

## ROMANCE NOVELS AND FEMALE SEXUALITY: VICARIOUS PARTICIPATION?\*

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the association between time spent reading romance novels and female sexuality. The respondents were 436 white female college students, age 18–47. Several variables of interest are used to indicate sexuality: 1) age when thoughts of sex first occurred, 2) age at first intercourse, 3) strength of sex drive, 4) sex addiction, 5) number of orgasms, 6) number of sex partners, and 7) femininity. Our results show that readers of romance novels self-reported greater sex addiction, greater sex drive, and greater number of orgasms required for sexual satisfaction than non-readers. However, readers had fewer sex partners, and were older when they had their first thoughts about sex and had their first sexual intercourse. This pattern fits the *Harlequin* romance stereotype of nourishing a satisfying sex life in the context of romantic monogamous fidelity while at the same time vicariously fulfilling desires through fictitious characters.

### INTRODUCTION

Gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors are well-documented (DeLamater & MacCorquodale 1979; Louderback & Whitley 1997; Parameswaran 2002; Walsh & Walsh 2002). Males are more likely to have sexual fantasies and to masturbate while doing so (Ellis & Symons 1990; Knoth, Boyd & Singer 1988; Oliver & Hyde 1993). In general, females tend to fantasize about themselves as *passive* receivers of the sexual advances of powerful men while males fantasize about themselves as initiators and "conquerors." While sexual fantasies are personal affairs, they are strongly influenced by the biology of sex and the social construction of gender (Giddens 1992).

Gender-typical responses to erotic literature have recently generated scholarly interest (Rabine 1985; Radway 1984 & 1987). Oliver and Hyde (1993) conducted a meta-analysis of 177 studies and found substantial gender differences in respondents' interest in pornography, frequency of masturbation, and frequency of casual sex. It has been found that from the earliest days of life, males are "visualizers" or "objectifiers" which later in life make them susceptible to the kinds of visual impersonal sexual stimuli represented in pornography (Geary 2000; Baumeister 2000). On the other hand, females prefer symbolic meanings of sexual identity and a relationship, are unenthusiastic and negative about pornography, and prefer romance novels (Lottes, Weinberg & Weller 1993). Thus an interest in pornography is often considered an almost exclusive male interest (Christensen 1990) and reading romance novels is considered an almost

exclusive female interest (Itzin 1992).

However, some females do show an interest in pornography. Walsh (1999) found substantial differences between female readers and non-readers of pornography in several indicators of female sexuality, such as sex addiction, number of coital sex partners, and number of orgasms per month required for sexual satisfaction. In fact, female readers of pornography were closer to males on all indicators of sexuality than to female non-readers. Much of the previous research on this topic has centered on the impact of pornography on the sexuality of male audiences and reports such findings as rapists and child molesters are significantly greater consumers of pornography than males in general (Bauserman 1996; Carr & Vandeuken 2004).

Empirical research on the association between reading romance novels and female sexuality for readers and non-readers is scant. Do readers reflect the female stereotype depicted in such novels in both their desires and their actual behavior, or does reading them represent only vicarious participation? The only empirical work addressing this question found that pregnant high school girls (a palpable indicator of expressed sexuality) judged that the content of romantic novels epitomized their own sexual desires and behaviors more strongly than did never-pregnant high school girls (Muram, Rosenthal, Tolley & Peeler 1992).

Romance novels are a major money-maker for publishers. A 2003 report showed that an astounding 55 percent of all paperback fiction sold in the United States between 1999 and 2002 were romance novels and

that they generating more than \$1.63 billion in sales in 2002 (Romance Industry Statistics 2003). Although about 60 percent of all U.S. households purchase no books, over 51 million individuals reported that they read at least one romance novel in 2002. Of those readers, about 71 percent were women between the ages of 20 and 54, and 63 percent of that group had either a college degree or some college education (Romance Industry Statistics 2003). Given the great popularity of romance novels among women it would be surprising if readership did not reflect something about sexual self-images and if readers did not differ from non-readers on this variable.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to evolutionary theory, gender differences in sexuality result from the natural selection for sex-specific solutions to adaptative problems each sex faced in ancestral times (Vandermassen 2004). Given that a woman's parental investment is obligatorily enormous and a male's obligatory investment is limited only to contributing sperm, it would be surprising indeed if the sexual strategies of the two genders did not differ in a number of ways. Males gain more in terms of reproductive success following a strategy of mating with multiple partners while the increased probability of female reproductive success lies mainly in securing resources from a male to assist her in raising offspring. There are no fitness benefits for females to mate with multiple partners, indeed, the opposite is true, and thus evolutionary logic implies that they will be choosier in her mating habits and come to prefer carefully selected males that are devoted and committed to a long-term intimate relationship (Baumeister 2004; Geary 2000; Malamuth 1996).

This does not imply a simplistic "men are from Mars; women are from Venus" view of gender differences in sexuality. As Schmitt (2004) has put it: "women possess all the hallmarks of having evolved a short-term mating strategy" but it is "a strategy based on selectively desiring men of high status, dominance, and genetic quality." This description of desirable males, of course, is exactly the description of the heroes desired by the heroines in romance novels. Male short-term sexual strategy, on the other hand, is far more indiscriminate and emphasizes quantity over quality (Baumeister 2000), and

this is the content of male fantasies that are fueled by pornography. In short, male sexual fantasies are prompted by the natural male tendency to *visualize* sexual images of unfamiliar women that reflects their short-term male mating strategy, while female fantasies are driven by the natural tendency of females to respond to auditory, contextual, or symbolic contents of erotica that communicates a desire and passion for familiar persons, all of which signify the long-term elements of female mating patterns (Malamuth 1996; Taylor 2005).

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, romance novels can be regarded as a form of text-reader interaction, a system of values and languages, an evolution of cultural ideals embedded in social institutions and structured by regularity and rules. From a Goffmanian perspective (1983), different cultural and social groups may instill diverse forms of sexuality with particular cultural meanings embedded in religious beliefs and/or moral values. Individuals may vigorously construct and reconstruct their sexual practices and experiences over their life cycle and, consequently, creating their identities as sexual beings. These structured ways of constructing sexual identity and the self are understood as an "interpretive representation," facilitating people to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" episodes within their life and the social world at large (Goffman 1974 21).

Goffman was referring to what modern psychologists call *erotic plasticity* (Baumeister 2004). A cascade of evidence from around the world indicates that females evidence far more erotic plasticity than males and this plasticity is a function of female sexuality being less tied to biology and more to culture than male sexuality (Baumeister 2000, 2004; Schmitt 2003). In other words, a less intensive motivation to engage in sex driven by a less powerful sex drive allows female sexuality to be more flexible and more prone to socialization influences. Among these influences are romance novels, a medium that provides readers opportunities to create sexual fantasies the acting out of which is denied to them in the real world. As Giddens (1992 123) has put it

Sexual fantasies, when consciously employed, can create a counter-order, a kind of subversion, and a little space into which

**Table 1: Comparisons Between Female Readers and Non-Readers of Romance Novels on Means of Seven Indices of Sexuality**

Variable	Mean	t	Sig. t
Age when first thought about sex			
Reader	14.65	-3.72	<.001**
Non-reader	13.63		
Age at first intercourse			
Reader	17.56	-2.19	<.05*
Non-reader	16.92		
Strength of sex drive			
Reader	72.10	-7.32	<.001***
Non-reader	59.00		
Degree to which addicted to sex			
Reader	45.20	-4.26	<.001***
Non-reader	19.01		
Number of orgasms desired per month			
Reader	12.10	-3.71	<.001***
Non-reader	5.81		
Number of sex partners			
Reader	5.20	2.26	<.05*
Non-reader	7.00		
Femininity score			
Reader	64.51	-3.14	<.01**
Non-reader	73.10		

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

we can escape, especially when they scramble all those neat and oppressive distinctions between active and passive, masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive.

Feminist views are less positive about the function of romance novels. They make the obvious point that the relationships described by romance novels and in the subsequent sexual fantasies that they generate rarely exist in the ordinary world. They add that the real world favors the values of male hegemonic power. Social reality is deeply rooted in gender stereotypes and these male-favoring stereotypes are reinforced in romance novels. In addition, romance novels are a form of commodity based on selling fantasies to women that emphasize the kinds of fidelity and love that echo the ideologies of consumerism and capitalism.

Through text-reader interactions, female readers become the "willing surrenderers" to the system of gender oppression that supports and reinforces females' social subordination. A recent ethnographic research partially confirmed the influence of Western romance novels and female sexuality in India (Parameswaran 2002). The author argued that reading Western romance novels reflects the deeply-rooted patriarchal discourses of feminine ethics that controls Indian women's

sexuality. Parameswaran (2002 832) argued that in India:

young women are fascinated by the commodities of Western material culture in imported romance fiction is located in their desire to experience their identities as cosmopolitan, global consumers. In negotiating the boundaries of tradition, Indian women readers construct romance fiction as modern manuals on sexuality that afford them escape from the burdens of preserving the honor of family and community.

Given the preceding, we hypothesize that readers of romance novels would have higher levels of interest in sexuality (at least in the abstract) than non-readers. If the assertion is true that such novels are a major source of socialization relating to the "proper" behavior of women, however, sexual abstractions may not necessarily translate into sexual behavior.

#### METHODS AND DATA

This is a descriptive analysis which attempts to assess the degree to which a single variable (readership of romance novels) is associated with a variety of indicators of sexuality. Subjects are 436 white female college students ranging in age from 18 to 47 who participated in the study for extra

credit points. Subjects were asked the percentage of their reading time that they devote to romantic novels: those who indicated any percentage that was greater than 1 were classified as readers ( $n=308$ , 70.6%), while those who indicated zero percentage were classified as non-readers ( $n=128$ , 29.4%).

The variables of major interest were: 1) age when thoughts of sex first occurred; 2) age at first intercourse; 3) strength of sex drive; 4) degree to which they feel addicted to sex; 5) femininity score; 6) the number of orgasms monthly required for sexual satisfaction, and 7) number of lifetime sex partners. Self-assessed items 3, 4, 5, and 6 asked respondents to assess themselves on a scale ranging from zero to 100 on each item (e.g., "To what degree do you feel you are addicted to sex?"). Items 1, 2, and 7 simply asked for the values or numbers. Various demographic variables such as age, marital status, and socioeconomic status were also included.

## RESULTS

Readers did not differ significantly from non-readers on any of the demographic measures but did on all measured indices of sexuality. With respect to the self-assessed indices of sexuality, Table 1 shows that there are considerable group differences on femininity, strength of sex drive, degree of feelings of sex addiction, and number of orgasms for sexual satisfaction with readers scoring higher than non-readers on all variables. These findings indicate a strong self-assessed interest in sexual activity in the abstract among readers of romance novels, relative to non-readers. In terms of overt behavioral differences, however, we find a somewhat different situation. The average age when readers first thought about sex was 14.65 compared to the average age of 13.63 for non-readers ( $t = -3.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Readers and non-readers differed in terms of the age at which they experienced their first sexual intercourse, with readers first experiencing it at 17.56 and non-readers at 16.9 ( $t = -2.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Readers also had fewer sex partners ( $M = 5.2$ ) than non-readers ( $M = 7.0$ ) ( $t = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In terms of palpable indicators of sexuality, then, readers turn out to be less "sexual" than non-readers.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results reveal that female readers

self-reported greater sex addiction, greater sex drive and greater number of orgasms required for sexual satisfaction than non-readers. This would lead us to suspect that readers would have a varied sex life and sexual activities with more partners than non-readers, and that they would have thought about and commenced sexual activity at a younger age. Contrary to expectations, readers of romance novels had fewer sex partners, a lower level of self-assessed femininity than non-readers, and were older when they had their first thoughts about sex and had their first sexual intercourse.

These findings are not so unusual when viewed in the light of a large number of studies that have shown a much greater inconsistency between attitudes and behavior among females than among males when it comes to sex (reviewed in Baumeister 2000). This attitude/behavior inconsistency coheres with the view of greater erotic plasticity in females than in males. Male sexuality is widely considered to be more lightly bound by biology and thus more rigid and less open to modification by sociocultural factors. The greater degree of female sexual plasticity allows them to more readily adapt to changing circumstances and thus to be more malleable to socialization. We argue that the content of romance novels is at least a modestly powerful molder of the sexuality of those who read them. From a feminist standpoint, by imagining being a heroine in a romantic fantasy, readers find an escape from the burdens of preserving female subordinated status. The content of most romance novels reflects the profoundly embedded patriarchal discourses of female constraints; so reading romance novels plays a role in shaping the meaning of the self, sexual identity and attitudes and behavior relative to this patriarchy. Thus the overall results of this study suggest that the general attitude/behavior pattern of readers of romance novels fits the *Harlequin* stereotype of nourishing a satisfying sex life in the context of romantic monogamous fidelity while at the same time vicariously fulfilling sexual desires through fictitious characters in romance novels.

Several limitations of this study are acknowledged. Because of sampling limitations and the non-experimental nature of the study, no cause/effect statements can be made; that is, are the attitude/behavior inconsistencies noted among romance novel read-

ers the result of the socialization influences of the novels or do people with such inconsistencies gravitate toward such novels? Further, the sexuality-related items were not defined for respondents, thus allowing them to place their own subjective definitions and idiosyncratic interpretations on them. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of findings is in the direction predicted by the erotic plasticity hypothesis. The results presented here do provide intriguing possibilities for future research into the role of romance novel reading in the sexual lives of those who read them.

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