What Mommies Want: Discerning Contemporary Cultural Values through Audience Reception of EL James' *Fifty Shades* Trilogy

Introduction: The "Mommy Porn" Cultural Phenomenon

Throughout 2012, Western popular media tracked the runaway success—born from a viral digital downloading movement—of the softcore BDSM "mommy porn" novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In April, an editor of the entertainment weekly *OnMilwaukee.com* exclaimed "*Fifty Shades of Grey* Invents 'Mommy Porn' Genre" (Snyder). *Fifty Shades of Grey* has now sold over 20 million copies in the United States, and the trilogy accounted for one in five print books for adults sold in the spring of 2012 (Crocker). Many cultural critics are flummoxed as to how a novel so totally bereft of literary content (as well as decent erotic content) could be such a runaway bestseller (Roiphe). This phenomenon, at first glance, appears to speak to a larger cultural trend that connects what "mommies" want and do not want … in their leisure reading and in the bedroom. But what does "mommy porn" as a genre signify? (For instance, do women who have achieved a level of success (domination?) in education and career, once in the home with kids, secretly pine for submission—for excitement—elsewhere? Or, is this phenomenon beyond just "mommies," breaking boundaries that defy the genre's signifier? Who is the audience for this genre, anyway?)

While the popular media has provided ample documentation of the cultural phenomenon of "mommy porn" (as the *OnMilwaukee* piece above suggests), scholarly discourse has yet to take it up and make sense of it. However, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is not the first set of sexually explicit texts that have entered the mainstream and captured the attention of a popular audience (although it may be the first via the digital download). What is different is the positioning of

these texts in a cultural moment that is decidedly undecided in its beliefs on feminism, on sexuality, and on motherhood. The convergent point of these issues in 2012 is these texts. By combining the scholarship on the current state of feminisms and postfeminism, current theoretical work in genre, audience reception, and online ethnography, a space may be created to answer questions about the readers of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. If we in Western culture are embroiled in a contemporary "mommy porn revolution" (Boudreau), it is a critically valuable inquiry to investigate why such a revolution is needed and what it seeks to redress and reclaim.

Research Questions

(1) In what ways does the contemporary genre of "mommy porn"—specifically, EL James' bestselling *50 Shades Trilogy*—reflect the contemporary cultural values of Western middle class women?

(2) Who is the audience for "mommy porn," and how does this audience respond after reading these texts?

(3) How does the accessibility of digital download affect the audience reception of "mommy porn"?

(4) Can the emergence of the "mommy porn" genre be read as post-feminist, or can it be reconciled with third wave feminism?

Review of Literature

Mainstream Media Treatment of *Fifty Shades* and "Mommy Porn"

In the media, treatment of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has largely consisted of three subject areas: the word-of-mouth buzz that generated its bestselling success, the possibility of this success in turn creating a genre called "mommy porn," and speculation by cultural critics as to the significance of this cultural phenomenon. "Yes, this is THE book everyone is talking about" is a frequent expression used to describe the first aspect of the cultural phenomenon, referring to the first book in the series (Bosman). *Fifty Shades of Grey* began as a small batch printing from an unknown author and small, Australian, independent press. But after this word-of-mouth hit, Vintage Books purchased the book and the subsequent two books in the series for publication (Bosman). Journalists began to track the sales numbers, both in digital e-books and print books, with great interest, reporting numbers sold from two million in four months on Amazon's Kindle e-book format to twenty million total, in both digital and print, by the end of 2012 (Poulter, Crocker). British media outlets were particularly fond of reporting that the trilogy had outsold the Harry Potter franchise on the UK's Amazon site (Poulter).

As readers were voracious for more erotica of this kind, copycat books began to appear on the scene, and publishers began to look for more women's erotica to publish. This escalation of desire to read women's erotica with characteristics particularly like *Fifty Shades*' has led cultural critics to deem this craze a new genre of women's fiction—"mommy porn" (Bosman). The craze crossed over so far into the popular vernacular that even Urban Dictionary attempted a definition of the genre:

> Mommy Porn is a sub-genre of erotica that grew out of the mainstream success of E.L. James' erotic novel 'Fifty Shades of Grey.' Characterized by its perceived audience and elegant description of female sexual domination, Mommy Porn first gained popularity with moms over thirty years old before it quickly spread to a worldwide audience.

The characteristics that define Mommy Porn are: Its focus on female sexual fantasy; The introduction of an innocent female protagonist to an unimagined world of sex; A controlling, alpha male love interest; and its detailed description of sex without using graphic words. ("Mommy Porn")

The discussion of "mommy porn" (along with anything else that has been granted the adjectival modifier "mommy" by popular cultural critics)—what it is and what it means—is ubiquitous in Western popular cultural media in 2012. As *Slate* essayist Pamela Haag woefully remarks, "everything we do is reduced [by the media] to a stupid pet trick for mommies" (Haag). If the Urban Dictionary definition above gives some explanation of what "mommy porn" *is*, there is far from consensus over what the consumption of texts in this genre *means*. In April, feminist cultural critic and scholar Katie Roiphe posited in *Newsweek* that the phenomenon suggests that independent career women desire to shed their power and "be sexually dominated," a comment met with a firestorm of backlash in the popular media (Roiphe, Bellafonte). While there have been suggestions that this leisure reading movement may have implications for the feminist beliefs of mommy porn readers (Bellafonte), cultural critics have left this arena to speculation rather than scholarly treatment.

The "Discreetly" Digital Download

As mentioned earlier, the sales success of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is in large measure due to its historic number of digital e-book downloads. Many journalists have commented on the "ever discreet" nature of the digital download and how purchasing softcore BDSM porn may be more palatable in this format (Bosman). Further, it is reported that the interest in *Fifty Shades* is in large part responsible for Amazon's UK site selling more digital books than print in 2012 (Poulter). This is not just a British trend, as other countries have seen unprecedented spikes in

sales of e-books, largely due to interest in *Fifty Shades*. For example, Israeli electronic bookstore evrit has reported a 150 percent increase in digital sales for September 2012, largely due to purchases of e-copies of the Hebrew *Fifty Shades*, of which, two-thirds were first-time e-book purchasers (Sela). While numbers such as these describe sales in many countries' media outlets, they are as of yet unmined territory in terms of scholarly analysis. Journalists report this unprecedented consumption of certain texts in a certain format—but we as scholars have yet to answer the question of why.

Historical Analysis: Feminism and Pornography

Commencement of a discussion of feminism and pornography is akin to opening a can of worms. Pornography was one of the hottest hot-button issues of the second wave feminist movement, and one that was not fully resolved therein. This debate predominantly involved visual pornography and its treatment of women subjects, which many second wave feminists of the 1970s believed to be degrading, objectifying, and victimizing (Sonnet 172). Contemporary scholars of feminism and pornography, such as Alan Soble in his *Pornography, Sex, and Feminism* (2002), now reflect on this era as a time when rigid feminist and conservative moral critiques of pornography were established that are now, as he suggests, "problematic, often socially determined, inflexible … and emphasize the worst aspects of the genre" (196). Scholars such as Soble have presented studies of numerous samples of visual pornography that emphasize its "diversity in themes and imagery" (21). These studies yield a contemporary claim that pornography should not be as clearly marked for feminist rejection as was formerly believed in second wave feminism through statements such as Andrea Dworkin's: that men utilize pornography because "men love death" (qtd. in Soble 17). Still, the battle rages on between those

who would reclaim pornography as sexually liberatory for women, and those who view it as the "central engine of women's oppression…" (Vance, qtd. in Sonnet 172).

While there is some interface between this scholarly conversation and the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, many scholars would argue that women's erotica largely falls outside the scope of pornography. However, sexually explicit material often eludes easy classification, and erotica as a sub-genre remains unclearly defined vis-à-vis pornography (Hazen 111). This is further complicated in the case of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy by the fact that *Fifty Shades* is BDSM soft core pornography by subject matter and yet Vintage Books clearly demarcated it as "erotic romance" on its covers for publication (James). The nature of this subject matter (bondage, rough sex involving domestic violence toward the female participant) would tend to cast *Fifty Shades* back into the visual pornography and feminist debate. This continued confusion over the genres of pornography, erotica, and romance (and what this ultimately means for audience expectation and consumption) grounds a potentially fascinating case study in the *Fifty Shades* cultural texts.

Beyond this genre confusion, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is clearly a new example of a larger cultural trend that has caught the attention of critics and feminist scholars, that of erotica produced "for women, by women" (Sonnet 169). Esther Sonnet conducted a study of the circulation and consumption of the British women's erotic paperback series *Black Lace* to argue that its success represents a contemporary turn to a "post-feminist heterosexuality" that involves active consumption of women's erotica and reclamation of women's sexual desire and pleasure (169-170). This line of argument aligns with much theoretical discourse around third wave feminism and postfeminism, although there remains much confusion as to a definition for each of these –isms. The theoretical discussion of third wave versus postfeminism is a lengthy and complex one with "little agreement" as to what the latter movement entails (Gamble 43), but for

the purposes of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy and its study, there are many possible avenues for exploration of these complexities. While many scholars have examined the theoretical underpinnings of these –isms, a project wherein a case study involving pornography was mined so as to better understand the distinctions has not been undertaken, as Sonnet, for instance, focused on postfeminism in her study.

Third wave, which as a movement evaluates the complexities of feminisms post-second wave, also considers how contemporary pornography should be viewed through a third wave feminist lens, or the lenses of multiple feminisms. As Wendy O'Brien advocates in her essay in *Third Wave Feminism* (2004):

> To abandon paradigms of victimization cannot mean that we close our eyes to the complexities of cultural signification and identity regulation. It is my suggestion that we talk about pornography more, not less. The caveat here is that we strive to move our discussions beyond the polarized framework of 'for' and 'against', strive to resist the all too easy simplification of second wave feminisms, and strive to address with frank honesty the difficult and contradictory questions of desire, pleasure, and guilt that inform our thoughts on pornography and on feminisms. (123)

There is then an interesting place to enter this discussion through the lens of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. In 2012, the consumption of these texts may render a space for O'Brien's consideration of the state of feminisms (or postfeminism in the vein of Sonnet and others) through the treatment of pornography.

Theoretical Approaches: Genre Theory, Audience Reception, and Ethnography

The popular media is throwing around the word "genre" to define a cultural phenomenon with persistent and confused zealousness, rendering its use intensely problematic. The American publisher of *Fifty Shades*, Vintage Anchor, through its representative, told the press "we're making a statement that this is bigger than one genre" (Bosman). While she meant literary genre—and broader than romance or erotica—she is also inferring a broader claim about the work of sexually explicit material in the publishing industry and in popular culture. In this vein, genre theory in a rhetorical context may help establish the relationship between these textual products, their communicative social function, and the resultant social behavior of their true audience. As Amy Devitt proposes, "genre … [is] a nexus between an individual's actions and a socially defined context. Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals' actions construct and are constructed by recurring context of situation, context of culture, and context of genres" (qtd. in Bazerman et. al 4). Can the media's pronouncement of these mainstream softcore porn novels as "mommy porn," resultantly change the function and meaning of these texts? Or can a systematic review of the practice of consumption of these texts render a rhetorically different meaning to them? In other words, has the genre definition "mommy porn" overdetermined the consumptive meaning of these texts, in such a way that a rhetorical genre study could potentially deconstruct it? Should the data show the many more readers than merely "mommies" are reading these texts, genre theory may illuminate the social function these texts perform in a much more significant way than the mere label "mommy porn."

In a similar ilk, "Mommy Lit" is defined as "semi-autobiographical writing dating back to the 1990s that 'unmasks the still-powerful myths of motherhood' by virtue of portraying heroines'…rage at living up to 'unattainable' expectations of motherhood…" (Arosteguy 409). "Mommy porn" may offer some of the same unmasking, but with much different content. While

this thread has not yet been explored, anecdotal evidence points to a similar audience (middle class, white mothers with "stifled sexual desire" (425)), such that an approach of collecting data and analyzing it through a lens of genre theory may better uncover their actual functions and meanings. The question, following Carolyn Miller's theory of genre as a social action (qtd. in Bonini 196), is whether or not the readers of these "mommy" texts form a discourse community such that these textual productions form a communicative event that transfers a "common knowledge basis" (196). This type of research question has been undertaken in other popular cultural contexts, such as in Adair Bonini's study of news versus reportage in the Brazilian media (196). Online ethnographic data of "mommy porn," once analyzed through the lens of Miller's theory of genre as social action, may de-bunk this notion of merely one type of "mommies" reading, and reveal a wider audience with more complex conceptualizations of cultural exchange that explode the label given to these texts.

As alluded to above, in order to examine "mommy porn" through the lenses of feminist theory and genre theory, it is necessary to collect and analyze data relevant to this phenomenon. Due to its popular cultural relevance (and the genre's inception as a viral digital movement), an online ethnography seems a natural fit. The use of the methodological approach of ethnography has been popular for studies of contemporary pornography and erotica. Most recently, in 2007, British media and cultural studies scholar Clarissa Smith published the results of her ethnographic study of British women who read the pornographic magazine *For Women*. Smith herself draws the distinction between her method and those that have preceded her: "I draw on theories of dialogism, media consumption and audience research rather than the feminism, psychoanalysis, and effects research which have tended to dominate questions of sexually explicit representations" (12). Applying contemporary film and media studies theory to

pornography, Smith sampled consumers of the magazine through interviews and questionnaires. In this way, she was able to focus on the audience reception—the lived experience of women's pornography. Wendy McElroy undertook a similar ethnographic study in 1995, but with different subjects: female sex workers. She interviewed a significant sample size of these women, as well as many other players in the industry, to gather data as to the real lived experience of pornography industry insiders in order to demystify beliefs that the industry was solely damaging to women (x-xi). Finally, Alan Soble's 2002 *Pornography, Sex, and Feminism*, relies on internet ethnographic research to collect a large sample size of varying pornographic websites and their content, in order to argue that diversity of imagery and content exists online, much differently than one would believe from reading second wave feminist polemics on visual pornography (22). Taken together, these studies suggest that ethnography can point out inconsistencies and overgeneralizations in the theoretical feminist debate, and prove a valuable tool for creating knowledge around the site of conflict of pornography.

Methods

Subjects for Study

In order to identify exactly who is the audience for "mommy porn," it is crucial to find the best location for collection of audience reception data. Because of the digital origin and continued orientation of the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon, it follows that my research would trace its footsteps in the digital realm. For the purposes of this study, I will want to capture data from self-identified readers of these texts in the largest possible online virtual communities. After several *Google* searches of all online *Fifty Shades* user groups and discussion forums, I have determined that these large forums may be divided into two major groups: general leisure readers and self-identified "mommy" or parent readers. (That being said, there are many smaller forums

with specific interests outside the scope of my study.) In order to analyze data from these two relevant groups, I will focus on one of each discussion forum. For the former, I will study the *goodreads.com* "*Fifty Shades of Grey* Book Discussion Board" ("*Fifty Shades*"). This discussion board contains the largest amount of data from the widest number of readers in the United States and the United Kingdom. The Goodreads site professes to be "the largest site for readers and book recommendations in the world" with more than 12 million members ("About Goodreads"). The subjects' commonalities are only two: book consumers/recommenders in general, and shared consumption of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy.

On the other hand, many discussion boards have cropped up online in which readers profess to be "mommies." The largest that I have located in on the *babycenter.com* discussion board devoted to the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. This is a public group of 39,000 members who are both: (1) parents, and (2) interested in discussion about *Fifty Shades* ("Anyone read *50 Shades*?"). Therefore, from these two online discussion boards, I will be able to analyze data from two populations, one self-identified as "mommy" consumers, and one not, in order to differentiate between the two according to this key "mommy" variable.

Measurement

While the two discussion boards discussed above provide 5000+ and 250+ postings (as of today's date) to mine for data, the measurements will consist of coding particular words and phrases pertaining to my research questions for retrospective product measurements (i.e., how many times did discussion board posts refer to "digitally downloading" the book; a coded term) and subsequent qualitative data analysis. This process of measurement is informed directly by grounded theory, as my measurement process "borrows" terms such as coding from quantitative analysis and utilizes them, while still retaining fluidity in the process of design and analysis

(Glaser, qtd. in Wertz et. al 56-60). Beyond digital e-book consumption, other coded terms critical to my study involve: (1) self-reporting as "mommy" or "female"/"male" reader; (2) did reader "like" these books and why; (3) what did reading these cause them to do/change in their own lives? These will be entered into a rubric by which I can analyze the data based on these variables, although once some data is collected, new coded terms may be run, per the fluid nature of grounded theory methods and design.

Data-Collection Methods

My study will consist of an online ethnography, specifically utilizing the methods outlined in a subset of online ethnography, netnography, as articulated in Kozinets' 2010 *Netnography* (qtd. in Bowler 1270). Kozinets' method is specifically designed to study consumptive practices of online communities and their cultural significance (Bowler 1270). His method offers "particular approaches to the capture of online community and cultural data" (1273). What is particularly effective about netnography as a study is its interface with grounded theory: it allows flexibility in design with "inductive coding procedures" (1274), such that I am attempting to create, and is also tailored to the online medium in its approaches to online data-collection. Kozinets' approach also offers strategies to minimize human error through systematic recordation of processes (1274).

This netnography will take both a concurrent and archival form. As this cultural phenomenon continues to surge ahead, its birth can be pinpointed to March and April of 2012. Compiling data from archived discussion board posts on the Goodreads and BabyCenter websites should recreate the cultural moment in which "mommy porn" came into being, while subsequent posts, from April to the present, track the movement forward.

Analysis

The analysis for this project will be undertaken according to the principles of selective ethnographic analysis, which involves the application of results from ethnography to other theoretical approaches. For my purposes, I will take the data collected from my netnography and then begin the process of qualitative analysis through two separate lenses: genre theory (particularly Miller's genre as social action), and theories of feminisms and postfeminism. For both, discernment of the audience of the *Fifty Shades* texts will be the foregrounded variable, as gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and status as a parent all help to create an understanding of the phenomenon as genre/social activity and as (gendered) feminist, postfeminist, or non-feminist practice. Then, the relationship between the results of the audience demographic and its correlative reception will be examined. Data as to how the texts are received by both men and women help to discern the work that these texts actually perform in society, while the data specific to women and mothers may illuminate these readers' beliefs about themselves as women (and as feminists) and to what extent the practice of reading these texts has any bearing on these beliefs. Also, data will be coded by date to discern if readers of the digital downloaded copies (especially before mainstream print publication) link a "discreet digital download" to their initial reception or actions surrounding these texts.

Ultimately, all of the variables listed form a relationship, and when analyzed together through these theoretical lenses, may offer an explanation that goes far beyond the media and the publishing industry's descriptor of "mommy porn" and toward an understanding of mainstreamed women's pornography in the twenty-first century.

Schedule for Project

Data Collection	June – September 2013
Analysis of Data	September – November 2013 (may interface recursively with data collection, but all data collected and analyzed by November)
Writing of Article for Publication	December 2013
Revision	first week of January 2014
Submission for Publication	January 15, 2014

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