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# THE UNDERSTANDING OF ROMANCE IN AUDIENCES OF 50 SHADES OF GREY

**Beatriz Inzunza**

## **Abstract**

*The success of 50 Shades of Grey was a controversial issue within Mexican audiences, because it represented a liberal perspective of women's sexuality within a conservative-Catholic society. This study presents the results of 587 surveys and 5 focus groups with Monterrey's population, which main objective was to recollect information on the social representations of romance and their relationship with what is portrayed in the film 50 Shades of Grey. Findings show that most of the identification of the audiences with the story was based on the expectations of the traits that romantic partners should have, are similar to what is found in Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele.*

## **Resumen**

*El éxito en taquilla de la primera película de la saga de 50 Sombras de Grey, fue un tema controversial en México debido a que expuso la sexualidad femenina desde una perspectiva liberal, en una sociedad considerada altamente conservadora por su influencia Católica. Este estudio presenta los resultados de 587 encuestas y cinco grupos de enfoque, cuyo objetivo fue el de conocer las representaciones sociales del romance en las audiencias regiomontanas, y su relación con lo que se presenta en la película. Los principales hallazgos arrojan que los participantes se identifican en su mayoría con los personajes (Christian Grey y Anastasia Steele), debido a que representan las características más deseables para una relación romántica.*

## Introduction

The success of the first film from the series *50 Shades of Grey* (50SOG) became a controversial topic within conservative societies, such as the one of Monterrey, Mexico. Despite the Catholicism presence and the right-winged ideology that mainly leads Monterrey's population's values, this movie was able to have massive volumes of fans (*Greysesseds*, as they call themselves) on its premiere, and to be considered as one of the most popular loves stories after the *Twilight* saga.

50SOG is a love story based on the trilogy book novels by E.L. James, where young millionaire Christian Grey seduces virgin university student Anastasia Steele, and introduces her to BDSM practices (for which she signs a contract provided by Christian, and was renegotiated by her once read). During the first part of the series, the plot develops around "romantic" gestures from Christian, that are demonstrated through expensive gifts (a new Apple MacBook or an Audi A3) and "exciting" dates such as driving sailplane. This is the film that is studied in the following article, which ends by Anastasia breaking up with Christian over not feeling her love reciprocated.

It is important to note that while most criticisms discussed BDSM sexual behavior, misogynist attitudes and *mommy porn* exhibition on commercial cinema, most of 50SOG audiences were mainly interested in the romance of the story. The problem to be studied here is if these audiences can recognize a chauvinistic romance, and if they can associate it to their own cultural context, which is considered to be *macho*. This hypothesis may explain the popularity of such a story within a conservative society.

For the purpose of this study, the theory of Social Representations seemed to be more likely to aid with the interpretation of the surveys and focus groups. Social Representations research looks for the meanings and understandings of people on specific topics, as well as for the sources that intervene in this process of signification, which in this case will be role that 50SOG film had in this process.

Social representations definitely constitute cognitive systems in which is possible to recognize the presence of stereotypes, personal opinions, beliefs, values and norms that guide the individual towards positive or negative attitudes. They are constituted as systems of codes, values, classifying logics, interpretative principles, and guidelines for practices that define collective conscience, which is the norm that sets the boundaries and possibilities of men and women's behavior in their world. (Araya, 2002, p.11)<sup>1</sup>

According to Moscovici (2001), founder of the theory, social representations are not stable or inflexible, but constantly updating when sharing, discussing or exposing to new sources of information or experiences. Mass media plays an important role, because—supposedly—they publicly show the consensus of a determined community.

Based on this, the primary objective of this research was to understand how 50SOG supports or challenges the audience's original idea of romance. The research questions that lead this study were: What are the general perceptions of gender roles in a romantic relationship in the context of study? How did the 50SOG audiences of this same context accepted or rejected the different romance elements of the story? How do the 50SOG audiences of this context relate their own understanding of romance to the story?

## Theoretical Framework

According to Al Mahadin (2013), the book series of 50SOG was originally conceived by the author as a fan fiction for the *Twilight* saga, with the purpose to "fill the gaps" left by the latter. He considers Grey's trilogy to have improbable elements such as "Christian's obsession

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<sup>1</sup> The translation from Spanish to English of this quote was made by the author.

with Ana for no apparent reason, the endless series of holidays and luxuries, the non-stop lovemaking, Christian as a multi-billionaire at the young age of twenty-six... [or] virgin Ana achieves an orgasm the first time she has intercourse” (p. 568). The novel intends to bring up romance, but with fantastic and improbable elements in a love story, meant to guarantee a success within fans.

However, Deller and Smith (2013) made a reception study of the books where they proved that audiences present both ‘pro and against’ opinions. Most of the popular and/or professional criticism they exposed was negative, since it was described as a “nice girl’s nasty book”. A public example of this professional criticism was Claire Philipson’s—director of Wearside Women in Need, a charity aiding victims of domestic abuse—campaign against 50SOG by calling it “an instruction manual for an abusive individual to sexually torture a vulnerable young woman”.

On the pro-side, Deller and Smith (2013) indicated that they see this novel as an opportunity to discuss female sexuality, argument that was brought up by several participants on their study. This is consistent with Whitehead’s study (2013) on 50SOG and its relationship with Mormon women’s communities, who felt this to be a repressed topic for women.

Most of the participants (69%) Deller and Smith (2013) interviewed said that they were first interested to read the novels out of curiosity, “to see what all the fuss was about”, which may be consistent with Monterrey’s audiences. The popularity of the series on social networks might have put on pressure on the audiences to become audiences of this story.

Some of the negative aspects that the readers brought up were that they considered the novel to be badly written, not accurate to BDSM relationships, or not properly erotic (Deller and Smith, 2013). This negative aspects motivates the formation of “anti-fan communities”, which necessarily makes them part of the audiences of 50SOG (Goletz, 2012, p.147).

Anti-fans were also expected to be found in the study of this article.

Even with the criticisms they mentioned, two thirds of Deller and Smith’s (2013, p.947) participants admitted they considered the books to be sexually arousing and romantic. They thought it was a novel that was socially acceptable to read in public, a ‘domestication of pornography’. This agrees with Whitehead’s study (2013), where readers believed the novel was a love story: “Ana’s thoughts and feelings within the framework of safety, mutual desire, discovery and consent that (...) for many women readers, despite the BDSM elements, this is what makes the book more like a ‘romance novel’ as opposed to standard erotica” (p.919).

Another important aspect to be brought up for the purpose of this paper out of Deller and Smith’s (2013) research was that some of the reader’s criticism was based on the psychology of the characters and an evaluation of their credibility in relation to ‘real life’. This is particularly important to the study in this article since the main objective was precisely to see how they relate the romance in the fictional story with their own realities.

Stronks (2012, cited in Whitehead, 2013, p.922) indicated that the troubling part of the story was that

(...) it perpetuates the fantasy that with love and time, a woman can ‘rescue’ a troubled man; it depicts (all) sexual relationships as modeled on a basic paradigm of dominance and submission (‘sex [is] something that men do to women’); and the public discussion surrounding the book assumes that a fantasy novel can reveal how women actually want to be treated.

Whitehead’s (2013) study shows that, in spite of the Mormon’s ultra-conservative values towards sex, the book’s effects on them did not subvert but rather strengthened their ability to follow church teaching in maintaining marital fidelity. For them, the book’s contribution was based more on sexual education, because they lacked of other sources of

information and experience on the topic. While they have clear objections towards the book (biblically-based morality, proper gender roles, Law of Chastity), Whitehead's participants also claimed "the right to individual discernment and the freedom of consumer choice, pragmatic reflections on consequences, the status of an individual believer's relationship to religious law and tradition", which defied the position of the conservative religions towards pornography and sexual education. From a cultural studies' perspective, these results work as evidence for the claim of *active audiences* at the reception moment of media contents.

These two studies are an important starting point for the paper, because they set possible hypothesis to the reception of Monterrey's audience to 50SOG. In comparison to Whitehead's research (2013), it is important to note that above 85% of Monterrey's population is considered Catholic. Religion overall Mexico is an important source of influence in people's values, since the Catholic Church's voice is usually a key opinion in controversial topics. Considering this, it is not surprising to find that right winged political parties are popular, and that conservative values within gender roles are 'mainstream' (men are the primary source of money, women are entitled with housekeeping chores, chastity is highly expected especially in women...).

Regarding general Mexican statistics on gender roles (as a way to describe the general context of the participants of the study), the 2003 National Survey for Family's Social Dynamics (ENDIREH for its abbreviation in Spanish, 2010) indicated that 59.9% of the female population above age 12 believe that women that work should also be responsible for house chores; and 32.3% of specifically Monterrey's female population think that men are the only persons responsible to economically support family (which, compared to Mexico's average of 26.4%, defines this city as relatively more conservative). The same survey's results showed that 33% of Monterrey's women think that men should have a higher income, and 21.1% believe

that men who earn less than women do not deserve to be respected.

In another report, ENVINOV 2007<sup>2</sup> (National Survey on Relationship Violence, 2008) results indicated that 61.4% of women have suffered of physical violence, and 2 out of 3 have been forced or tried to force them into having sexual relations. Also, 44.9% of women ask for permission to their male partner to go out at night without him, 33.3% to go out during the day without him, 28.2% to visit friends, 26.8% to visit family members, and 24% to make regular expenses. There's no surprise to see that 56.6% of women in Mexico believe that their rights as women are not respected.

Knowing the context of the study, which is one that empowers men significantly different than women within a relationship, the main suppositions were that audiences in Mexico would actually feel identified with the male superiority and female submission represented in this love story, reason why individuals accept it as a romantic example or aspiration.

### Methodology

This study was done in two stages. During the first one, 587 surveys were collected. The two main objectives of this survey were, first, to know what were the gender role expectations that the participants had for their romantic partners or possible future serious relationships; and the second one, to explore the reception of 50SOG, specifically in their perceptions on the main characters (Anastasia and Christian), and their liking or disliking of the story. However, not all participants had seen the movie at the moment of the survey, so the second part of the survey was just responded by the 35% of the people that had already watch it at the moment of the survey collection.

The first part of the questionnaire was designed in the following way: there was a list of 19 features, and each of them had to be placed in either one of the two

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<sup>2</sup> This survey focuses on adolescents or young adults up to 24 years old, before getting married or engaged.

options “man” or “woman”, depending on which of the two preferably should have this trait. These features were selected after doing a pilot survey that openly asked what is expected in a woman and what in a man in order to be considered a good romantic partner. Some examples of the attributes listed were (the full list will be shown in results): Virgin, Not a smoker, Practice a religion, and Superior within a Relationship.

The research assistants that searched for respondents informed that some of the participants felt insulted by having to choose only one of the options, so some of the attributes were left in blank, or checked both options even against instructions. The “both” option was deliberately left out because it would’ve become a “politically correct” answer that the study was trying to avoid.

The second part of the questionnaire explored personality traits of the two main characters, and general opinions of the story and film. The profile of the survey participants was: 51.8% were women, 75.9% were between ages 19-23, 95.5% were heterosexuals. All of them were upper-middle class, and most of them are university students, from which 90% go to private institutions.

For the second stage of the study, five discussion groups were conducted. Focus groups allowed the research to inquire further on some of the responses obtained through the surveys. It also motivated discussion and interaction between 50SOG audiences, allowing the participants to reach consensus of most of their opinions and perspectives. The participants of these sessions had similar characteristics (age and social class) than the survey profile, but in this case, they all had seen the movie at the moment of the focus group. The main difference amongst the different sessions was gender/sexual preference. There were two female heterosexual groups (F1, F2), two male heterosexual groups (M1, M2), and one male homosexual group (G). During the results, these codes will be used along with a second number, which refers to the participant in that specific session.

The decision of excluding female homosexuals was based that, according to the survey from the first stage (and later confirmed by the focus groups impressions), the main attraction of the movie was Christian Grey, character embodied by the actor Jamie Dornan. Gay men expressed their attraction to this character, as well as women. Most heterosexual men ended up watching the movie out of their female friends or girlfriend’s pressure.

All moderators followed a questions guide that was previously designed, and very small improvisations were made at the moment of the session, depending on some responses from the participants. The discussions were focused on gender roles in a romantic relationship, chauvinistic perceptions in Monterrey’s society, BDSM acceptance, and how do they relate these topics 50SOG with their own reality.

A special mention is due to the twenty-six students that participated as research assistants of this project, from the course of Communication Theories and Methodologies PR’15 from the University of Monterrey. While the instruments were designed in consensus along with the research responsible and author of this article, students practiced the application of these methods throughout the months of February to April 2015.

### **Profiling the Audience – Romance in Monterrey**

The first part of results had the purpose to define the original social representations on romance from the participants. Most of the data exposed comes from the surveys, that as explained before, includes both people who had and hadn’t seen the movie at the moment.

In the following tables, the participants from the survey indicated which traits are to be considered in young women or men in order to be a good candidate for a serious partner. The second column shows the general percentage that was put for the “man” option, and the third one displays the percentage proportions between female and male respondents.

Table 1 demonstrates what is expected in a male partner:

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Percentage indicated in “Men”</b>	<b>Percentage proportion of female/male respondents</b>
<b>Respect to other</b>	71.1	53/47
<b>Independent/Emancipated</b>	69.1	52/48
<b>Sense of humour</b>	68.6	56/44
<b>Gift-giver</b>	68.5	56/44
<b>Serious</b>	65.1	51/49
<b>Attentive</b>	65	56/44
<b>Cool<sup>3</sup> (Successful)</b>	59.1	46/54
<b>Superior within the relationship</b>	58.7	46/54

Table 1. Men’s required characteristics to be considered for a partner according to surveys. Source: Author.

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from “chingón” in Spanish.

As shown in the table, most of the characteristics listed are preferred by women in men, rather than men for themselves within a relationship (the exceptions are “cool/successful” and “superior within the relationship”). Most of the characteristics lead to the fact that men are supposed to be the ones who support the relationship, since they’re the ones that are independent, gift-givers and successful. Amongst the other features that are relatively important for this research are attentive, serious (as in not a “party-boy” or “player”) and superior (over women).

The focus groups supported these opinions when discussing expenses habits while dating:

M: How much is considered enough to spend during a date with a woman?

G-1: Depends on the occasion

G-3: 500 pesos<sup>4</sup>

(G)

F1-2: Pay for the table at the club<sup>5</sup> (laughs).

F1-5: At least dinner in Tanaka<sup>6</sup> (laughs).

(F1)

The group F1 agreed that social class is an important factor to choose a partner, since they affirmed that “you’ll look for someone that is same or better than you... you’ll hardly choose for someone who’s less” (F1-5). Most of them believe that men whose expenses are paid by women are unusual and weird, but would depend on the occasion to see if it’s acceptable or not. Regarding on who’s

earning a higher salary within a relationship, they believe that women who have better wages can make their male partner feel less empowered and give society reasons to bully him (F1, M2). Men feel like they have the responsibility of paying fully for expenses on dates, but they wouldn’t mind if women would pay once in a while for their part or to give a contribution to the check, especially when men aren’t working because of being full time students (M1).

This would mean that the acceptance of Christian Grey’s character agrees with their perception of what is expected in a man in respect to his role in a romantic relationship, since he is wealthy, dominant, and serious (he doesn’t fool around, he barely drinks alcohol and expects his partner to be ‘healthy’ as well, he doesn’t frequent social events). Attitudes towards an alternative social representation of a male partner in a heterosexual relationship are openly rejected through comments such as not wanting a person from a lower social class than themselves, or not liking the idea of women paying for their dates.

Regarding women’s characteristics, results showed higher percentages, which means that the female role within a relationship is culturally stronger than men’s.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the study, this meant around 30 USD (April, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> “Pay for the table” is a literal translation from Spanish, which refers to the club’s requirement to buy a number of bottles of liquor or spend a determinate amount of money in order to have a right for a table with seats.

<sup>6</sup> Tanaka is a Japanese restaurant, known to be one of the fanciest in the city.

Feature	Percentage indicated in "Women"	Proportion of female/male respondents
Doesn't swear	87.3	52/48
Virgin	86.5	51/49
Doesn't drink or smoke	76.8	50/50
Likes to stay at home	75.9	57/43
Takes care of her appearance	74.9	53/47
Religious	70.5	53.5/46.5
Close to family	59.8	52/48
Strong values	52.2	58/42

Table 2. Women's required characteristics to be considered for a girlfriend according to surveys. Source: Author.

What it's also important to notice here, is that women chose in a majority these characteristics for themselves, as is observed in the third column. Most of the features support the female stereotype on conservativeness preferred over liberal behaviour.

This female role description is also consistent with Anastasia Steele's character, since she is a virgin, she doesn't go out much, she doesn't swear, she gets along well with her mother, and she barely drinks or smokes. Regarding her system of values, by the end of the movie she proves to be not a *gold digger* that is just interested in Christian's wealth, since she declines the expensive gifts over the break up. While she seems to be careless about her looks, as will be explained afterwards, most participants find her physically attractive.

The survey's results were inconsistent with the findings of the focus groups, where women didn't think that being a virgin was a positive feature (F1). This can mean that respondents answered this survey thinking of the *common repertoire*<sup>7</sup> of the society they live in or the status quo. They did recognize that there are a lot more disadvantages for women to be sexually active, since they're not only exposed to more STDs or pregnancy-risk, but also to be severely

judged by society as "loose", "slut" or promiscuous. When asked what were the advantages of men being virgins, they responded that most probably they would not objectify women as much when coming to a sexual encounter, and that they could be more trusted; in general, they didn't find many disadvantages to it (F1, F2). Female participants of both groups were quite alternative to the hegemonic ideology since they promoted sexual liberation in women, and sexual conservativeness in men.

With men, those who said they were virgin themselves said that they would not like to have a girlfriend who isn't (M1). They think that the main advantages of women being virgins is that they are not "loose" or promiscuous, and that virginity is an evidence of maturity and self-respect. They don't find disadvantages in both women and men being virgins at all (M1). The M2 group believes that virgins are good because they boost men's ego on "being the first ones" (M2-5), but they also find advantages on sexually active women since "you can learn from them" (M2-1). They think that the disadvantage of men being virgins is lack of experience and the insecurity of not being able to know how to sexually satisfy their partners (M2).

As observed, the most discussed characteristic in the focus groups towards the female role in a relationship was the virginity trait, which offered alternative opinions and attitudes. The rest of the characteristics did not triggered further discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Common repertoires refers to the guidelines to general social practices, that are understood as acceptable within a specific context (Araya, 2001).

The following table are the three traits that were closely divided between men and women:

Feature	Women	Men	Both
Support	42.7	48.1	9.3
Smart	47.4	42.3	10.4
Sociable	41.6	47.9	10.5

Table 3. Gender-equal characteristics according to surveys. Source: Author.

In these traits, some respondents decided to cross both options (even when the instructions clearly indicated you could only choose one of the options). It's important to remember that during the surveys, several pollsters reported that some participants were offended by having to choose either only man or only women.

A note must be made at this topic of gender equality, since one of the questions on the focus groups was related to this. While most participants agreed that is something politically correct to be looked after, there were some respondents that showed resistance to a full equality:

F2-2: I don't think it's fully possible [to become gender equals]... at least here there will always be common courtesy that you can't completely eliminate. It would be wrong that men don't open the door to the woman or things like that. You're not going to open the door to him or give him a hand to get down of the car...

F2-3: I think the same. (...) even when we wanted this, there will be jobs that we can't do as well as a man because there are physical differences. There will never be 100% equality.

(Female Group 2)

M1-4: It's very difficult because in most of the cases, mothers are the ones that carry the macho culture and educate their children with that same macho culture... so the cycle continues...

(Male Group 1)

Concerning relationships, participants consider that the main difference between a formal or informal relationship is that the latter is for sexual or fun purposes (going out dancing or for dinner), while the first one is for exclusiveness and long term. A subject

from F2 said that she would introduce the formal partner to her family, while the second one would barely meet her friends (M2 agreed on this). They think that men are most likely to make women fall in love with them when they make gifts such as flowers or calling frequently to show attentiveness, which is something important when comparing these habits with Christian Grey.

And finally, regarding their opinion on BDSM, F1 and F2 would definitely not go out with someone who has these sexual practices. Only one participant from F2 said that when she falls in love, she's more likely to try new stuff, even when going against her own interests and values (F2-2). M1 however, believe that people who practice BDSM are pathologically unstable and don't understand the meaning of love. They thought that the story of *50 Shades of Grey* is an accurate representation since Christian Grey had a miserable childhood and therefore, he's now a sadist. M2 would definitely try it if their partner would suggest it (especially if she's good looking), depending on how far or what kind of 'activities' she would propose.

After this explanation on how the participants of both surveys and focus groups think of men and women in relationships, the following section of the results will show the reception of the film of *50 Shades of Grey*.

### 50SOG – Reception

The survey showed that the general opinion towards the movie was that it was not strongly liked nor disliked, but more indifferent (43.3%). On the focus groups, the participants said that expectations of the movie were higher than it really was (G, F1), and that the success was mainly due to the curiosity of the audiences after listening and reading

so much controversy on the sexual topic of the story (G, F1, F2, M1, M2). This is consistent with Deller and Smith's (2013) results. The subjects of this study actually said they wouldn't recommend the movie at all (G, F1, F2, M1), since it's "mediocre" (G), "chauvinistic" (G), "bad story" (F1, M1), "too dirty" (F1), "it's better in the books" (F1, M2), "boring" (F1, F2, M1), "silly mom-porn" (F1), and "slow" (F2, M1).

Most of the participants demonstrated to be highly disappointed, and expressed they had felt pressure (specially men) on watching the film with their partners or close friends. People who had read the novels before were dissatisfied with the adaptation of the book to the movie because they believed it was less erotic and romantic than the original story.

Regarding Christian Grey, the participants of the survey that had seen the movie at the moment of the survey indicated the following:

- 83.3% said that he's more aggressive/violent than tender or sweet with Anastasia Steele
- 73% think that he's a cold person, versus the option of saying he has a romantic personality
- 72.6% feel he's psychologically or physically sick
- 67.1% perceive him as an antisocial man
- 59.5% consider that he's a disrespectful man
- And 65% of the participants said he's very confident and with a high self-esteem

Only one out of six traits can be evaluated as positive within the results of the surveys. In the focus groups, what stands out of this character is his appearance (handsome, athletic body and elegant), which, as stated before in this article, was actually the reason why they believed some people went to see the film in the first place (G, M2). They also

mentioned very superficially that there is something about his mysterious personality or attitude that made him attractive to people (G, F1, M1, M2). They liked that he was rich and successful (G, F1, F2, M1, M2), that he dominated the relationship (F1), that he's a smooth talker (M2), or that he would make exciting plans for dates (F1), as well as be attentive by calling her frequently (F1). He also seemed like someone who's able to do a lot of things like flying a helicopter, playing the piano, or being a good reader, which made him interesting (F2).

Most of the participants thought he was *macho* because he decided for Anastasia things like what laptop to have, what car to drive or what dress to wear. However, one of the participants of F2 had a different point of view on the macho criticism, since she said that having the dominant role in sexual practices doesn't mean it will be like that as well in the other aspects of a relationship (even when they had pointed out macho behaviour before). Other participants said that his *machoness* could be diminished since Christian had been submissive before (referring to the first BDSM sexual relationship he had in the story of 50SOG), which meant that he's able to exchange roles and therefore, not give the impression he's superior in his relationship with Anastasia.

About the character of Anastasia Steele, surveys revealed the following description:

- 76.5% believe she has a weak, submissive character
- 73.5% think she has a very low or none self-esteem
- 60.1% perceive her as a dependant person (instead of independent emotionally and/or economically)
- 56.4% described her as dumb instead of smart
- 50.2% indicated that she has no values

- The only positive characteristic was that 67.9% believe that she has no economic interest in Christian, in other words, she's not a *gold digger*

During the discussion groups, not all participants thought that she was precisely physically attractive (G, M2), and said that it was her "sanctity" or "innocence" (meaning virgin; G, F1, M1), submissiveness (G, F1), lack of attitude (G), and easiness to manipulate (F1) what made her interesting/desirable. In F2, participants expressed that she's slow and boring. Still, men's sessions differed in some of the points. For example, in M1 some men said that she was attractive because she was hard to get; and in M2, participants thought she was beautiful, that the way she did subtle flirting was nice, and that she had a fun attitude.

One of the participants on F2 did recall that Anastasia has a good moment demonstrating her emancipation when by the end of the story she decides to back down on the relationship, which gave this character the opportunity to stop being submissive and have a stronger personality. Some think that Anastasia's docile nature is compensated with the fact that she set the rules before signing the contract with Christian, which made her less obedient than most people believe she is (G, F1, F2).

According to the participants, the story doesn't promote gender equality or any explicit kind of feminism; on the contrary, participants of the discussion groups believe that it brings out "macho-man" and misogynistic values, because Christian sees Anastasia as a sexual object (G, F1, M2). They also said that Christian and Anastasia's relationship doesn't show love or romanticism, but male superiority, domination, possessiveness, and ways to cancel the female opinion or personality (G, F2, M1).

Nevertheless, in F1 and M1 groups, some believed that gender equality was part of the story since she had the option to sign a contract to practice BDSM under her own terms, which made her free to decide if she wanted to be part of the relationship and how. However, they

recognized that Christian Grey is macho because, as said before, he decided what she was going to wear, what laptop she was going to work on, or what car she was going to drive, without giving her options to decide or choose. On the other hand, they believe that what can be interesting on a feminist perspective is how they brought up sexual liberation of women, which is consistent with Whitehead (2013), and Deller and Smith (2013).

Male participants thought that this relationship is portrayed like merely a business, as if she was his employee and was getting paid with trips and gifts (M1, M2). This is consistent with the ideology Stronks (2012, cited in Whitehead, 2013) indicated regarding sex being "something that men do to women", since they didn't recognize Anastasia's freedom to choose whether she wants to be part of this relationship or not.

In summary, participants showed no strong opinions towards the whole of the story. They were able to recognize what is likeable or not of the film, and also see what is acceptable or not in their own realities. This part will be discussed in the next section.

### **Discussions—Strengthening or Defying the Idea of Romance**

It is important to note that while a lot of gender issues are brought up during the study, this article does not intend to analyze the results from gender studies perspective, but rather specifically explore the social representations on romance, which inevitably discusses gender roles within relationships. The intention of this section is to find the similarities and differences that participants describe of their social representations on romance and what they perceive of 50SOG. Also, to show how these participants relate the story to their own reality.

To sum up what has been exposed before in the results sections, it is possible to generalize based on the survey and focus groups responses that gender roles and practices are significantly determined, and are usually accepted by both male and female participants. Also, these gender role and common repertoires are similar to

those portrayed in 50SOG, for example, the expectation of virginity in the female partner (although there were some inconsistencies in the focus groups), and the economical independency of men and spending money on their girlfriends.

Participants in focus groups frequently mentioned that the author of 50SOG “must’ve done a research before writing the story” because the characters collected all the attributes people like in love stories:

M: Why would someone feel attracted to Christian Grey?

F1-5: Because of his status, and because if you’re with him, he makes you feel like the most important woman in the world... makes you feel like a princess, and women like that.

(Female Group 1, Participant 5)

M1-5: I feel like he is the perfect dream of any woman that I know... the perfect boyfriend, he has a private jet, a lot of money, he’ll take you to Miami on vacations...

M1-1: ...gives you gifts out of nothing...

M1-6: I mean he’s the dream man, is like: let’s have lunch in Paris, and dinner in China...

(Male Group 1)

As observed, the participants projected themselves in their responses, by saying “if *you’re* with him” or “gives *you*”. They bring up the traits that they believe are likeable or expected in a real male partner, which in this case is specifically wealth (so they can afford to pay for expensive dates and gifts, or unusual hobbies like driving a helicopter).

While they had mostly a negative perception of the characters (as shown in the previous section: CG is aggressive, cold, psychologically or physically sick, antisocial, and disrespectful; AS is weak, submissive, insecure, dependant, dumb, valueless), 76.1% of the participants who saw/read 50 Shades of Grey said that they would go out with someone who is like Christian Grey or Anastasia Steele. This

can be explained with Stronks’ (2012, cited in Whitehead, 2013) hypothesis on the desire to ‘rescue’ troubled men (which in this case, can also be women).

Even when they thought Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele could be good candidates for partners, participants also believed that this film represents what a relationship should not be, since it’s superficial, cold, and materialistic (G, F1, F1, M1, M2). This was inconsistent with the fact that they also remarked that this is the type of relationship that most people look for themselves:

F1-2: It’s not what it should be, but it’s what’s looked after. Women look for someone who’s the best for you, the way I see it is that if you’re going to get married, my husband should be able to pay for a house and buy me my stuff. It’s important that he’s able to pay for that even when I have money of my own.

(Female Group 1, Participant 2)

Nevertheless, there are some participants who recognized that this love story is too fantastic and therefore unbelievable (F2), which is a criticism exposed by Al Mahadin (2013). This became an issue that made some of the male participants upset, since they think these type of characters could have an effect in women’s expectations towards a male partner, setting them higher than most of men could actually reach.

Regarding on the BDSM topic, the main supposition was that, considering the conservativeness of the guests during the focus groups and surveys (middle class, northern Mexicans, mostly catholic), the participants would be offended or they would express their dislike towards this type of sexual activities. This was proved since 63.6% of the participants of the survey indicated that BDSM is not acceptable within their relationships. However, out of that 63.6%, 73.9% were women, while 48% of the male participants said that it was acceptable to them, which shows that men in this study are more open to try or accept BDSM practices rather than women.

It's important to note that even after watching the film, 5.1% of the survey respondents still do not understand what BDSM is. Of course, there was an 86.2% that said that this story isn't a source for sexual education, which disagrees with Whitehead's (2013) study. However, most of the focus group participants think that this can set a wrong example for naïve people or adolescents (G, F1, F2), or have read articles reporting that some partners got hurt or even killed while trying to practice BDSM after watching the film (G, F1). They believe that mass media may have violent effects within relationships.

On the other hand, some male participants (M2) specified that, while they're open to try BDSM practices, this type of relationship would be short-term and only for sex purposes, not for exclusiveness or to be considered marriage material (G). Some other participants declared that material incentives were decisive: "just enough time to get expensive gifts" (F1), or "as long as she gives me an Audi" (M1). When asked if this movie could be pedagogical on romance, the general opinion was:

H2-3: There's nothing to learn about love, only sex.

(Male Group 2, Participant 3)

As shown in the previous section, male participants rejected 50SOG as a love story, contrary to what most women believe. Women find the film to be romantic although improbable to happen in reality. None of the participants was considered a fan or anti-fan (since there were no strong feelings towards the film), but they were able to recognize the attractiveness of the characters.

In consistency with Deller and Smith's (2013) study, most of the

criticisms (both positive and negative) were based on the psychology of the characters and their credibility in relation to reality. Most of the discussions lead to the possibility of finding these traits in a real romantic partner, and how the subjects themselves would negotiate the acceptance or rejection of them based on the circumstances.

Social representations play an important role in the acceptance or rejection of fictional stories and characters. It has been constantly proven that the more audiences can identify with these films and characters, the more they will be able to engage emotionally and lead to fan communities. This study shows that while participants are able to take enough distance from the screen to understand what is probable and improbable to find in reality, at the same time they accept that their expectations and desires look similar to what is exposed in the film.

It also shows how the audiences prioritize their values towards romance: male partner's economically stability over sexual interests, or gender differentiated roles over equality. Audiences who accepted the love story as such, most of the time oversaw misogynistic behavior or physical or psychological violence, and justified it by saying that Anastasia was always free to be there or not.

Further research should be encouraged towards collecting more examples of love stories to be compared with these social representations of romance, and therefore understand how films strengthen, update or defy these ideologies and expectations in reality.

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