

Leisure Research Symposium Paper

Fifty Shades of Complexity

Exploring Technologically Mediated Leisure and Women's Sexuality

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual argument for why leisure researchers, and feminist leisure scholars in particular, should examine how a technology enhanced form of leisure, namely reading sexually explicit material, can liberate or constrain women's sexuality (Sonnet, 1999). To achieve this goal, we examined the popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, which is largely consumed by women, utilizing various technologies. Situating our analysis within the broader literature on leisure and technology and feminism and sexuality, we argue that understanding women's consumption of erotic and pornographic materials during their leisure has complex and important implications for women's sexuality and subsequent well-being. In so doing, we point to a number of areas for future research that will help complicate this understudied area of leisure research (Freysinger et al., 2013).

Keywords: *sexually explicit material; mediated leisure; feminism; participatory cultures; serious leisure*

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In our experience, every woman remembers when she first heard of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It is not unlike an historical moment forever embedded in the collective consciousness that reflects a particular time and place. Whether through a friend, a sister, a website, a blog, or a newspaper article, women recognized that the *Fifty Shades* series was a phenomenon that was sparking a new era of women's sexuality. Not wanting to be left out, diverse groups of women recognized the need to participate in the cultural moment in which they could openly claim—some without shame—that they read erotic material and enjoyed it. In large part, this cultural moment was fuelled by various technologies that enabled women to read the books privately on e-readers, but quickly moved from the private realm to the public as women openly read hard copies in their leisure.

We, too, recognized a significant moment in time and like other women, read the books for leisure. That is, we found the books amusing, entertaining, and pleasurable. As feminist scholars, we acknowledged the books offered opportunities for exploring the links between leisure, technology, and women's sexuality. However, the books also troubled us because of their adherence to traditional, heteronormative, and dominant patriarchal ideals for women's sexuality. We questioned whether we could knowingly enjoy the books given that we understood they had potential negative implications for women as a social group. Others, too, have realized this dilemma specific to the consumption of sexually explicit material by women. For instance, Ciclitira (2004) demonstrated that women wrestle with their enjoyment of pornography while simultaneously worrying about exploiting women who work in the industry. Similarly, Tisdale (1992) revealed her own enjoyment of pornography as a way of knowing herself sexually, while also recognizing the wider debates amongst feminists who see pornography as dehumanizing and oppressive for women (Dworkin, 1987; MacKinnon, 1987). Yet, as feminists, we wanted to acknowledge the liberatory possibilities for women who were reading the books through their own lens.

Aware of the complexities of being readers who are also feminist scholars, we thought the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series served as an excellent exemplar of why sexually explicit material geared towards women *should* be an important area of leisure studies. Surprisingly, this subject has received scant attention in the leisure literature, even though consuming sexually explicit material is a leisure practice that has significant personal and social relevance (Shaw, 1999). There is some research on sexual practices within the leisure literature, however. For example, there is a growing body of leisure literature on sexual identity (Barnett & Johnson, 2013), some research on specific sexual practices (e.g., sex tourism, swinging) as leisure (Jeffreys, 2003; Worthington, 2005) and a limited number of studies that explore health experiences (such as infertility and depression) and the implications for sexual wellbeing (Parry & Shinew, 2004; Berdychevsky, Nimrod, Kleiber, & Gibson, 2012). In terms of sexually explicit materials specifically, however, little research on this topic exists within recreation and leisure studies. Shaw's (1999) study is a notable exception, but her research focused on men's consumption of pornography and the implications for women's lives. Since then, technological advancements have made pornographic and erotic material more accessible, affordable, and anonymous, what Cooper (1998) refers to as the Triple A engine. Part of this engine includes new forms of erotic and pornographic materials *made by women, for women* (Sonnet, 1999). We argue this shift has significant implications for women's leisure and sexuality, especially given the popularity of the *Fifty Shades* series. Yet, to our knowledge there is no research on the interplay between leisure, technology, and women's sexuality. These issues warrant investigation, particularly by feminist scholars who ought to be theorizing about and problematizing sexually explicit material, such as the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series (Bell, 2005).

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide a conceptual argument for *why* leisure researchers, and feminist leisure scholars in particular, should examine how a technology enhanced form of leisure, namely reading sexually explicit material, can liberate or constrain women's sexuality (Sonnet, 1999). Rather than accepting such leisure practices as good or bad for women, we pay close attention to the ways that women's leisure is complicated and nuanced by gendered ideologies, expectations, and experiences. To achieve this goal, we examined the popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, which is largely consumed by women utilizing various technologies. Situating our analysis within the broader literature on leisure and technology and feminism and sexuality, we argue that understanding women's consumption of erotic and pornographic materials during their leisure has complex and important implications for women's sexuality and subsequent well-being.

Although we attempt to position our paper very broadly within the leisure and technology and feminism and sexuality bodies of literature, our personal lens into this topic is through feminist standpoint theory. Woliver (2002) explained that feminist standpoint theory is focused on uncovering assumptions about power differentials within a patriarchal society. One of the key components of power is knowledge, which is socially situated and comprised of a culture's beliefs and opinions (Harding, 1991). Women have been left out of much of the social construction of knowledge as a result of their marginalized status within patriarchal society (Woliver, 2002). To address this gender gap, feminist standpoint theorists argue that knowledge needs to be grounded in the lived experiences of women. A feminist standpoint, therefore, involves observations and theory that start from and look out at the world from women's lived experiences (Harding, 1991). This conceptual paper starts from our own experiences as feminist scholars who read the books, but we go on to consider the implications for women's lives.

The link between feminist standpoint theory and leisure research is made clear by Harding (1991) who argued the need for research focused on women's everyday lives: "women's struggles to improve the quality of daily life... constitute important strategies of political resistance to oppression and domination" (p. 130). The focus on quality of life is clearly applicable to discussions of women's sexuality, but we also appreciate the way feminist standpoint theory incorporates an historical perspective by focusing on the whole context of women's lives, and its contribution to "how and why social and cultural phenomena have taken the forms in which they appear to us" (Harding, 1991, p. 131).

While we are keen to identify as feminist standpoint theorists, we are less inclined to position ourselves within a particular wave of feminist research. Parry and Fullagar (2013) outlined a number of critiques associated with the wave metaphor including the way it frames a particular feminist story about change over time that focuses on linear progressions, which can reify generational differences and underplay the sociopolitical context of change (Parry & Fullagar, 2013; Caudwell, 2011). Similar to Parry and Fullagar (2013), we aim to emphasize continuity and difference over time, within and between 'waves' as they have been described (Bromley, 2012; Archer Mann & Huffman, 2005), in relation to feminist leisure research. However, we respect that many feminist scholars do position themselves within particular waves, especially those working with sociocultural and historical contexts. As a result, within our paper we draw upon the wave metaphor where it has been utilized by other scholars to contextualize their research.

Contextualizing the Series

Fifty Shades of Grey is the first book in an "erotic novel" trilogy by author E. L. James. Set mostly in Seattle, the books trace a relationship between a young, sexually innocent college grad-

uate named Anastasia (Ana) Steele who encounters a highly successful business magnate on the brink of turning 30 named Christian Grey. Grey's interest in Ana adheres to traditional structures of erotic fairy tales as he initiates Ana's first sexual experience and "awakens" her previously dormant sexual desire (Jorgenson, 2008). Criticized for their literary value, the books are best known for the explicitly erotic narrative, which prominently features sexual practices involving bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism (BDSM) (Meaney & Rye, 2007). Initially, the books were referred to as "mommy porn," which reflects the erotic content of the books and the main fan base. The success of the series, however, demonstrates the books are now popular among women of all ages (Milhausen, 2012). Indeed, the books have topped best-seller lists worldwide, earned E. L. James a number of accolades, and generated a number of spinoffs, including cookbooks (*50 Shades of Kale*), musical parodies, *Saturday Night Live* skits, and even the development of a university course (Woods, 2013). The overwhelming popularity of the *Fifty Shades* series speaks to its social significance, but so, too, does women's liberation to openly read, share, and talk about the erotic books, which is linked to technology enhanced leisure.

Initially, The *Fifty Shades* series was written by E. L. James as *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) fan fiction and published under a different title on fan fiction websites. James reworked the trilogy publishing them as e-books with a virtual publisher, which was the start of their success (Milhausen, 2012). The books were advertised through book blogs, but much of the success is attributed to word-of-mouth recommendations among female readers shared through online communities for women. The process alone demonstrates the importance of technology—fan fiction websites, e-books, virtual publishers, online communities of interest—to women's leisure. Our purpose is to underscore the importance of leisure research to understand how such technology facilitates women's consumption of sexually explicit material and whether it has liberatory and/or constraining implications.

Inextricably linked to discussions of liberation or constraint with respect to the *Fifty Shades* series is whether the books represent pornography and/or erotica. While it is somewhat difficult to differentiate these terms and discuss one in the absence of the other, pornography is often defined as sexually explicit material that portrays real sex acts (Doring, 2009). Toward this end, Shaw (1999) defined pornography as that which objectifies and depicts women's bodies for the exclusive pleasure of men. Consequently, Shaw argues that pornography is the quintessential leisure pursuit in which women are used as objects for male pleasure. Indeed, one of the main critiques of pornography is that it objectifies, dehumanizes, and depersonalizes the subjects, mostly women (Attwood, 2007). And, despite technological advances that have created new forms of pornography in which women are both producers and consumers, Attwood (2007) posits that certain genres of sexually explicit material that objectify women for men's sexual pleasure still exist. In her words, "hardcore" commercialized pornography:

is still organized around a set of sexual 'numbers' derived from 1970s ...[that include] the oral, vaginal, and anal penetration of women by men, girl-on-girl scenes and threesomes. Porn of this kind tends to focus on the explicit display of women's bodies, with male display limited to ejaculation, usually onto the body or into the mouth of a woman—the so-called money shot" (p. 449).

Many feminist scholars have argued that this form of pornography has constructed and maintained female oppression by depicting women as skilled sexual servants of patriarchal needs (Sonnet, 1999). Furthermore, Doring (2009) highlighted that pornography aimed at a

male audience (both online and offline) depicts sexist images of women that contributes to negative attitudes and abusive behaviours towards them as well reinforcing idealized versions of women's bodies and their sexual prowess that can negatively impact perceptions of their abilities. In addition, she noted that pornography can undermine "traditional values of marriage, family, and monogamy by showcasing sexual freedom, thus setting the stage for sexual liberalism and 'amoral' or 'irresponsible' sexual behaviour" (Doring, 2009, p. 1093). It is precisely these types of depictions of women's sexuality that erotica sought to counter.

Erotica can be conceptualized as "the expression of women's true sexuality" (Shaw, 1999, p. 200). Rather than visual depictions, erotica presents imaginary narratives that are sexual in nature and create a space in which women can envision their fantasies (Sonnet, 1999). The following excerpt from book two of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series serves as an example of a sexually explicit scene geared towards women's sexual fantasies:

"You are a fine sight, Anastasia Steele." He bends over the bed and slowly crawls up and over me, kissing me as he goes. He kisses each of my breasts and teases my nipples in turn, while I groan and writhe beneath him, and he doesn't stop (James, 2011b, 65).

Such scenes give women "permission" to explore their sexuality and envision themselves trying out sexual acts, which can be "both empowering and potentially subversive of both dominant sexist and anti-pornography feminist placements of heterosexual women's relationship to the domain of pornography" (Sonnet, 1999, p. 182). In this regard, erotica offers women a leisure space that can enhance their sexuality and sexual well-being.

Recognizing that the *Fifty Shades* series is written by a woman for women with the intent to be sexually engaging, it could be categorized as either pornographic or erotic depending on the positionality of the reader. For our purposes, we refer to the books as sexually explicit material resisting a direct categorization as either pornography or erotica. Our main interest is not in how to categorize the books, but rather what kinds of questions leisure researchers might ask about this sexual practice since technology enables women to access sexually explicit material, such as the *Fifty Shades* series, in a way not heretofore possible.

Leisure and Technology

One of the most pressing feminist issues today is women's relationships with technology. Throsby and Hodges (2009) observed, "one of the core feminist concerns surrounding technologies is the extent to which they facilitate or obstruct goals of equality and emancipation. Do they enhance women's lives and capacities, or constrain them?" (p. 12). Recognizing the importance of these debates in other fields, leisure researchers have recently started exploring the roles and impacts of technology. For example, Parry, Glover, and Mulcahy (2013) used a feminist lens to explore the roles of social networking sites in the development of social and peer support for mothers of young children. Their research demonstrated that new mothers desperately wanted to connect with others in a similar situation. However, women report difficulty making friends as an adult, especially after they become mothers. Social networking sites that focused on connecting mothers facilitated deep platonic relationships amongst the women, but also a sense of community that was akin to family relationships. Resultantly, the women experienced care, camaraderie, and felt connected, not isolated and alone. In this sense, technology was liberating for women.

It is easy to think about the liberatory outcomes of technology when women connect over a shared identity of motherhood, which is a socially valued role. Do the same benefits apply if women use technology to connect over a less socially sanctioned topic such as sexual desire?

According to Muise (2011), online sexual weblogs provide women with spaces to discuss their sexuality in communities where they can articulate sexual desires while potentially avoiding shameful feelings about sex acts (Muise, 2011). In her words, "online blogs and zines are one place where women can develop vocabularies of sexual desire, reduce shame around sex, and build communities to share experiences and information" (Muise, 2011, p. 412). Thus, Muise demonstrates the liberatory potential of online technology for women's sexuality.

Other researchers have also noted that the ability to access sex sites on the internet empowers women to explore their own sexuality. Technology such as fan fiction websites, e-books, virtual publishers, social networking sites, and online communities of interest are opening up new avenues for women's consumption of and construction of their sexuality and sexual practices (Milhausen, 2012). Attwood (2007) explained, "It is now possible to create, distribute and access a much more diverse set of sexual representations" (p. 441). These new, diverse sexual representations are more likely to draw in what Attwood refers to as the 'ordinary consumer' of sexualized materials. Moreover, newer forms of representation and access want to attract audiences that have traditionally been ignored by porn including women and younger adults (Attwood, 2007).

The *Fifty Shades* series is an excellent example of the ways that women are able to access sex stories in their leisure through technologies such as e-readers and discuss them in online communities of interest including book clubs, chat rooms, and blogs. For example, the discreet nature of e-reading devices enables women to consume the erotic series privately without shame whenever and wherever they like during their leisure (Chemaly, 2012). This form of consumption facilitates subversive behavior by enabling women to bypass the gendered judgment associated with activities perceived to be on the fringe of social acceptability (Brown, 2012; Tisdale, 1992). This behavior is not limited to sexually explicit materials on e-readers, however, as women are also reading and contributing to *Fifty Shades* blogs, participating in chat groups, and looking up *Fifty Shades* inspired sex toys online. For example, Hamilton (2012) reported that based upon the *Fifty Shades* series "sales of crops and whips are up by 15%, blindfolds by 60%, and bondage ties 35%. Paddles and handcuffs for spanking scenes made famous in the book have soared 30%, while sales of naughty jiggle balls are up by 200%" (p. 1).

While ubiquitous access can be viewed as liberating, Attwood (2007) cautions that even newer pornographic sites that purport to be sensitive to women's sexuality are focused on the commercialization of sex that can be constraining to women's liberation by depicting women in patriarchal sex acts. Similarly, in their study of internet filtering programs employed by institutions (such as universities), Sampaio and Aragon (2001) suggested that while the outcome of employing filters might satisfy the needs of those interested in protecting children from pornographic and sexually graphic internet sites, at the same time they often block "access to women-centred or feminist friendly Web sites" (p. 126). Their research points to the complexities surrounding access to sexually explicit material on the web and the need to question whether identities presented online are "real."

In addition to these concerns, there is the difficulty in addressing whether technologies are emancipatory or constraining in light of a number of other factors such as, which women are using technology (considering race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, etc.) as well as which technologies are being used and in what ways. These issues were inherently evident to us when we attended a discussion of the books hosted by a local public library. There, women (and sometimes their partners) from a broad intersection of the community, represented themselves and their sexuality in a variety of ways with a high degree of openness. Interesting questions emerged from the public discussion such as, what are the differences in women's

experiences reading the books based on how they accessed the content (i.e., online, borrowed the book through the library, purchased their own copies)? What pressures exist for women (and men) to read sexually explicit material? In what ways do women feel empowered by reading erotica? Given that the stories are heteronormative, do non-heterosexual women feel constrained or emancipated by them? Despite these emerging questions, it is clear that women are using technology in their leisure to move beyond the individual pleasure of reading the books to create a collective identity grounded in a shared, sexual fantasy world (Sonnet, 1999). As Sonnet (1992) explained:

the newly empowered reader of [series such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*] utilizes a commodified form of popular culture to signal alignment with a collective identity which exists only through that form. By connecting women in a shared fantasy world, the philosophy [of books such as *Fifty Shades*] mobilizes a rhetoric of community and collective female identity created around sexual fantasy. Consumption of erotica, then, works to reinforce the cultural identity of...women (p. 178).

A shared identity, even for readers from diverse backgrounds, highlights the important role that leisure contexts play in bringing people together (Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2013). As Kleiber, Hutchinson, and Williams (2002) noted, "Leisure, in its compassionate and friendship forms, and through social activities, clearly has the potential to provide people with feelings of social support and a decreased sense of loneliness and isolation" (p. 222). According to Glover and Parry (2008), a leisure-oriented social context is a "sphere of sociability" in which friendships and social support (including peer-to-peer support) are formed, maintained, and therefore, sustained (p. 221). They argued that the social nature of leisure venues fosters quasipublic sphere effects, thereby providing a social infrastructure that can facilitate social attachments and the development of social capital. Leisure spaces do so because they are casual, unpretentious, and engaging, and therefore buttress an effective socialization process. As Rojek (1999) highlighted, leisure environments are relaxed, which facilitates people speaking their minds and being themselves.

The role leisure plays in bringing people together face-to-face for support, broadly defined, is well documented in the literature (Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002). Since online leisure communities have received less attention (Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2013), women's use of technology and participation in online communities to consume/discuss sexually explicit material, in this case the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, is an excellent opportunity to address this gap in the literature. Building on the research by Parry, Glover and Mulcahy (2013), we wondered in particular, about how women's consumption of sexually explicit material represents a form of "participatory culture," which occurs when technology brings together groups of like-minded people who would not connect otherwise face-to-face (Attwood, 2007)? Accessing and discussing *Fifty Shades* online, as opposed to face-to-face, can lower inhibitions and lead to more open, honest discussion. According to Doring (2009) in online communications, "sexual inclinations and preferences otherwise concealed in the real world due to fear of rejection can be acted out... participants experience this as liberating and it often encourages self-acceptance" (p. 1095). In this way, the participatory culture created through *Fifty Shades* enables women to move beyond justifying their sexual desire and practices and instead express their sexual desire, share their sexual knowledge, and even learn about how to perform new sexual acts. For instance, one contributor to an online *Fifty Shades of Grey* book club reported:

I read all three. The writing is not that good, but I dont [sic] think that is the point. I will tell you they caused me to be more inspired in the sex dept. I am not, nor have I ever been, plain ole vanilla but things were getting a bit 'usual' in the bedroom. Having 5 kids and a grandson living with us we can not swing from the lights or anything like that but I sure was in the mood a lot more. After being married so long it is nice to try some new things to spice it up a bit.

Similar comments were made by different women on this site and others regarding the value of the books and the opportunity to discuss sexual desires and experiences. Participatory culture, in this regard, fuels a 'collaborative eroticism' (van der Graf, 2004) in which sexuality becomes an important component of both individual and group/collective definition and is intentionally used as a form of resistance to the way that sexual activity is presented in mainstream pornography (Attwood, 2007). A collaborative eroticism is important as it recognizes that everyone can have sexual desires. In this way, participatory cultures, such as those created through *Fifty Shades of Grey*, contribute to what McNair (2002) refers to as the "democratization of desire" (p. 191). According to Kolehmainen (2010), the democratization of desire troubles the dominant representations of male, heterosexuality by adding to the public discourse different representations of sexual desire including those of marginalized groups such as women and those who identify with other sexualities. According to Doring (2009), sexual well-being (and avoidance of sexual problems) requires access to sex-related information that contributes to new and different behavioral skills and motivation to try them, which women get through participatory cultures. As such, exploring these cultures is crucial if we want to understand "new kinds of cultural production and consumption" today (Attwood, 2007, p. 442).

While the production and consumption aspects of women reading the *Fifty Shades* trilogy might be new, the storyline of the books is not. According to Milhausen (2012), the *Fifty Shades* trilogy reproduces one of the oldest stories in the book: the Cinderella fantasy wherein a young, poor, heterosexual woman is swept off her feet and rescued by an older, highly successful and domineering, but damaged heterosexual man (James, 2011; Jorgenson, 2008). For example, the back cover description of the first book in the *Fifty Shades* reads:

When literature student Anastasia Steele goes to interview young entrepreneur Christian Grey, she encounters a man who is beautiful, brilliant, and intimidating. The unworldly, innocent Ana is startled to realize she wants this man and, despite his enigmatic reserve, finds she is desperate to get close to him. Unable to resist Ana's quiet beauty, wit, and independent spirit, Grey admits he wants her, too—but on his own terms. Shocked yet thrilled by Grey's singular erotic tastes, Ana hesitates. For all the trappings of success—his multinational businesses, his vast wealth, his loving family—Grey is a man tormented by demons and consumed by the need to control. When the couple embarks on a daring, passionately physical affair, Ana discovers Christian Grey's secrets and explores her own dark desires (James, 2011a, back cover).

Thus, while technology has influenced the way the books are created, consumed, and shared, it has not altered the gendered nature of the story that is told. In this regard, the *Fifty Shades* storyline reflects how new technologies continue to reproduce traditional, patriarchal storylines that constrain women's ability to truly capitalize on the possibilities that the technology affords them. Throsby and Hodges (2009) described how technologies are "simultaneously material and social, and both mediate and are mediated by social relations" (p. 11). That is, the *Fifty Shades* series not

only demonstrates how technology influences gender, but also how gender influences technology, because women are using online technology to speak about their sexuality and to explore ways to experiment with new approaches (i.e., sex toys) in the bedroom (Fox, Johnson, & Rosser, 2006). And while technology can enable and empower women to read whatever they would like (and perhaps experiment with their sexuality), what they read, including sexually explicit material such as the *Fifty Shades* series, may also have constraining/disempowering influences. For example, one scene from the first *Fifty Shades* series depicts the following sexual scenario:

He lunges at me, pushing me against the wall of the elevator. Before I know it, he's got both of my hands in one of his in a viselike grip above my head, and he's pinning me to the wall using his hips. Holy shit. His other hand grabs my hair and yanks down, bringing my face up, and his lips are on mine. It's only just not painful (James, 2011a, p. 78).

This scene serves as just one of many examples in which the narrative reproduces the man as the sexual agent and the woman as the helpless recipient of his desire. Indeed, critiques of the book adhere to Pozner's (2010) assessment of popular culture in that they reveal how narratives frame "ways that both play to and reinforce deeply ingrained societal biases about women and men, love and beauty, race and class, consumption and happiness" (p. 17). This can have negative implications for both women and men and these negative influences can serve to reinforce traditional ideals about women's sexuality.

Feminism and Sexuality

Historically women's sexuality has been constructed such that the ideal woman is the innocent virgin and a sexual object rather than a sexual subject in her own right. She is not an active agent, but rather a passive recipient of male sexual desire in which she gives pleasure as opposed to seeking it for herself while eagerly awaiting her biologically determined role of wife and mother. This notion of the "passionless" and reproductive woman (Cott, 1978; Penny Light, 2013) is entrenched in patriarchal structures that many (second wave) feminists sought to dismantle by positioning women as capable of seeking and receiving sexual pleasure on their own terms from both men and women (Our bodies, Ourselves, 1998; Vance, 1992).

While many who position themselves as second wave feminists embraced the notion of women taking agency over their own bodies, at the same time, there were debates over the pleasure and dangers of sex and sexuality for women. These debates can be observed particularly in discussions about the dangers of pornography, which was viewed by some as the "central engine of women's oppression, the major socializer of men and the chief agent of violence against women" (Vance, 1992, p. xix as cited in Sonnet, 1999). Vance (1992), however, suggests that the ways that women experience their sexuality might be more complex. In her own confessional piece about her enjoyment of pornography, Tisdale (1992) problematized anti-pornography feminism. She asserted that pornography verifies that the sexual self is real and argues that by watching pornography, women can make free choices about their own sexuality. In this regard, the *Fifty Shades* series is problematic for women who adhere to second wave values around women's sexuality that focus on the need to challenge patriarchal structures and foster equality amongst the sexes (Bromley, 2012). Power hierarchies and the resultant oppression of women (and other marginalized groups) is often still a characteristic of sexually explicit materials such as those found in these books and, as such, some feminists see the books as dangerous, rather than as a vehicle to promote pleasure.

Many feminists who position themselves within a third wave, however, focus on women's individualism where they can be empowered by their sexuality, act as sexual agents, and identify their own sexual pleasures, including those found in sexually explicit materials (Kipnis, 2007; Hammers, 2005). Through its focus on multiplicity and inclusivity, so-called third wave feminism seeks to reunite gender equality and sexual freedom embracing sexual desire and sexual expression, broadly defined (Shugart et al., 2001). Accordingly, "third-wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it (heterosexual or otherwise), and actively play with femininity" (Synder, 2008, p. 179). Thus, third wave literature includes support for sex work, advocates for sexual assertiveness, and reflects a vast array of sexual language without any judgement (Synder, 2008). The focus on an "unfettered and entirely self-defined sexual expression and identity" (Shugart et al., 2001, p. 204) makes sex-positivity one of the dominant tendencies of third wave feminism and opens up space for women to play a variety of roles in their sex lives, including being submissive to a dominant (male) partner.

Clearly, the terms under which women are able to negotiate their own sexuality, despite calls by feminists, are conflicting. This is particularly the case because of the contemporary context where notions of female sexuality that purport to empower women are "sold" to consumers of sexually explicit material while at the same time products and stories that reinforce traditional patriarchal (heterosexual) norms and values are marketed to the masses. As Sonnet (1999) argued, the consumption of erotica (and we argue all sexually explicit material) by women needs to be problematized because "all forms of mass-marketed pornography attest to social changes in which sexual citizenship has become a profitable basis for the construction of readerships: sexuality has become inextricable from consumption" (p. 176–177).

Indeed, Sonnet (1999) questions whether women are able to use erotica, for instance, as a leisure pursuit by way of exploring their own "independent sexual subjectivity" or whether traditional power relations that are inherent in male-defined pornography prevent them from doing so (p. 172). In this view, women can consume, interpret, and even talk openly about sexuality despite the fact that many of the sexual encounters in pornography and erotica are framed in a traditional manner (Sonnet, 1999). However, by using traditional narrative structures such as those found in fairy tales, authors of sexually explicit material can adhere to inherent patriarchal structures. For example, Jorgenson (2008) notes that although erotic fairy tales feature "spunky" heroines, "they ultimately choose to be in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage, conforming to patriarchal norms" (p. 28). In our view, the narrative of *Fifty Shades of Grey* adheres to this structure. Despite the illusion that these stories provide a radical departure for women from roles that observe traditional femininity, in the end, they reproduce rather than resist such roles. In this series, the man (Christian) is the hero, head of the household and sexual predator who pursues the woman (Ana), who is submissive, inexperienced, and a caretaker and sexual object. Thus, fiction that contains sexually explicit narratives often reinforces the patriarchal system and inherent gender inequities that form societal norms and values.

As Franiuk and Scherr (2013) noted, the media tends to reproduce these values and, therefore, they become the dominant ideologies by which consumers understand their social reality. In addition to the books not challenging traditional views of masculinity and femininity, they also "combine sex and violence...and follow a clear script regarding heterosexual romantic relationship development by putting men and women in the dominant/submissive roles and eroticizing aggressive male behaviour" (Franiuk & Scherr, 2013, p. 16; Radway, 1984; Turpin, 2008), a feature of other erotic romance novels (for example, Meyer's *Twilight*, Day's *Crossfire*, and Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series). In *Fifty Shades*, despite Ana's reservations about Christian's

interest in BDSM practices, she succumbs to his desire for her and, as a result, her own sexuality is awakened. However, there is an added dimension of sexually explicit violence embedded in the *Fifty Shades* story. Christian enjoys spanking Ana when she defies him. For example, after breaking one of his code of conduct rules, Christian grabs Ana and tips her across his lap. Next, a scene from the first book reads:

With one swift movement, he angles his body so my torso is resting on the bed beside him. He throws his right leg over both of mine and plants his left forearm on the small of my back, hold me down so I cannot move. *Oh, fuck.* “Put your hands up on either side of your head,” he orders. I obey immediately. “Why am I am doing this, Anastasia?” “Because I rolled my eyes at you,” I can barely speak. “Do you think that is polite?” “No.” “Will you do it again?” “No.” “I will spank you each time you do it, do you understand?” Very slowly he pulls down my sweatpants. Oh, how demeaning is this? ...He places his hand on my naked behind, softly fondling me, stroking me around and around with his flat palm. And then his hand is no longer there... and he hits me—hard. *Ow!* My eyes spring open in response to the pain, and I try to rise, but this hand moves between my shoulder blades, keeping me down. ...He hits me again and again, quickly in succession. *Holy fuck it hurts* (James, 2011a, p. 273-274).

In addition to spanking Ana, Christian prevents Ana's sexual release when he is angry with her as another form of punishment. This serves to normalize male violence and reinforces that women should “stand by their man”—a narrative that Franiuk and Scherr (2013) say works to enforce that women should remain in violent relationships (p. 18).

Despite this reproduction of problematic narratives, which reinforce traditional patriarchal values, sexually explicit material can also serve to make readers more comfortable with new (to the reader) sexual scenarios (Jorgenson, 2008). In the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the new aspect of the traditional tale of an “innocent initiation” (Jorgenson), is that of BDSM sexual practices (Milhausen, 2012). Engaging in BDSM was once viewed as a psychological disorder (von Krafft-Ebing, 1965), but today many researchers view BDSM participants as psychologically healthy individuals engaging in an “erotic subculture” that fosters a form of harmless sexual leisure (Lindemann, 2011, p. 152; Wilkinson, 2009). BDSM participants are often highly skilled practitioners who invest a great deal of time learning about the ways to pleasure their partners in online and face-to-face communities, enact “scenes” where others observe to learn about various forms of BDSM, and attend conferences wherein different knowledge, practices, and skills are shared. They also invest significant amounts of money purchasing the props needed to enact their sexual desires. Grounded in shared consent, practitioners are very specific about the rules involved in BDSM. Consequently, to master the necessary skills can require significant time and energy. Once an underground subculture, today it is possible to find a great deal of information on these practices on the internet or in texts such as the *Fifty Shades* series. For example, one scene from the first *Fifty Shades* book outlines how the characters will use a suspension grid and a St. Andrew's cross, common pieces of equipment used in BDSM practice (Dempsey, 2012):

He takes my elbow and moves me to beneath the grid. He reaches up and takes down some shackles with black leather cuffs. ‘This grid is designed so the shackles move across the grid.’ I glance up. *Holy shit*—it's like a subway map. ‘We're going to start here, but I want to fuck you standing up. So we'll end up by the wall over there.’ He points with the riding crop to where the large wooden X is on the wall (James, 2011, p. 322).

Wilkinson (2009) suggests that mainstream representations of SM, and we argue BDSM, leads to greater tolerance and more widespread acceptance for these types of sexual practices. This can be linked to what Plummer (1994; 2003) termed the creation of "intimate citizenship" where discourses about the private sphere are increasingly discussed in public (2003, p. 68). For Giddens (1992), new technologies have allowed for new possibilities in sexual life, particularly for women who are now freed from sex for procreative purposes only and this opens up spaces for other types of sexual encounters for pleasure (Giddens, 1992; Langdrige & Butt, 2004). While some feminists have condemned such practices as oppressive for women, others have endorsed BDSM as a way for women (and men) to explore their sexual desires. For example, an online book club for *Fifty Shades* readers reveals a number of quotes by women who took up BDSM practices after reading the series. By subverting the gendered shame of sexual desire, women are able to reframe their own sexuality in a broader and more inclusive context thereby positively impacting their sexual wellbeing. For example, one online commentator said, "I have also explored the 'darker' side of sex before I was married and it [*Fifty Shades*] hasd [sic] definatley [sic] made me want that part of my life to resurface hehe." At the very least, the books open up opportunities for women to explore new sexual possibilities.

As Albury (2008) pointed out, the sexual practices and experiences such as those found in sexually explicit materials "are an important part of many people's self-recognition as sexual subjects" (p. 650) even though some may consider those representations to be stereotypical or harmful. Reading sexually explicit material, therefore, has the potential to be an incredibly liberating leisure practice. The importance of erotic fiction 'by women for women' should not be underestimated, noted Sonnet (1999) because of the provocative way it takes: "women's sexual pleasure seriously and offers popular pleasures with a view to enhancing women's understanding of the possible role of erotica in developing personal sexual practices" (p. 183). Indeed, consuming sexually explicit material makes us consider our own desires, particularly in terms of what each of us as individuals views as pleasurable or dangerous, and how we decide to conform (or not) to prevailing social norms, values, and conventions about our sexuality and sexual practices (McNair, 2005).

The ability of women to negotiate social norms and values while also acting as agents in the development of their own personal sexual practices is an important aspect of reading sexually explicit materials for leisure. This is particularly important today as women (and men) are bombarded with the availability of sexually explicit material everywhere in popular culture, which Kolehmainen (2010) describes as "pornographication." She noted that this phenomenon "can be understood to cover the development in media technology and the expansion of porn; transformations in media regulation and legislation; and the visibility of porno chic in connection to a general sexualisation of culture...[which] pays attention to the portrayal and address of women as active, desiring and powerful sexual subjects rather than erotic objects of the male gaze in contemporary media" (p. 180). As the women reading *Fifty Shades* note in online book club forums, the books fostered their ability to assert agency in reading and then initiating sexual practices with their partners. For example, one online blogger commented, "The sex scenes were not as steamy as I thought they were going to be, but I did get kind of hot reading it, and I had a sex dream about DH the first night I read it." At the same time, the books also reproduce some of the problematic aspects of pornographication of today's culture. The same online commenter quoted above goes on to report, "I keep telling my h to read it [*Fifty Shades*], you know, to get some ideas, but he says that with his mind he doesn't need to. I'm still waiting for him to act on his imagination though..." This perspective speaks to the larger construction of women as

the passive recipients of their partner's sexual desire and at the same time are expected to be the nurturers of relationships where "the maintenance of a long-term heterosexual relationship now includes the nurturing of passion as an important aspect of preserving intimacy" (Benjamin & Tlusten, 2010, p. 600). In other words, the construction of female sexuality as passive in the books is also translated into expectations for women in their own sexual relationships. As another online commenter noted, "I think that I understand what the buzz is all about, we as women, moms, caregivers, and just overall 'doers'. I think the lead [sic] of being with man, in a situation where we don't [sic] have to make all of the decisions, there is the element of surprise and in a word, release." So while women are agents in reading and discussing the books, they are also caught between constructions in popular culture of women being liberated sexually and constructions of "proper" roles for women as wives and mothers. As McNair (2005) notes, "sex matters... it goes to the core of who we are as human beings; that it is about power, and desire, and transgression, and guilt. Sexuality is a disruptive, subversive force, subject to regulation, control and repression in every society. It is therefore a zone of fierce contention, and its mediation—what can be said and represented about sex, and by whom, has been a front line in the struggle for sexual equality" (p. 558-9). Ultimately, the complexity in novels like the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series needs to be problematized because, on the one hand, they promote the liberation of women's sexuality through readers' ability to explore new sexual practices while at the same time reinforcing for them that heterosexual marriage and children (the traditional "happily ever after") are the end goal.

Commentary

This conceptual paper makes the case that leisure researchers, and feminist scholars particularly, should be exploring women's use of technology to consume sexually explicit material, because it has received scant attention in the leisure literature. One notable exception, as mentioned, is Shaw's (1999) investigation of men's consumption of pornography and its implications for women's lives. She found women's reactions to all pornography, but violent pornography in particular, were negative. In Shaw's study, "pornography elicited fear reactions, had a negative effect on women's identities and on their relationships with men, and was seen to reinforce sexist attitudes among men. Despite this, many of the women felt that their "opinions were not 'legitimate', and overt resistance to pornography was often muted" (p. 197).

Our examination of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series brings to the fore the potential for women's voices to be heard in the debate about the consumption of sexually explicit material. At the same time, though, it is clear that there is a need to further explore women's consumption of the books during their leisure. Our preliminary investigation of readers discussing the books in various communities reveals examples of women who actively engage with and enjoy sexually explicit material. We view the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series as representative of an ideological shift in women's leisure as technology once utilized almost exclusively by men to consume sexually explicit material is now being utilized by women. This consumption is facilitated by technology that affords women the opportunity to consume sexually explicit material privately during their leisure. Moreover, technology also facilitates the opportunity for women to join online communities and express their sexual desires and experiences publicly. Yet, women are not just consumers of sexually explicit materials. The *Fifty Shades of Grey* series demonstrates the contemporary phenomenon of user-generated content in the form of fan fiction that enables women to actively *create* the content that is consumed. The success of the books demonstrates their social impact and makes public women's private sexual desires. However, it also calls for a

deeper debate about the meaning and implications of technology enhanced leisure, particularly in terms of the shifting sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts in which these books are being read. Future research should aim to situate the consumption of these books in leisure settings and consider how those settings have shifted and changed over time. It is clear that new information and communication technologies are playing a central role in facilitating not only the consumption of sexually explicit materials by women, but also how they are able to discuss and share their perspectives with others. While such materials have been available to readers in different periods in the past, the public engagement of readers with broader communities is a new phenomenon that needs more attention.

Technology plays a vast and ever-increasing role in women's (and men's) leisure lives, but has not yet been adequately conceptualized within the leisure literature. To this end, we propose the term "mediated leisure" to reflect the many ways that leisure behavior is both facilitated and influenced by various technologies. Technology is ubiquitous and impacts upon nearly all aspects of life, including leisure (Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2013). Feminists argue that such technological advancements can empower and provide new opportunities for women, particularly through participation in online communities wherein women can engage in broader discussions that may be feminist-oriented (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009). Indeed, technology moves feminist issues, problems, and concerns out of the private realm and into a visible, public space, such as the Internet (Puente, 2008). Toward this end, we need to consider the social mechanisms that will support a full inclusion (including use and programming) of women in technology (Puente, 2008). This area of research, often referred to as technofeminism, seeks to address "the so-called digital gap and recover a sphere traditionally associated with the masculine for women" (Puente, 2008, p. 435). In other words, it is not just the message (the traditional patriarchal storylines) that is problematic for women, but rather the mode—technology itself—can also be constraining. How, if at all, does resistance online translate into offline life? Who are the women that are using this technology and who might be excluded from these discussions? For instance, do women experience the books differently depending on how they access them (by reading online, purchasing paper copies, borrowing from libraries) and discuss the stories? Technology itself must be problematized so that questions such as these are explored.

When sexually explicit materials are consumed via technology, however, a deeper debate about the meaning and implications for leisure, technology, sexuality, and feminism is vital (Pozner, 2010). That is, while technology has the capacity to liberate women in their leisure consumption, it can simultaneously serve to reproduce gendered stereotypes, which may serve to invalidate the achievements of feminism. We must take care to avoid a backlash against women's social progress through leisure and technology (Faludi, 1991; Pozner, 2010; Freysinger et al., 2013).

One area of particular concern with respect to the backlash is the pleasure gap that many feminists argue exists between men's and women's sexuality. That is, despite the opportunity for women to consume sexually explicit materials, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, men still feel more entitled to sexual pleasure (Attwood, 2007). Orenstein (2000) explains the "pleasure gap says something profound about women's deepest feelings of legitimacy, the license to... 'ask for what you want,' and expect to get it. Will a woman who suppresses her needs during sex be able to assert them in other realms of her life?" (p. 26). Our paper demonstrates the value of online communities and the resultant participatory culture in that they bring like-minded women together to "share moments of intimacy, laughter, and friendship in which a wide variety of attitudes and experiences are expressed...these techniques allow the individual to change...her ideas and

views, and to achieve a certain state of wisdom... 'truth telling' has long been a feminist strategy for personal transformation within social contexts" (Bell, 2005, p. 198). More research needs to be conducted to understand what exactly is happening in those online communities with respect to women's sexuality (Muise, 2011). In particular, how are women constructing their sexual desire? Are they resisting and/or reproducing traditional norms and values and what are the implications for their leisure? At the same time, we need to explore what happens offline. What opportunities exist for women to be critical of the books and the messages contained therein in face-to-face communities (like traditional book clubs) and what are the differences amongst women's experiences depending on their positionality?

Leisure is an important context in which gendered ideologies can be resisted and/or reproduced. When conceptualized as resistance, leisure is seen as a site for women, either individually or in groups, to challenge ideologies that perpetuate unequal power distributions or the ways power is implemented within patriarchal society (Shaw, 2001). Under this premise, leisure becomes one arena where women's power is gained, maintained, reinforced, diminished, or lost. Thus, women's leisure becomes a political practice. For Shaw (2001) the link between leisure, resistance to cultural ideologies, and power relations are clear. She explained:

An important aspect of resistance...is resistance to dominant ideologies, associated with factors as gender, race, the family or sexuality. Challenging ideologies are thus a challenge to underlying power relations. Since ideologies are perpetuated through cultural activities, and especially through representational activities such as the media, the importance of leisure is evident. Because of its representational nature, through such activities as sports, social activities and celebrations, as well as media activities, such as television, movies, videos, and magazines, leisure practice[can be used] to resist dominant ideologies (p. 189).

Applying this conceptualization to women's consumption of sexually explicit material such as the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, there is evidence that such leisure is resistant. That is, open consumption and discussion of sexually explicit materials enables women to develop a sexual vocabulary, learn about various sexual practices, and reduce shame around their sexual desire. Moreover, in making time and space to consume and discuss sexually explicit material, women are creating what Wearing (1998) referred to as "personal space" in which women seek out time and space for themselves during which it is possible to develop diverse subjectivities and rewrite femininities. In the case of sexually explicit materials, leisure as personal space can also enable women to explore their sexual selves, accept themselves as sexual agents and thus, go beyond sexual expectations of women in today's society.

Yet, leisure in the form of sexually explicit materials, such as the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, can simultaneously reproduce traditional gender ideologies by adhering to traditional patriarchal roles and sexual scripts for both women and men. In other words, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series may represent a *constraining* leisure pursuit for women given its role in reinforcing and reproducing oppressive gender structures and relations in the storylines and sexual scripts (Muise, 2011; Shaw, 1994). Either way, resistant or reproductive, women's sexuality deserves attention within the leisure literature.

Considering women's sexuality also opens up space to explore the link between leisure and women's overall health and well-being. Feminist scholars have established women's health, broadly defined, as a major area of leisure research (Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Indeed, various dimensions of health including emotional (Parry, 2007), mental (Fullagar, 2008), social (Hutchi-

son, 2013), and physical (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2001) have been explored through a leisure lens. This multidimensional view redefines health as the ability to live life fully—with vitality and meaning (Insel & Roth, 2006). Health is determined by decisions about living one's life, including one's leisure. Yet, women's *sexual* health has been largely ignored by feminist leisure scholars. As Freysinger, et al., (2013) note,

consensual sex, glamour/beauty work, erotica, prostitution and sex tourism, expression of sexuality, pornography, date rape, and sexual assault are clearly feminist concerns and are central to individuals' and cultures' leisure...Many questions remain, such as in what sense these practices are work, oppression, freedom and self-expression, leisure, and/or exploitation (p. 549).

Clearly, sexuality is a fruitful area for future leisure research.

One practice raised in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series that we argue warrants attention is BDSM. In particular, BDSM communities could be explored in relation to serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007). That is, similar to Stebbins' conceptualization of a serious leisure participant, BDSM practitioners often launch themselves on a 'career' (broadly defined) in which they systematically pursue the special skills and knowledge for their involvement. Moreover, in contrast to causal leisure, BDSM requires a significant investment in time, money, and energy in order to master the pursuit. Practitioners of BDSM gain sexual pleasure from giving and receiving pain and/or serving in dominant or submissive roles in their sex lives. Given the slightly taboo nature of this leisure, practitioners of BDSM form a tight subculture wherein they feel accepted and their leisure is validated. Such an ethos is important as BDSM practitioners identify strongly with their leisure pursuit. Evidently, BDSM practitioners embody the characteristics of a serious leisure participant (Stebbins, 2007). Yet, to our knowledge there has been no leisure research on this topic. We think this would be an interesting area of research that would further develop the theoretical contributions of serious leisure.

Williams and Storm (2012) argue that BDSM is about power relationships, not necessarily connected to sexual activity and therefore suggest the term "erotic power exchange" to sum up this relationship. Thus, BDSM is a particularly important area of study with respect to women's sexuality as it potentially offers a context in which women can resist traditional patriarchal norms and values when it comes to their sexuality. More research is needed to understand whether women are actually conforming through BDSM or if it is an act of resistance. Thus, BDSM needs to be problematized in popular culture wherein books like *Fifty Shades of Grey* oversimplify the power relations that exist in real BDSM exchanges. In particular, we argue the gendered nature of serious leisure as studied through BDSM would be particularly enlightening as scant research has explored this aspect of leisure practices and sexuality. This would also allow researchers to further investigate the heteronormative narratives that exist in such books to explore more deeply how they fit into the actual practices of BDSM communities and how the communities themselves resist or reproduce traditional norms and values in a nontraditional setting.

Conclusion

We began this paper acknowledging our own consumption of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series and debating the complexities of consuming sexually explicit materials as a leisure pursuit in light of our feminist positionalities. In particular, we questioned whether a technologically enhanced form of leisure, namely reading erotic and pornographic material can liberate or con-

strain women's sexuality. This conceptual paper noted that women's consumption of sexually explicit materials can be both liberating and constraining. We acknowledge the value of consuming sexually explicit materials for opening up new leisure spaces for women, but are cautious about the ways that such materials are inextricably linked to patriarchal norms and values. Rather than judging women for what they consume during their leisure, we hope this paper encourages *all* readers to employ a critical lens when consuming sexually explicit materials, such as *Fifty Shades Grey*. We end with the words of Christian Grey to Anastasia Steele, "Later, baby."

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