books themselves and to the male protagonist. In many ways, then, the data reveals the continued, constraining salience of heteronormative ideologies on straight women’s identity production. Importantly, though, this is not to criticise these readers for falling short of some progressive standard or ideal. The main focus of this article has been on answering the question: can consumers of *Fifty Shades* gain agency through discussing these books?

It is evident, from our data, that female fans may, indeed, gain some agency via their online discussions of *Fifty Shades*. In particular, it has been shown that those in our sample have been able to achieve solidarity with other women by positioning themselves as a homogeneous group with a shared identity. By orienting themselves in relation to Christian Grey, and to the books themselves, the consumers of *Fifty Shades* produce their own identity as women. Through this, they are able to evaluate what they – as women – want. Furthermore, the books have clearly prompted women to talk about their sexual desires; though they are rare in our corpus, moments of sex talk do occur. Rather than judge the women’s orientation to the *Fifty Shades* texts, then, our approach has aimed to analyse how these readers bring the text into line with their own concerns, turning a text about BDSM into identity work around their own experience as (typically) married women. While their discussion may not represent a particularly queer or progressive aspect of female sexuality, the women do indeed gain their own sense of agency from the text. It is also clear from how the fans of *Fifty Shades* interpret the representation of Anastasia and Christian that agency is not simply a matter of agented women characters being progressive, and submissive characters being regressive. In our data, readers focus on the agency which Anastasia herself exerts. In particular, their focus on the sexual pleasure that she derives from Grey’s focus on her orgasm enables them to evaluate their own experience of sex with their husbands.

From the discussion above, it is clear that it is important for CDA approaches to integrate readers’ responses into interpretations of texts. We have shown that readers do not simply passively receive messages from texts, and that our role as feminist analysts is not to judge readers as regressive if they appreciate books like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Our bottom-up analysis has shown, instead, that readers consume and interpret texts,
yet also use them in the construction of their identities. By focusing on the work that readers do when they interact with texts, we may grapple more coherently with questions of just how texts have significance for their readers; this is especially important when those texts concern sex and sexuality. Furthermore, it is apparent that social networking sites and other examples of online media are useful resources to exploit in the exploration of how audiences themselves respond to representations. Indeed, it is not only the *Fifty Shades* books which enabled the women in our corpus to produce a culturally-meaningful identity, but the ability to do so mutually in a relatively anonymous way. Social media thus allows analysts to capture the interaction of fans in a jointly-constructed and collaborative environment which, by its very nature, encourages the production of shared discourse.

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**Notes**

1. By providing this short plot summary, we are not precluding the fact that this text is interpreted in different ways by different groups of readers.
2. The narrator refers to Anastasia’s ‘inner goddess’ throughout the books, using the concept to differentiate between her own inexperience or concern and her natural, sexual desires.

**References**


