

Young Women's Perceptions of the Relationship in *Fifty Shades of Grey*

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Abstract

Objective: Millions of women are interacting with *Fifty Shades of Grey*—a best-selling novel and film. Yet, to date, no social science study has been undertaken to examine women's perceptions of the *Fifty Shades* relationship narrative in its film adaptation—what they deem appealing, what they deem unappealing, and what they would welcome or resist in their own relationship. In the present study, we used focus groups to examine women's perceptions of the relationship patterns in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film.

Methods: Focus groups were conducted with 35 young adult women (randomly sampled from the registrar's office of a large Midwestern university) immediately after watching the *Fifty Shades* film with the study team at a local theater within two days of the film's release. Seven semistructured questions concentrating on reactions to the relationship patterns between Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele depicted in the *Fifty Shades* film were asked, including general reactions, appealing and unappealing characteristics, romantic and dangerous elements, and aspects that participants would tolerate (or not tolerate) in their own relationships.

Results: While participants assessed parts of the relationship between Christian and Anastasia as exciting and romantic, they consistently indicated an unappealing lack of health in the relationship. Participants expressed grave concerns over Christian's stalking, controlling, manipulative, and emotionally abusive behavior, anger in sexual interactions, and neglect of Anastasia's needs. At the same time, they sympathized with and rationalized Christian's behaviors as a function of his personality, needs, and abilities. A small contingent implicated Anastasia in the unhealthy relationship process, whereas a broader majority of participants highlighted the challenges with trying to “speak up” in an unhealthy relationship like Christian and Anastasia's. When asked where participants would draw the line in their own relationship, participants indicated they would welcome the adventure and gifts, but would not tolerate being controlled and stalked, having their needs neglected, and having a partner who expressed anger in sexual interactions.

Conclusions: Our findings point to the value of using popular culture, including the *Fifty Shades* narrative, to actively engage young women in productive conversation about characteristics of relationship health and unhealth. Similar approaches could be used to engage young women in safe, relatable conversations about healthy and unhealthy relationships, including the warning signs of abuse. As a broader impact, our study contributes to an understanding of how young women interact with and make sense of relationships depicted in popular culture.

Introduction

Significance

AS MILLIONS OF WOMEN are interacting with *Fifty Shades of Grey*¹—a best-selling novel² and film³—no social science study to date has been undertaken to examine women's perceptions of the *Fifty Shades* relationship narrative in its film adaptation—what they deem appealing, what

they deem unappealing, and what they would welcome or resist in their own relationship. In the present study, we examined, through focus groups, young women's perceptions of the relationship patterns in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film. Our study concentrated on women between the ages of 18 and 24 years because this developmental period, over all other developmental periods, is intensely focused on explorations of intimate relationships, love, sexuality, and sexual

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expression.^{4,5} It is also a period when women are at high risk for experiencing violence in their intimate relationships.^{6–8} Across the lifespan, between 24% and 44% of women will experience intimate partner violence,^{6,7} with significant adverse health outcomes.^{8–17} Women with a history of intimate partner violence in the past 12 months,¹⁵ for example, have elevated risk of depression (3.26-fold increase), anxiety (2.73-fold increase), substance abuse (5.89-fold increase), sexually transmitted disease (3.15-fold increase), urinary tract infections (1.79-fold increase), vaginitis (1.56-fold increase), chest pain (1.53-fold increase), chronic pain (e.g., cervical and back pain, headaches), trauma-related joint disorders (1.59-fold increase), and various types of injury (e.g., lacerations, contusions, sprains and strains).

Our study is highly relevant to the development of young women, including the potential for helping to establish a healthy relationship trajectory across the lifespan, particularly given the known associations between interacting with popular culture (including *Fifty Shades*) that depicts violence against women and/or highly gendered stereotypes^{18–24} and violence victimization and related health risks. While well-validated, theory-based relationship violence prevention programs such as Safe Dates,²⁵ the Fourth-R,²⁶ and Coaching Boys into Men²⁷ target contributing factors to violence in relationships across all levels of the social ecology²⁸ (e.g., individual, peer, family, and school environment), a prime emphasis is placed on social norming—including combatting messages at the broader societal level (e.g., media) that condone violence against women. These programs acknowledge that the use of popular culture is an important facilitator for opening conversations²⁹ about relationships, sexuality, and warning signs of abuse.³⁰

Two recent cross-sectional studies showed associations between interacting with the *Fifty Shades* novels and violence victimization, binge drinking, disordered eating, having a high number of sexual partners,²³ and traditional gender role identification²⁴ (the idea that men are strong, powerful, and in control and women are weak and subservient³¹). While the studies could not demonstrate temporality and did not account for all factors (e.g., family environment, interactions with all types of popular culture) that might be associated with health risks and traditional gender role alignment, the study findings nevertheless corroborate prior investigations noting associations between interacting with popular culture and related media depicting violence against women and attitude and behavior risks.^{21,22,32–34}

For example, Malamuth's seminal study showed that male undergraduate students randomized to watch violent sexual films had increased acceptance of violence against women, with a nonsignificant opposite trend for female viewers.³⁴ More recent analyses have confirmed associations between men's viewing of violent pornography and attitudes supporting violence against women.^{32,33} Other studies have shown a range of potential risks for women who interact with sexualizing magazines (valuing appearance over competence and intensive body surveillance)¹⁸ and thin-ideal images (depressed feelings, stress, guilt, shame).³⁵ Gail Dines, author of *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked our Sexuality*, brings these ideas together by calling attention to increasingly problematic messaging about women, including hypersexualized images and violence, in Internet-based pornography and visual media more generally—including ensuing expectations for women's physical appearance (e.g.,

waxed vaginal areas) and for sexual interactions (e.g., double anal penetration).²¹

Violence against women in other types of popular culture, such as music videos, has also raised concern. For example, Eminem and Rihanna's music video, *Love the Way You Lie*, romanticizes physical, sexual, and emotional threats, including an intent to kill within a couple's relationship (i.e., "If she ever tries to fucking leave again I'm a tie her to the bed and set this house on fire ..."). In relation to lyrics like these, the American Academy of Pediatrics³⁶ issued a cautionary policy statement about the role that depictions of violence, problematic sexual messages, sexual stereotypes, and substance abuse play in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of young people.

Fifty Shades of Grey narrative

What are the basic tenets of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* narrative? In the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film, handsome, wealthy, and sexually experienced Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan) and plain-looking, sexually inexperienced college student Anastasia Steele (Dakota Johnson) become romantically and sexually involved. The *Fifty Shades* narrative blurs desire and danger,³⁷ weaving in edgy sexual elements into the romantic relationship; namely, Christian uses physical restraints (e.g., handcuffs, neckties), floggers, riding crops, feather ticklers, verbal intimidation, and spanking in an attempt to sexually engage and subdue Anastasia.

Within the *Fifty Shades* relationship, consistent with traditional gender scripts,^{31,38,39} Christian's sexual needs are prioritized over Anastasia's desire for an emotional connection. For example, in one scene, Anastasia returns from a long-distance trip and indicates a desire to connect emotionally with Christian; appearing angry by events happening in his office, Christian ignores Anastasia's request and instead commands her to get ready for sex. While Anastasia is upset by Christian's dismissive request, she complies and is depicted as aroused during the ensuing sexual interactions. In another sexually charged scene, after Christian spans Anastasia for rolling her eyes at him, Christian abruptly announces that he needs to leave, which disturbs Anastasia; instead of pressing Christian to stay, Anastasia cries later on the telephone with her mother.

Bonomi's prior in-depth analysis of the *Fifty Shades* narrative,⁴⁰ as depicted in the book,² revealed Christian's systematic use of abuse (e.g., stalking, intimidation, controlling behavior, social isolation) to dominate Anastasia, consistent with national definitions of intimate partner violence.^{40,41} The *Fifty Shades* film³ adaptation tones down aspects of the abuse in the books, but the abuse is nonetheless present. For example, shortly after being spanked and calling her mother crying, Anastasia plans a visit to see her mother in Georgia. In connection, Christian becomes angry and follows Anastasia from Seattle to Georgia, which alarms Anastasia and disrupts her visit with her mother. The film amplifies the original book scene by depicting Anastasia as sending Christian a longing text message from Georgia ("I miss you"), prompting his visit. In any case, following a romantic interest nearly 3,000 miles and manipulating her away from family time fits patterns of stalking and domestic violence.⁴¹

Other examples of Christian's controlling, manipulative behavior depicted in the film involve telling Anastasia that

she is not allowed to talk with anyone about their relationship, harassing Anastasia about whether any of the men in her life are her “boyfriend,” commanding her to eat, and buying her expensive gifts that cause her to feel uncomfortable and induce her dependency.

In spite of the abuse depictions in *Fifty Shades*, millions of women are drawn to the narrative.¹ In an effort to understand aspects of the *Fifty Shades* relationship that are appealing and unappealing to women, our study involved talking with 35 young adult women (ages 18 to 24 years) after watching the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film with the study team. Our study contributes to an understanding of how women interact with and make sense of relationships depicted in popular culture.

Methods

Study procedures were approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board. A total of 35 young adult women (eligibility: ages 18 to 24 years and enrolled at the university) were recruited to watch the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film with the study team and to participate in focus group discussions⁴² about their perceptions of the *Fifty Shades* relationship immediately following the film. Subjects received \$60 cash for study participation. Subjects were recruited through random sampling by the university’s registrar’s office; a total of 260 subjects meeting the eligibility criteria were sent a recruitment email and study information sheet, with the enrollment period held open for 24 hours. Within the 24-hour enrollment period, of the 260 randomly sampled subjects, 41 signed up to participate, with 35 subjects ultimately participating in the study—sufficient for thematic saturation.⁴³ Of those who signed up but did not participate, two were unable due to extreme cold weather (temperatures hovered around zero degrees on the days of the study), two were ill, and two did not provide reasons.

The average age of participants was 21 years (range, 19 to 24 years), 32.2% identified as racial/ethnic minority, and most were sophomores, juniors and seniors (Table 1). Our sample was more racially/ethnically diverse (32.2%) than our university’s students as a whole (17.3%). Forty-two percent of the sample had interacted in some fashion with the *Fifty*

Shades books, and of these, less than half finished reading the first book.

Two study sessions ($n=20$ participants and $n=15$ participants) were scheduled within 2 days after the film’s release to minimize the impact that publicity about the film could have on participants’ perceptions. Focus groups were conducted immediately after watching the *Fifty Shades* film. Focus group methodology is commonly used in health behavior and health education studies, where participants are asked to focus on a topic and presented as a set of questions, such as in response to a film; it is a useful methodology when the research purpose is to elicit people’s understandings, opinions and views within a social context.⁴⁴ Crucial to the success of focus groups are standard procedures, including establishing clear criteria for subject eligibility (described above), identifying clear discussion questions, setting ground rules for respectful discussions, and establishing competent notetakers.⁴⁴

To guide the focus groups, seven semistructured questions concentrating on reactions to the relationship patterns between Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele depicted in the *Fifty Shades* film were asked, including questions addressing participants’ general reactions, characteristics of the relationship that were appealing (and unappealing), elements that were romantic and dangerous, elements that participants would tolerate (or not tolerate) in their own relationships, and how participants would describe the relationship to a friend. The skilled discussion facilitator (AEB) actively and consistently probed all participants to express opinions to ensure that less vocal individuals contributed. Other procedures used by the facilitator to encourage participation included establishing group discussion norms at the beginning and reminding the group of the norms throughout the process, conducting the groups in a comfortable location, and reinforcing the confidential nature of the discussions.

Two data capture approaches were used, including using notetakers and audiotaping the focus groups. Four study staff attended the focus groups, including the facilitator (AEB) and three recorders (EMN, CLC, SP), who sat at the sides of the room and actively recorded participant dialogue in their computers. In addition, the focus group discussions were audio-recorded (YK) and transcribed (EMN). The study team comprised three gender-based violence researchers trained in qualitative methods (AEB, EMN, CLC); one popular culture scholar (YK); and one undergraduate social science student (SP).

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes, including areas of disagreement among participants.⁴⁵ The entire study team met for three initial in-depth discussions of the notes from the notetakers; first, immediately following each focus group (two meetings) and then for a four-hour meeting once the transcripts were assembled. After these initial meetings, AEB, EMN and CLC independently and iteratively read and highlighted themes in the organized notes and transcriptions, with several in-person meetings following and electronic communication used to clarify themes; the in-person meetings involved the entire study team (AEB, EMN, CLC, YK and SP). There was nearly perfect consistency in the identified themes across AEB, EMN and CLC. As an additional validity step,⁴⁶ the findings were presented at a university-wide event involving approximately 200 faculty and students from

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

	N = 34 ^a
Age (years), mean	21 years (range, 19–24 years)
Race/ethnicity, <i>n</i> (%)	
White	23 (67.6%)
Black/African American	8 (23.5%)
Hispanic	1 (2.9%)
Asian	1 (2.9%)
Unknown	1 (2.9%)
Year in college, <i>n</i> (%)	
Freshman	6 (17.6%)
Sophomore	9 (26.4%)
Junior	7 (20.5%)
Senior	11 (32.3%)
Graduate (master’s)	1 (2.9%)

^aThe University Registrar could not access information for one of the 35 participants.

multiple disciplines, including three students who participated in the focus groups.

Results

Overview

While participants assessed parts of the relationship between Christian and Anastasia as exciting and romantic, they consistently indicated an unappealing lack of health in the relationship as the overarching narrative. Participants identified Christian's controlling, manipulative, and abusive behavior and angry emotions as key contributors to the lack of relationship health, including stalking Anastasia, selling her car without her permission, taking her to a hotel while she was intoxicated and unconscious even though they had little relationship together, buying her expensive gifts to control and manipulate her, and expressing anger in their sexual interactions. At the same time, participants were sympathetic and rationalized Christian's behaviors. Further, while participants acknowledged the adverse impact of Christian's behaviors on Anastasia, a small contingent of participants implicated Anastasia in the unhealthy relationship process, while others resisted this narrative by acknowledging the challenges of "speaking up" in a relationship like Christian and Anastasia's. When asked where participants would draw the line in their own relationship, participants said they would welcome the gifts, adventure and sexual exploration, but they generated a more robust narrative about what they would not tolerate including being controlled and stalked, having their needs disrespected, and having a partner who expressed anger in sexual interactions. Finally, when asked how they would describe the relationship to a friend, participants reiterated elements of the couple's lack of relationship health. The themes are expanded upon below.

Relationship appeal

When asked what aspects of the relationship were appealing and romantic, participants identified the general chemistry that exists between Christian and Anastasia (e.g., "I love unexpected chemistry, how they just kind of connected, it was cute, how he popped up at the hardware store [where she works], I thought that was ... actually cute, that was how me and my boyfriend met"); further evidenced by their eye contact, their exchange of endearing phrases (e.g., "Laters, baby"), their passion ("passionate even if they were just kissing"), and their sexual tension and erotic, boundary-pushing sexual activities:

"It was hot, hot, hot, hot, very hot, really steaming, really about pushing the boundaries, something going on for both, trying to get out of comfort zone, curious to where relationships will go, she wants more, don't know where that will go."

Participants were excited by romantic activities that characterize the relationship, such as the dancing and helicopter and glider rides (e.g., "the dancing, it is just the little things, and God, flying"), and participants connected to the couple's realistic, recognizable relationship issues, particularly as they might play out in their own lives (e.g., "unhealthy relationship but realistic ... you get infatuated and change yourself because you want to please them [boyfriend]").

Other appealing elements included Christian's focus on Anastasia, including his physical attraction to her even though she is not "cookie cutter hot," that he is willing to negotiate because he desires her so much ("He was willing to negotiate with her and go on a date night with her because he desired her so much"), and that he seems to genuinely care for Anastasia's well-being:

"He cared about her physical well-being ... wanted her to be safe, pulled out a condom, made sure she wasn't sleeping in her vomit clothes, although it was in a weird way, he cared."

"I noticed that he would look at her when she was sleeping, like in care, the body language, he was desiring her, but not sexually, he cared for her."

A small contingent of participants liked that Christian is direct about what he wants sexually (a relatable pattern in their own lives—"Guys these days are like 'let's get right to the point.' If a guy thinks you want sex, they will ask for it." Whereas participants consistently across focus groups liked that Christian tries to make Anastasia feel special (e.g., by calling her his "girlfriend"; by his willingness to be seen in public with her; by giving her gifts such as a computer; and by inviting Anastasia to be in a public photograph with him).

Finally, appealing elements of Anastasia's character included her ability to wield some power in the relationship, including when she teases Christian by not promptly answering his text messages, as well as her relatable physical qualities ("Anastasia is realistic because she is relatable; she is natural and [her] roommate is supposed to be the bombshell").

Relationship lack of appeal

While participants assessed parts of the relationship between Christian and Anastasia as appealing, they generated a consistent, robust narrative about unappealing elements that they deemed unhealthy, dangerous, and harmful to Anastasia, to Christian, and to the relationship more generally. The lack of relationship appeal sifted out into three categories: (1) Christian's control/manipulation, stalking, abuse, anger and neglect of Anastasia's needs; (2) Christian's personality and needs, including his dark past (sexual abuse that he suffered), which constrained his ability to be fully connected to Anastasia; and (3) Anastasia's inability to negotiate her needs in the relationship.

1. Christian's control, stalking, abuse, and anger. Participants were consistently troubled by Christian's attempts to control, manipulate, emotionally abuse, and stalk Anastasia; Christian's anger toward Anastasia (particularly in their sexual interactions); and his neglect of Anastasia's needs. Not unlike the challenge of distinguishing between what is exciting and romantic versus problematic in real-world relationships,⁴⁷ the same elements that were noted as appealing about the relationship were simultaneously described as highly unappealing and problematic. For example, while participants were excited by the expensive gifts Christian gives Anastasia—a finding that is consistent with females' attraction to men with status⁴⁸—they also described the gifts as unappealing because they are used to control and manipulate Anastasia, including the perception that Christian gives more extreme gifts as his desire to control her increases:

“[The gifts were] symbols of the control and dominance he wanted over her ... manipulative because it caused Anastasia to feel pressure to give him something in return. ... [The] gifts started out as genuine [the books], but as he [Christian] asserts more dominance the gifts become more controlling [the car].”

“I think the gifts were symbols of the control he wanted to have over her; his dominance went beyond the bedroom, wants her to eat certain foods, not drink, dress a certain way. ... I don't think he was just interested in controlling her ... I think the car was about him wanting her to have a certain image ... more about I made the decision to buy you a car so you are going to drive it, here is a laptop to email me ... he wanted to control her.”

In the process of gifting Anastasia a new car, participants were troubled that Christian sold Anastasia's car without her permission. While participants said they would not mind receiving a new car, they were clear that by selling Anastasia's car, Christian overstepped boundaries (“I don't mind gifts, but you can't take my car ... he overstepped”) and forced Anastasia's dependency (“He always said she could leave at any time, but he sold her car ... made her feel stuck because he made her dependent upon him”).

Similarly, even though a minority of participants found appealing aspects of Christian's tendencies to stalk Anastasia (e.g., “it was cute, how he popped up at the hardware store [where she works]”), the broad majority of participants indicated that Christian's stalking tendencies toward Anastasia were problematic (“Didn't like how controlling he was, and how he would show up at different places, she didn't tell you where she was, and he just showed up”), especially when it posed danger for Anastasia. For example, participants were disturbed by Christian showing up at a bar where Anastasia is hanging out with friends, followed by taking an inebriated and unconscious Anastasia to his hotel where he undresses her even though they are not in a relationship:

“[It was] most dangerous when she woke up in his bed after [stalking her at] the bar; if that happened to a friend that would be dangerous, the fact that he undressed her is not okay, she never gave consent, if a I guy did that to me I would never talk to him again, that was a very dangerous situation.”

Likewise, while participants found endearing the romantic elements of Christian and Anastasia's gliding adventure in Georgia, participants were highly disturbed that Christian follows Anastasia to Georgia (i.e., stalks her) and disrupts her visit with her mother:

“[It] made me mad he went to Georgia. [She] called her mom crying, went there for a break, and he followed her, got in her head a lot, that was the most dangerous, that he could get back into her life that easily. [He] took her away from her family and made that trip about him.”

“[It's] abusive, she wants her alone time, but he drags her away; he took her away from her mom in Georgia.”

In the emerging narrative across focus groups, despite a smaller contingency of focus group participants finding Christian's “directness” as appealing, more consistently participants across focus groups were disturbed that Christian neglects Anastasia's needs both in and outside of sexual interactions. For example, participants noted that when Anastasia returns from visiting her mother in Georgia and wants to talk (i.e., to emotionally connect) with Christian, Christian ignores Anastasia's request and instead orders her to get ready for sex. Further, while participants indicated Christian

seems to care about Anastasia, they outlined ways in which he disregards Anastasia and creates a double standard in the relationship:

“[I] didn't like the manipulation or emotional abuse; [Christian] ripped her [Anastasia] apart emotionally; a lot of emotional abuse is tearing someone down; more you look into it you see it, making her feel as though she is unworthy of him; like when he gets random calls from work and just leaves or when he leaves her in bed, emotionally hurting her and doesn't seem to care.”

“[He] expected her to do things his way, but wasn't willing to try her way. ... I didn't like how she had to be an open book, but he didn't have to do the same but [he] expected her to be an open book.”

As an extension of neglecting Anastasia's needs, participants universally deemed Christian's anger, particularly in sexual interactions, as highly problematic:

“[I was] most uncomfortable with him using BDSM sex as an outlet for his anger, not because it was sexually arousing ... didn't like him being emotionally upset and then engaging in violent sexual interactions.”

“He seemed angry and that was a way to take out his anger, and then he says he wants to punish her [Anastasia] because he is angry; there is no separation between his anger and the sex; he is emotionally distressed and immediately suggests the red room [i.e., the erotic playroom] and [they] have violent sexual interactions.”

“It's when his aggression stems from his normal life and goes to the bedroom that it's not okay, when he is getting aggressive with her outside of the bedroom that is where boundaries are crossed, that isn't necessarily in the contract.”

Finally, more generally, participants were troubled by how controlling Christian is, such as telling Anastasia to “eat,” buying her clothes, and limiting her time with friends—which participants felt cause her to lose her identity (“That makes you lose yourself as a person, you lose your identity for what he wants”) and puts her in danger (“The amount of control he did have over her, even though she wasn't always for it, he would bring her in it, could put her in danger”).

2. Christian's personality and needs drive his behavior. While participants identified Christian's control/manipulation, stalking, emotional abuse, anger, and neglect of Anastasia's needs, they were sympathetic and rationalized these behaviors as a function of his personality, needs, and ability to wield power in the relationship due to his affluence. Consistent with tendencies to rationalize problematic relationship behavior as stemming from prior abuse and trauma⁴⁹ and for sympathy to be invoked in response,³⁰ participants consistently returned to the idea that Christian's damage stemming from sexual abuse he experienced in adolescence by “Mrs. Robinson” (his mother's friend who seduced him and made him her submissive) is a key contributor to his actions in the relationship; including his choosing Anastasia (“a weak, insecure female”), his inability to establish an emotionally intimate connection with Anastasia, and his angry sexual expressions:

“Christian was sexually abused as a child and isn't able to have meaningful relationships because he doesn't know how.”

“[His experience as a submissive] just screams sexual abuse from a family member ... he wasn't really able to

differentiate between the submissive dominant relationship to the relationship that he really wanted to have with her ... they sometimes say that hurt people will hurt people like he really didn't know how to be with her or love her the way he wanted to."

Additionally, during this aspect of the focus group discussion, a small contingent of participants downplayed problems with Christian's elaborate gift-giving and stalking behaviors by suggesting that Christian does these things because his wealth affords him the opportunity, privilege, and power: "[It is] realistic for a man of power or prestige to use that to get what he wants out of a woman." These same participants further rationalized Christian's stalking behaviors by indicating they engage in similar stalking activities on a smaller scale, such as checking up on a partner on Facebook and Instagram:

"Christian does anything for Anastasia (helicopter ride). People may say this is stalking. But we do something similar with Instagram. Christian has the money to find out where Anastasia is. We do something similar with Facebook."

3. Anastasia needs to more effectively negotiate her needs. While participants acknowledged the adverse impact of Christian's behaviors on Anastasia, a small contingent of participants simultaneously implicated Anastasia, including blaming her for not negotiating her own needs and for manipulating Christian. While this could reflect participants' sense of Anastasia as empowered, the tone of the comments fundamentally blamed (and shamed) Anastasia for her inability to speak up: "From the jump he said you have to communicate. She should have said red or yellow. She's a grown woman." Returning to the scene where Christian takes intoxicated, unconscious Anastasia to a hotel—a scene that participants deemed highly dangerous for Anastasia—one subject chastised Anastasia for taking the ibuprofen Christian left for her:

"She was letting too many things slide; he put the pill bottle there, and I was like I wouldn't take some random pill and juice with someone I just met, in the back of my mind I just thought that was weird, that she would be so trusting of someone that she doesn't know; I just don't trust random people like that."

Further, consistent with societal scripts that women be sexual gatekeepers in relationships,^{31,38,39,50} a small contingent of participants were adamant that Anastasia should tell Christian to "stop" when she does not like what he is doing, and that if she did not know how to tell him to stop that she should learn how. These participants expected Anastasia to draw the line around her discomfort with the sexual activities, including using "safe words" (i.e., agreed-upon signals that a sexual activity has exceeded the comfort zone of its participants): "From the jump he said you have to communicate. She should have said red or yellow. She's a grown woman." They also expected that she communicate more effectively in general:

"You have a voice, you can control it, he told you he is going to do it so if you don't say anything he is going to assume that you are okay ... she has to figure out how to communicate ... you have your own voice ... they have a saying in society, 'If you're timid, work on that.'"

Even with some participants in our focus groups placing the blame on Anastasia for not standing up for herself, the broader majority of participants acknowledged the challenges of "speaking up" in a relationship like Christian and Anastasia's, for example:

"In these relationships, there are a million different ways these role plays can go, she [Anastasia] is new to this ... sometimes they [Anastasia] don't want to hurt the other person [by speaking up]."

What's more, as a reflective process, there were participants who transparently identified their discomfort with other focus group participants blaming Anastasia, by implicating themselves as the "quiet voice":

"I just like, I'm kind of quieter, I have a hard time speaking up, and I feel like maybe sometimes things happen and you don't voice yourself right, and the more dominant voice takes over, sometimes people shut down and it happens and it is unfair to say that just because you don't speak your mind people are allowed to take advantage of you. ... You have to think about that she [Anastasia] is with a very intimidating person."

Where would you draw the line?

When asked where participants would draw the line in their own relationship, participants said they would welcome the adventure, a new car and computer, and trying new things sexually, but they generated a more robust and consistent narrative about what they would not tolerate including being controlled and stalked, having their needs ignored, and having a partner who showed anger in sexual interactions. For example:

"The stalking, specifically coming into my apartment uninvited, that would make me angry and the fact that he did buy her a cell phone and she has a flip phone; the signing of the contracts, I understand the nondisclosure because he is famous, but the BDSM contract is unrealistic and she didn't have a lawyer go through; some of the bedroom stuff is nice, but I would not partake if the person was angry or upset about something."

"You can't tell me what I'm about to eat, I will eat whatever I damn well please. You can't tell me how much sleep I can get, you aren't going to talk down to me; the way he said she shouldn't drink too much, let her make a mistake; with the exercise, he had to carry her out; don't tell her to exercise, [she's in] control of her own body."

In further responding to this question, participants invoked the idea of maintaining a sense of agency and self-determination in relationships, including not being "too swayed" by a man's power and prestige, stating that it is "important to not let a rich, hot guy sway you so much. You have to hold onto yourself. ... You have to."

How would you describe the relationship?

Finally, when asked how they would describe the relationship to a friend, participants reiterated elements of the couple's lack of relationship health as troubling. Participants' perceptions about the unhealthy relationship were linked to the idea that Christian and Anastasia were two different people wanting two different things and with an inability to meet each other's needs, with Christian's prioritization of

his sexual needs and his inability to emotionally connect with Anastasia conflicting with Anastasia's desire for a deeper intimate connection than Christian could offer. For example:

"I really don't know how to explain what happened. It was unfair to her, but it was unfair to him because he did want a relationship, but his problems in the past couldn't let him love her ... messed up and confusing."

"[They're] two different people who want two different things, sort of upfront but not really, little bit of a power dynamic that makes it uneasy, definitely intense and erotic, just different and uncomfortable."

Discussion

Situating our study findings within broader societal processes

Our study described young women's perceptions of the relationship between Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film.³ Overall, while participants assessed parts of the relationship between Christian and Anastasia as exciting and romantic—for example, those elements connected to prestige and status,⁴⁸ including the helicopter and gliding rides afforded by Christian's wealth—they consistently indicated an unappealing lack of health in the relationship. Participants consistently expressed grave concerns over Christian's controlling, manipulative and emotionally abusive behavior and anger in sexual interactions, while simultaneously sympathizing with and rationalizing Christian's behaviors. Further, while participants acknowledged the adverse impact of Christian's behaviors on Anastasia, a small contingent of participants implicated Anastasia in the unhealthy relationship process, whereas most others resisted this narrative by acknowledging the challenges of "speaking up" in a relationship like Christian and Anastasia's.

The women in our study clearly identified problematic behaviors in Christian and Anastasia's relationship that align with national definitions of intimate partner and sexual violence, such as the use of anger to intimidate/pressure someone sexually.^{41,51} In addition, participants identified specific abuse-related behaviors and processes in Christian and Anastasia's relationship that others have identified as critical in entrapping victims in abusive relationships;⁴⁷ such as Christian selling Anastasia's car without her consent, which participants recognized as eroding Anastasia's agency and inducing her dependency on Christian. Related, while participants found Christian's gifts as flattering, they clearly acknowledged their function to manipulate Anastasia.

With this said, study participants sympathized with and rationalized Christian's abusive behaviors and a small group indicated Anastasia should have spoken up. While this latter standpoint could reflect an empowered stance, the tone of the comments fundamentally blamed (and shamed) Anastasia for her challenges in speaking up. Participants' sympathizing with Christian's troubled past and some implicating Anastasia aligns with a broader societal narrative to uphold the status quo. For example, in the high-profile domestic violence case where National Football League player Ray Rice was observed on video knocking his fiancée unconscious, a societal narrative emerged that while Rice's actions were indeed troubling his fiancée played a role in instigating the

event by hitting him first.⁵² Similar societal narratives emerged around the high-profile domestic violence case involving musicians Chris Brown and Rihanna; namely, Rihanna was blamed for harassing Chris Brown.⁵³

Further, like our participants who suggested that Anastasia should have stood up for herself, in domestic violence cases like those involving Chris Brown and Rihanna, there was a societal undercurrent reflecting a lack of understanding of why victims returned to their abusers after suffering abuse. Domestic violence is typically a chronic dynamic,^{7,47,54} with abusers using similar strategies as Christian Grey (e.g., control and manipulation, stalking) to disempower their partners over time.⁴⁷ Revealing information about abuse suffered in childhood is sometimes a strategy used by abusers to elicit the victim's sympathy and entrap her;³⁰ it is an important area for abuse prevention discussions.

Even with a portion of the study sample implicating Anastasia in the unhealthy relationship, as an overall process, the young women in our study clearly identified abusive behaviors in the relationship that align with definitions of intimate partner and sexual violence.^{41,51} Participants also clearly drew the line on abusive processes they would not tolerate in their own relationships, namely being controlled and stalked, having their needs disrespected, and having a partner who expressed anger in sexual interactions. These findings corroborate key factors highlighted (e.g., respect in relationships, warning signs of emotional abuse) in well-established violence prevention programs, like Safe Dates,²⁵ the Fourth-R²⁶ and Coaching Boys into Men.²⁷

Study limitations

We conducted focus groups with young women enrolled in a large Midwestern university. While the goal of qualitative research is not generalizability,⁴⁶ but rather, representing the in-depth experiences of people within a social context,^{42,44} our study is nonetheless limited to the perceptions of college women who participated in our study. Our sample was more racially/ethnically diverse (32.2%) than our university's students as a whole (17.3%). Our focus on college women was intended to represent the perspectives of emerging adult women, a group that is developmentally focused on intense explorations of intimate relationships, love, sexuality, and sexual expression.^{4,5} Future studies could be expanded to include young men, even they are not if they are not the primary consumers of the *Fifty Shades* narrative.

We did not specifically explore other experiences in women's lives that may have impacted their perceptions of the relationship between Christian and Anastasia, such as prior experiences in their own relationships. Even without including focus group questions about prior relationships, some participants alluded to their relationships, including prior abuse victimization. Had our sample comprised only women with abuse experiences, it is possible that the intensity of abuse identified in Christian and Anastasia's relationship would be described as more severe, as prior empirical studies have noted.⁵⁵

Prior interactions with the *Fifty Shades of Grey* books, exposure to media coverage of *Fifty Shades*, and prior interactions with other types of popular culture could have influenced participants' perceptions of the relationship between Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele. Future studies

could be designed to include a more robust examination of the prior experiences of women in interacting with all aspects of popular culture and with other narratives stemming from family interactions, peer and mentor interactions, and school processes known to be important in young people's perceptions of relationships (including discussions in health education classes).^{18–22,25,26,27,32,33,56,57}

Finally, it is possible that the focus group setting (rather than an individual one-on-one interview setting) constrained women's full expressions. With this said, the focus group facilitator (AEB) has been conducting high-level group discussions on controversial topics for nearly a decade through her qualitative studies, through her discussion-based undergraduate classes on sexual morality, and through her national leadership positions. The facilitator actively and consistently sought input from all focus group participants to ensure the team heard from less vocal participants. While actively seeking input from all participants does not guarantee that all viewpoints are adequately represented, the facilitator used other strategies (e.g., establishing discussion norms, reinforcing confidentiality) to encourage contributions.

Focus groups have the potential to create the richest and most robust narratives about a given topic because they are socially situated, involve participants interacting with each other and the moderator, and make space for disagreements and elaborated points of view.⁴² Within our groups, we observed central differences around women's sense of Anastasia's role in the relationship, with a small contingent of focus group participants implicating Anastasia in the unhealthy relationship process while the broader majority indicating she may have had trouble speaking up. Other differences included the perception of Christian's gifts as romantic versus dangerous and controlling, and Christian's stalking being perceived as "cute" by some but disturbing by the broad majority.

Implications and next steps

Our findings have implications for relationship violence prevention efforts and women's health. Within the context of the strong emotional pull typical at the start of intimate relationships, our findings could be used to engage women in dialogue about the challenges of identifying and resisting unhealthy relationship processes, particularly in the relationship initiation phases, and in developing skills to promote relationship health. The use of popular culture, and specifically *Fifty Shades*, is an important facilitator of these conversations²⁹ because it purports a safe mechanism to disentangle characteristics of relationship health and unhealth; our study findings could be used to engage young women in conversations about the challenges in holding abusers accountable and developing agency.³⁰

Similar to other programs that incorporate popular culture in prevention efforts,^{58,59} our results could be used to inform stand-alone interventions that involve working with film to encourage conversations with young people about healthy relationships, healthy sexuality, and warning signs of abuse. One strategy is to assist adolescents and young adults in constructively engaging with popular media through the development of critical media analysis skills.²³ Several media producers and critics have developed systems to rate popular media on the inclusion or absence of historically accepted biases pertaining to gender standards, sexuality standards

and race and ethnicity.^{60–62} One recent implementation in Sweden's film industry is the use of the Bechdel test of gender neutrality, used to assess narratives in which two women engage with each other about something other than men.⁶² Despite the existence of such critical media rating systems, no system has been used to ask consumers of popular media to raise questions about the depiction of violence against women or other vulnerable populations. With this said, community-based advocacy organizations across the United States have developed templates for working with young people to critically analyze gender role stereotyping and abuse in popular film; these could be rigorously tested and evaluated within the context of research.

In addition to well-established relationship violence prevention programs, such as Safe Dates,²⁵ the Fourth-R,²⁶ and Coaching Boys into Men,²⁷ additional innovative strategies are needed to address social norms that condone violence against women. An upstream, societal-level approach could include engaging film producers in creating narratives that represent more egalitarian gender and relationship processes, including systematically integrating experiences of race/ethnicity and class.^{31,63–69}

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