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Gender, Romance Novels and Plastic Sexuality in the United States: A Focus on Female College Students

By Huei-Hsia Wu¹

Abstract

This analysis gauges gender difference in time spent reading romance novels and sexuality. Respondents were 770 white American college students, including 436 females and 334 males, age 17–49. Males are viewed as a reference group. Drawing upon the “plastic sexuality” thesis and feminist theory, this study hypothesizes that female readers of romance novels have higher levels of interest in sexuality (at least in the attitudes) than male readers, and non-readers but such a sexual interest is not necessarily converted into a more active sexual behavior. Most romance novels promote deeply constraining patriarchal values, reading romance novels plays a role in shaping the meaning of the self, sexual identity and attitudes and behavior relative to this patriarchy. The results indicate that due to a higher degree of plastic sexuality, female readers of romance novels self-reported greater sex drive, and greater number or orgasms required for sexual satisfaction than male readers and female non-readers. However, female readers had fewer sex partners, and were older when they first thought about sex and had their first sexual intercourse. This pattern fits the *Harlequin* romance characterization: female readers nourish a fulfilling sex life in the context of idealistic monogamous faithfulness, while at the same time vividly satisfying desires and sexual fantasy through fabricated characters.

Keywords: romance novels, plastic sexuality, sexual fantasy

Introduction

In 2005, the Romance Industry Statistics reported that romance novels comprised an astonishing 54.9 percent of paperback novel sales. The sale of romance novels in 2004 was about \$1.2 billion. Although about 60 percent of all U.S. households did not purchase any books, over 64.6 million individuals reported that they read at least one romance novel in the previous year. Of these readers, almost 80 percent were women between the ages of 17 and 54, and 63 percent of that group had either a college degree or some college education. The number of male readers of romance novels was also on the rise considerably. In 2004, the share of male readers of romance novels is about 22 percent, while it was only 7 percent in 2002 (Romance Industry Statistics 2005). The immense popularity of romance novels begs sociological questions. Do romance novel readers and non-readers have different sexual attitudes and behavior? Do male and female readers respond differently to romance novels? Do readers reflect the female stereotype depicted in romance novels in both their desires and their actual behavior? Or does reading them represent only vicarious participation?

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Gender difference in varied responses to erotic stimulus is of considerable theoretical importance (Baumeister 2004 & 2000; Ellis & Symons 1990; LaMar & Kite 1998; Louderback & Whitley 1997; Oliver & Hyde 1993; Parameswaran 2002; Rabine 1985; Radway 1987; Wu & Walsh 2006). For instance, females are less receptive to pornography and likely to be sexually aroused than males. Females are also less likely to have sexual fantasies and to masturbate while exposing to erotic stimulus (Ellis & Symons 1990; Oliver & Hyde 1993). Fisher et al's (1988) study suggested that male college students self-report more positive attitudes in erotic media than female college students. In their meta-analysis of 177 studies, Oliver and Hyde (1993) found substantial gender difference in respondents' interest in pornography, frequency of masturbation, and frequency of casual sex.

Sources of varied gender responses to erotic literature are biology of sex and social construction of gender (Giddens 1992). Varied mating strategies exist between and within the sexes. Male sexual fantasies are more likely to be driven by the natural male tendency. Visualizing sexual images of unfamiliar women reflects the short-term mating strategy of males. Female fantasies tend to be shaped by the natural tendency of females to respond to auditory, contextual, or symbolic contents of erotica that communicates a desire and passion for familiar persons, all of which signify the long-term elements of female mating patterns (Malamuth 1996; Taylor 2005). Therefore, men are more responsive to explosive visual stimulus (e.g., pornographic images) and sexually aroused more easily than females (Baumeister 2000 & 2004; Geary 2000). In contrast, females are more responsive to symbolic meanings, interpretive representation of sexual self and a relationship. Thus, they prefer romance novels to pornography. In effect, many studies have suggested that females are less enthusiastic and more negative about pornography (Lottes, Weinberg & Weller 1993).

It is well-known that most romance novels emphasize love and relational fidelity to reach their readers, particularly females. This emphasis has two social implications. First, love and commitment have been important themes for gender socialization through which females learn how to think and act "properly." Second, they have become females' counter "male-pornographic-fantasy strategy" to divert males' attention from genitals and impersonal sex to relationships (Ellis & Symons 1990: 556). However, this strategy may also reinforce women's subordinate status defined by the patriarchal system and values. Thus, pornography and sexual interest are often considered an almost exclusive male interest. Love, relationship and commitment depicted in romance novels are often considered to be an almost exclusive female interest (Itzin 1992; Christensen 1990; Ellis & Symons 1990). Moreover, studies of female readers and non-readers of romance novels found that readers self-reported a stronger sexual relation and having a sexual interest about twice as high as non-readers (Cole & Shamp 1984).

Even so, some females do have an interest in pornography. Strossen (1995) established that females constitute about 40 percent of American pornographic videotapes rental audience. A recent research by Walsh (1999) revealed substantial differences between female readers and non-readers of pornography in several indicators of sexuality, including sex addiction, number of coital sex partners, femininity, masculinity, and number of orgasms required for sexual satisfaction. Results of the study asserted that female readers of pornography are closer to males on all indicators of sexuality than to female non-readers, while there is no significant difference between male readers of

pornography and male non-readers. The strong female interest and weak male interest in romance novels reported in the literature suggest that males who are interested in romance novels may be closer to female readers of romance novels in sexuality (at least in the abstract) than female non-readers. However, the sexual behavior of male readers of romance novels may be closer to female non-readers than female readers.

Much of the previous studies in this area have been centered on the negative impact of pornography on violent and sex crimes. One of the predominant findings has been that male criminals (e.g., rapists and child molesters) were significantly greater consumers of pornography than males in general (Bauserman 1996; Carr & VanDeusen 2004). But other studies have challenged the conventional view. For example, Malamuth's (2000) study argued that pornography may have an indirect impact on crimes, instead of a direct effect. That is, exposure to pornography increases male self-fulfilling sexual fantasies but it does not necessarily increase the number of male violent crimes against females.

Despite mounting scholarly interest in pornography, research on the association between reading romance novels and sexuality is inadequate. To date, empirical research using survey data in this area consists of only two studies. Muram et al's (1992) empirical work on this issue found that pregnant high school girls (a palpable indicator of expressed sexuality) judged that the content of romantic novels epitomized their own sexual desires and behaviors more strongly than did never-pregnant high school girls (Muram, Rosenthal, Tolley & Peeler 1992). A recent empirical research conducted by Wu and Walsh (2006) found that romance novels may have some positive impact on the formation of female sexual fantasy but such a fantasy is not necessarily translated into female sexual behavior (e.g., age at first sexual intercourse).

Theoretical Background

A long standing issue in sex research is whether gender difference in sexual responses derives from human mating biology or social factors. Most behavioral scientists view human sexuality as a genetic design for human reproduction. But sociologists tend to view human sexuality as a social construct, and a process of social interactions and learning, frequently shaped by cultures, norms, traditions, gender socialization, and social institutions (e.g., media, education, family, and peers). Nevertheless, an increasing number of social scientists agree that sexuality is influenced by the biology of sex and the social construction of gender (Giddens 1992).

According to evolutionary theory, gender differences in sexuality result from the natural selection for sex-specific solutions to adaptive problems each sex faced in ancestral times (Vandermassen 2004). Given that a woman's parental investment is obligatorily enormous and a male's obligatory investment is limited only to contributing sperm, it would be surprising indeed if the sexual strategies of the two genders did not differ in a number of ways. Males gain more in terms of reproductive success following a strategy of mating with multiple partners. Meanwhile the increased probability of female reproductive success lies mainly in securing resources from a male to assist her in raising offspring. There are no fitness benefits for females to mate with multiple partners. Indeed, the opposite is true. Thus, evolutionary logic implies that females will be choosier in her mating habits and come to prefer carefully selected males that are devoted and committed to a long-term intimate relationship (Baumeister 2004; Geary 2000;

Malamuth 1996). This does not imply a simplistic “men are from Mars; women are from Venus” view of gender differences in sexuality. As Schmitt (2004:4) has put it: “women possess all the hallmarks of having evolved a short-term mating strategy” but it is “a strategy based on selectively desiring men of high status, dominance, and genetic quality.” This description of desirable males, of course, is exactly the description of the heroes desired by the heroines in romance novels.

Male short-term sexual strategy, on the other hand, is far more indiscriminate and emphasizes quantity over quality (Baumeister 2000), and this is the content of male fantasies that are fueled by pornography. In short, male sexual fantasies are prompted by the natural male tendency to *visualize* sexual images of unfamiliar women that reflects their short-term male mating strategy, while female fantasies are driven by the natural tendency of females to respond to auditory, contextual, or symbolic contents of erotica that communicates a desire and passion for familiar persons, all of which signify the long-term elements of female mating patterns (Malamuth 1996; Taylor 2005).

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, romance novels can be regarded as a form of text-reader interaction, a system of values and languages, an evolution of cultural ideals embedded in social institutions and structured by regularity and rules. From a Goffmanian perspective (1983), different cultural and social groups may instill diverse forms of sexuality with particular cultural meanings embedded in religious beliefs and/or moral values. Individuals may vigorously construct and reconstruct their sexual practices and experiences over their life cycle and, consequently, creating their identities as sexual beings. This process is called self-presentation. The effort of sexual beings in a mass society to construct a dramaturgical (also socially desirable) imagery agreeable to others of equal or higher social status is known as *impression management*. Through such a management, individuals are said to “engage in scripted behavior in order to persuade a desired mode of action from those with whom one is interacting,” as Holstein & Gubrium (2000) suggested. Thus the success of a romance novel depends in part on the writers’ ability to draw in the reader, creating a beloved impression.

Moreover, Goffman’s theory also insinuates what modern psychologists call *erotic plasticity* (Baumeister 2004). Plenty of evidence from around the world indicates that females evidence far more erotic plasticity than males and this plasticity is a function of female sexuality being less tied to biology and more to culture than male sexuality (Baumeister 2000 & 2004; Schmitt 2003). In other words, a less intensive motivation to engage in sex driven by a less powerful sex drive allows female sexuality to be more flexible and more prone to socialization influences. Among these influences are romance novels, a medium that provides readers opportunities to create sexual fantasies, the acting out of which is denied to them in the real world. As Giddens (1992:123) has put it, “Sexual fantasies, when consciously employed, can create a counter-order, a kind of subversion, and a little space into which we can escape, especially when they scramble all those neat and oppressive distinctions between active and passive, masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive.”

Feminist views are less positive about the function of romance novels. They make the obvious point that the relationships described by romance novels and in the subsequent sexual fantasies that they generate rarely exist in the ordinary world. Feminists add that the real world favors the values of male hegemonic power. Social reality is deeply rooted in gender prejudices and these male-favoring prejudices are

reinforced in romance novels. In addition, romance novels are a form of commodity based on selling fantasies to women that emphasize the kinds of fidelity and love that echo the ideologies of consumerism and capitalism. Through text-reader interactions, female readers become the *willing surrenders* to the system of gender oppression that supports and reinforces females' subordinate status. A recent ethnographic research partially confirmed the influence of Western romance novels and female sexuality in India (Parameswaran 2002). The author argued that reading Western romance novels reflects the deeply-rooted patriarchal discourses of feminine ethics that controls Indian women's sexuality. Parameswaran (2002:832) argued that in India:

young women are fascinated by the commodities of Western material culture in imported romance fiction is located in their desire to experience their identities as cosmopolitan, global consumers. In negotiating the boundaries of tradition, Indian women readers construct romance fiction as modern manuals on sexuality that afford them escape from the burdens of preserving the honor of family and community.

Given the preceding, I hypothesize that female readers of romance novels would have higher levels of interest in sexuality (at least in the abstract) than male readers and female non-readers. If the assertion is true, if romance novels are a major source of gender socialization, then sexual abstractions may not necessarily translate into sexual behavior.

Methods and Data

This is a correlational analysis which attempts to assess the degree to which a single variable (readership of romance novels) is associated with a variety of variable indicating sexuality. Subjects were 770 white Idaho college students, interviewed between 1990 and 2000, who participated in the study for extra credit points. Of total subjects, 436 were females and 334 were males, age 17–49. Males were viewed as a reference group. Subjects were asked the percentage of their reading time that they devoted to romantic novels: those who indicated any percentage that was greater than 1 were classified as readers ($n = 308$, 70.6%), while those who indicated zero percentage were classified as non-readers ($n = 128$, 29.4%). Female readers and non-readers were compared with males and with each other on a number of demographic and self-reported behavioral/attitudinal variables of sexuality.

The variables of main interest were (1) age when thoughts of sex first occurred, (2) age of first intercourse, (3) number of sex partners, (4) strength of sex drive, (5) number of orgasms, (6) degree of sex addiction, (7) promiscuity, and (8) femininity. Self-assessed items 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 asked respondents to assess themselves on a scale ranging from zero to 100 on each item (e.g., "To what degree do you feel you are addicted to sex?"). Items 1, 2 and 3 simply asked for the values or numbers. Various demographic variables such as age, marital status, and socioeconomic status were also included.

Results

Male readers ($n = 88$) and male non-readers ($n = 236$) did not differ significantly on any of the sexuality and demographic measures, and were thus combined to form a

single 'male' category. Females reported a significantly higher percentage of time spent reading romance novels ($t = 22.67, p < .001$) than males. The average percentage of time spent reading romance novels for female readers is 40.1 percent, while that of males is 11.58 percent. Female readers and non-readers did not differ substantially on age and social class.

With respect to the self-assessed indices of sexual attitudes, Table 1 shows that there are considerable gender differences on degree of feelings of sex addiction, strength of sex drive, number of orgasms for sexual satisfaction. Female readers scored higher than female nonreaders on these variables. However, males scored higher than female readers on these variables. These findings indicate a strong self-assessed interest in sexual activity *in the abstract* among males and female readers of romance novels, relative to non-readers.

Regarding overt behavioral differences, however, the situation is quite interesting. The average age when female readers first thought about sex was 14.65, compared to the average age of 13.63 for female non-readers, and 12.71 for male readers. Additionally, males, female readers and non-readers differed in terms of the age when they experienced their first sexual intercourse, with female readers first experiencing it at 17.56, female non-readers at 16.92 and males at 16.71. Female readers also had fewer sex partners ($M = 5.17$) than female non-readers ($M = 7.0$) and males ($M = 15.13$). In terms of palpable indicators of sexuality, female readers turn out to be less "sexual" than female non-readers and males. To test this hypothesis, this study computed correlation coefficients (phi-coefficients) between the indices of sexuality and readership of romance novels by gender. The correlation coefficients are given in the last column in Table 1. As expected, the phi-coefficients of sexuality indices are statistically significant at all conventional levels and with a correct sign. However, the phi-coefficient of age of first sex intercourse among males, female readers and female non-readers is not statistically significant. In short, the results of this analysis suggest a strong association among males, female readers and female non-readers of romance novels on all indices of sexuality, except for age of first sex intercourse.

Table 1 Comparison of Male and Female Readers and Non-Readers of Romance Novels on Means of Eight Indices of Sexuality

Variables	Male	Female readers	Female non-readers	F-ratio	Prob.	r
	(1)	(2)	(3)			
Sex addition	71.73	29.35	15.33	47.508	<.000	.282
Sex drive	75.90	67.68	49.38	33.662	<.000	.453
Number of orgasms monthly	14.84	8.28	5.43	38.239	<.000	.355
Femininity score	17.65	72.42	66.19	468.83	<.000	.331
Promiscuity score	47.37	19.82	23.75	66.704	<.000	.353
Age of first intercourse	16.71	17.56	16.92	9.280	<.000	.02
Age of first sex thought	12.72	14.65	13.63	30.678	<.000	.196
Number of sex partners	15.13	5.17	7.00	59.787	<.000	.253

Note:

- a. F -ratio was computed using Tests of Between-Subjects Effects.
- b. $p^{***}<0.001$, $p^{**}<0.05$, $p^{*}<0.01$. The probability of F -ratios is highly significant across seven indices of sexuality, suggesting substantial differences in sexual attitudes and behavior across groups.
- c. r is the correlation coefficient for each index of sexuality. Except for age of first intercourse, correlation coefficients of all indices are statistically significant at all conventional levels.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results reveal that female readers self-reported greater sex addiction, greater sex drive and greater number of orgasms required for sexual satisfaction than female non-readers. But female readers scored lower than males on these attitudinal variables. This would lead us to suspect that female readers would have a varied sex life and sexual activities with more partners than female non-readers, and that they would have thought about and commenced sexual activity at a younger age. Contrary to expectations, readers of romance novels had fewer sex partners, a lower level of self-assessed femininity than non-readers, and were older when they had their first thoughts about sex and had their first sexual intercourse.

These findings are not so unusual when viewed in the light of a large number of studies that have shown a much greater inconsistency between attitudes and behavior among females than among males when it comes to sex (see Baumeister 2000). This attitude-behavior inconsistency is coherent with the view of greater erotic plasticity in females than in males. Male sexuality is widely considered to be more tightly bound by biology, and thus more rigid and less open to modification by socio-cultural factors. The greater degree of female sexual plasticity allows them to more readily adapt to changing circumstances and thus to be more malleable to socialization. This study argues that the content of romance novels is at least a modestly powerful molder of the sexuality of those who read them. From a feminist standpoint, by imagining being a heroine in a romantic fantasy, female readers find an escape from the burdens of preserving female subordinated status. Most romance novels promote deeply constraining patriarchal values. Thus reading romance novels plays a role in shaping the meaning of the self, sexual identity and attitudes and behavior relative to this patriarchy. The overall results of this study suggest that the general attitude-behavior pattern of readers of romance novels fits the *Harlequin* stereotype of nourishing a satisfying sex life in the context of romantic monogamous fidelity, while at the same time vicariously fulfilling sexual desires through fictitious characters in romance novels.

Several limitations of this study are acknowledged. Because of sampling limitations and the non-experimental nature of the study, no cause-effect statements can be made; that is, are the attitude-behavior inconsistencies noted among romance novel readers the result of the socialization influences of the novels, or do people with such inconsistencies gravitate toward such novels? Further, the sexuality-related items were not defined for respondents, thus allowing them to place their own subjective definitions and idiosyncratic interpretations on them. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of findings is in the direction predicted by the erotic plasticity hypothesis. The results presented here do

provide intriguing possibilities for future research into the role of romance novel reading in the sexual lives of those who read them.

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