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Fifty Shades of sex shop: Sexual fantasy for sale

Amber Martin

Queen Mary, University of London, UK

Abstract

This article proposes that the extensive sales and widespread popularity of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has placed BDSM in the sexual spotlight and explores how this is being capitalized upon by some sex shops and sex toy retailers by encouraging consumers to bring the erotic fiction of *Fifty Shades* into their own sexual reality through the purchase of particular commodities and the acquisition of BDSM related sexual knowledge. This article argues that this is based upon a particular ‘*Fifty Shades*’ brand of BDSM that is constructed as fun, fashionable and exciting as opposed to extreme, marginalized and dangerous.

Keywords

BDSM, commodification, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, sex shop, sex toys

The *Fifty Shades*’ trilogy narrates a BDSM¹ sexual relationship between the novels’ two central characters, Anastasia Steele and Christian Grey. The extensive sales² (Philipson, 2013) and popularity of the novels have placed BDSM in the sexual spotlight and this article explores how this has been capitalized upon by sex shops and sex toy retailers by selling both BDSM related commodities and knowledges under a *Fifty Shades* rubric. The article argues that the rise of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy as a mainstream work of erotic fiction has created a specific *Fifty Shades* brand of BDSM that repositions it from being perceived as an extreme, marginalized and stigmatized sexual practice (Hoff and Sprott, 2009) to one which is fashionable and socially acceptable.

In October 2012, an Ann Summers³ store in a provincial city in the UK had a *Fifty Shades of Grey* display stand holding copies of the *Fifty Shades* novels alongside light bondage products such as spankers, whips and restraints. It was located towards the front of the store, making a marked change from the usual location of light bondage items at the back of the store, hidden from view. At the time, the

Corresponding author:

Amber Martin, School of Geography, Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, UK.

Email: a.martin@qmul.ac.uk

Ann Summers website, and several other sex toy retailers' websites such as Nice'n'Naughty and Simply Pleasure, had *Fifty Shades of Grey* 'sections' that displayed selections of light bondage products. In the same year, the online sex toy retailer Lovehoney developed an 'official' range of *Fifty Shades* inspired sex toys, called '*Fifty Shades of Grey*: The Official Pleasure Collection, approved by EL James'. The collection includes products that are specifically designed to replicate items that feature in the book, such as whips, spankers and blindfolds, and each item carries a *Fifty Shades of Grey* logo and comes in *Fifty Shades* packaging. Some of the items in the collection are almost identical to own-brand items sold by the retailer yet they are considerably more expensive. For example, the 'official' collection includes a pair of silver handcuffs priced at £14.99, which are engraved with the words 'Fifty Shades of Grey', whereas the retailer's own-brand handcuffs, which are almost identical bar the engraving, are priced at £5.99.⁴ This indicates that *Fifty Shades* is becoming a brand in its own right that is used to add value, or perhaps more appropriately profit, to products and indicates a capitalization on the popularity and 'mainstreaming' of the novels.

The mainstreaming of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has increased the visibility and acceptability (Attwood, 2009; Brents and Sanders, 2010) of BDSM as these works of erotic fiction have become embedded in everyday discourse (Juffer, 1998). In particular, the novels' orientation to women lends them acceptability thanks to the reduced stigma surrounding erotica (Juffer, 1998). However the particular version of BDSM popularized by the novels is a diluted one as they do not refer to – what some may consider to be – more extreme BDSM sexual practice. This is reflected in the corresponding *Fifty Shades* product ranges that consist of more lightweight items such as paddles, spankers and blindfolds as opposed to more 'hardcore' items such as chains, gimp masks, collars and leads. This suggests that the mainstreaming of the novels has promoted a specific brand of *Fifty Shades* BDSM that is perceived as exciting and safe as opposed to extreme and frightening. This highlights how the increased accessibility and acceptability of BDSM prompted by *Fifty Shades* lends legitimacy and acceptability to the consumption of BDSM related products and how this is being capitalized upon by retailers.

The *Fifty Shades* inspired collections and product ranges are presented by retailers through a discourse of enabling the conversion of erotic fiction into erotic reality. This is exemplified in the following quotation from EL James, the author of the novels, relating to the official product range: 'This range is what I always imagined while I was writing *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I'm so excited that the toys I described in the books have come to life and can now be enjoyed around the world' (James, 2012). The product descriptions of the individual items in the range include excerpts directly from the parts of the novel in which they feature. For example, the product description of the handcuffs mentioned earlier includes a description of the product alongside a direct excerpt from the novel in which the character Christian Grey uses a pair of silver handcuffs to bind Anastasia Steele. In addition, the sex shop chain Nice'n'Naughty has a *Fifty Shades* inspired product selection on its website which states; 'Turn your bedroom into your very own red

room of pain!’⁵ (Nice’n’Naughty, 2012b). The product selection includes ‘ben wa balls’, which are a sex toy that features in the novel, that are described as; ‘Perfect for recreating your favourite “fifty shades” scenes’ (Nice’n’Naughty, 2012a). In addition, it even includes a ‘grey tie’ that has become a symbol synonymous with *Fifty Shades* as it is the image on the front of the first novel in the trilogy. The tie’s product description states; ‘You’ve read about it, you’ve fantasized about it and now you can make it reality! THE Grey Tie is the ultimate accessory to make your *Fifty Shade* dreams come true... Make your own story’ (Nice’n’Naughty, 2012c). These examples highlight how these items are presented as vehicles to convert the consumer’s *Fifty Shades* inspired dreams and fantasies into their erotic reality. Thus sexual fantasy itself becomes commodified via the transition of fictional objects in the book into real commodities for sale.

In addition to ‘themed’ products, some sex toy retailers are offering *Fifty Shades* inspired in-store BDSM ‘classes’. For £75 the erotic boutique Coco-de-Mer in London offers a class titled ‘Fifty Shades of Pleasure Revealed’. The description of the class states; ‘Beyond the steamy fiction lie actual techniques to enhance your romance, orgasm and sexual potential’ (Coco-de-Mer, 2012) and the class is said to offer ‘the necessary foundation skills around sensuous bondage’ (Ibid). Also, for £25, the erotic boutique Sh!, in London offers a women-only, in-store class titled ‘Fifty Shades of Kinky Sensuality’ that is advertised as ‘a light-weight introduction to the world of BDSM’ (Sh!, 2012) that ‘aims to introduce women to the erotic world of Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele... as well as how to use props such as Love Balls, Blindfolds, Crops and Clamps’ (Sh!, 2012). The class offers women ‘pink bubbly and cupcakes’ (Sh!, 2012) whilst they are given this introductory course to BDSM. The classes’ emphasis on teaching BDSM ‘moves’, ‘techniques’ and how to use the related products is indicative of a similar discourse of transforming the fiction of the novel into reality – here via the acquisition of sexual knowledge as opposed to products. Both stores have offered BDSM related classes in the past. However, like the *Fifty Shades* themed products, the novels are used to repackage what was once already sold in an attempt to capitalize on their popularity. The classes’ emphasis on being lightweight introductory courses to BDSM further highlights how the particular branded version of *Fifty Shades* BDSM invoked by these retailers is a diluted one. The high costs of the classes, their orientation towards women and the fact that they take place in stylish retail environments reflects how sex-product consumption, and its related sexual practice, is legitimized when it is embedded within discourses of class, femininity, fashion and style (Attwood, 2005; Smith, 2007).

To conclude, the ‘mainstreaming’⁶ and popularity of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has been capitalized on by some sex shops and sex toy retailers through the creation of product ranges and in-store classes. The sexual fantasy of the novel is commodified as consumers are encouraged to purchase these particular products and sexual knowledges in order to convert their *Fifty Shades* sexual fantasies into their own erotic realities. The novels’ mass visibility, acceptability and orientation to women are subsequently lent to the associated *Fifty Shades* themed products and classes so

they too are legitimized and rendered acceptable. It is in this way that *Fifty Shades* has become a particular brand of BDSM that is presented as female friendly, fashionable, exciting and safe as opposed to extreme, marginalized and dangerous.

Notes

1. BDSM is a compound acronym deriving from the following terms; bondage and discipline (BD), domination and submission (DS) and sadism and masochism (SM).
2. In August 2012 *Fifty Shades of Grey* became the best-selling book of all time in Britain with a total of 5.8 million sales consisting of 3.8 million physical books and 1.5 million ebooks sold. The novel has sold approximately 65 million copies worldwide.
3. Ann Summers is a high street lingerie and sex toy retailer.
4. All prices are correct at the time of writing.
5. The 'red room of pain' refers to the sex room in the character Christian Grey's house.
6. This term is, of course, controversial and can be interpreted in different ways. For further discussion, see Attwood (2009) and Brents and Sanders (2010).

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Amber Martin is a lecturer in Economic Geography at Queen Mary, University of London. Her central research interests include retail, branding, marketing, commodities, globalization and consumption geographies and their relationship to gender, sexuality and material embodiment. Her current research focuses on the geographies of the sex-shop industry in England and considers the regulation of sex shops, sex shops as consumption spaces and their relationship to the space of the body. She is the author of *Sex shops in England's cities: From the backstreets to the high streets*, in *(Sub)Urban Sexscapes*, edited by Maginn, P and Steinmetz, C (Routledge, forthcoming) and one of the contributors to *Engaging with the Bailey Review: Blogging, academia and authenticity, Psychology and Sexuality* (2011).