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A POST FIFTY SHADES OF GREY EXAMINATION OF CANADIAN PUBLIC LIBRARY COLLECTIONS (Paper submission)

Abstract (50-100 words)

The phenomenon surrounding *Fifty Shades of Grey (FSOG)* created a new and public conversation about erotica and erotic romance literature. Although the phenomenon surrounding *FSOG* has faded, the sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance is still of interest. Traditional and non-traditional LIS review sources were examined for erotica/erotic romance titles to determine characteristics of titles reviewed, trends seen in the reviews, and to uncover the uptake of reviewed materials in Canadian libraries. Findings show some distinct characteristics in titles along with an influence of *FSOG* in the reviews, and a mismatch between the review sources examined and an example of a public library's collection.

1. Introduction

The romance genre is one of the highest circulating genres in public libraries, while also being a genre that has been historically snubbed, both within and outside of LIS (Adkins, Esser, Velasquez, 2010; Charles & Linz, 2005; Adkins, Esser, Velasquez, & Hill, 2008). At the same time, the genre has never lacked reviews in various media and it has an established place in public libraries. The publication in 2012 of Kristen Ramsdall's *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre* is evidence of the embrace of romance. The focus for this research is not on the romance genre broadly, rather the combined sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance. The release of *Fifty Shades of Grey (FSOG)* in 2012 was greeted with a level of interest not seen before in an erotic romance title (Bentley, 2012). The phenomenon surrounding the text created a new and public conversation about erotica/erotic romance, mostly in relation to sexually-explicit content. Six years later the phenomenon surrounding *FSOG* has faded, but the sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance is still of interest.

Changing sexual mores are referred to as one of the main reasons for the shift in broad acceptance of romance, likely along with its sheer popularity amongst patrons. Given the popularity of the *FSOG* phenomenon, might the romance sub-genre of erotica/erotic romance also be benefiting from a change in perception? This research is an exploratory and introductory effort to understand the proliferation of this genre both within traditional reviewing media and Canadian public library collections. It allows us to further investigate free access to materials with sexual content in Canadian library collections.

2. Literature

In libraries, there have been some interesting conversations around *FSOG*. It was welcomed by many and has been used by some readers' advisory librarians to discuss how to develop collections in this genre (Bourrier-Lacroix, 2016). But *FSOG* was not without its detractors as a small number of libraries made headlines for deciding, initially, not to purchase the books for their collections (Bosman, 2012; Gallo, 2012). Except for Martinez, et al (2016), self-censorship of librarians has been little studied recently, but is of interest in the current research.

4. Findings

a) What erotica/erotic romance titles are reviewed?

The overwhelming majority of the 742 reviewed titles found in WorldCat were for the print format. Only a handful of books were in other formats and those were generally self-published. Findings also indicate that although erotic titles are diverse as far as sexual content, they are not diverse as far as colour or ethnicity. This finding follows the characteristics of challenged books in ALA's banned book report (Doyle, 2016) and the findings from the Ripped Bodice's (2017) research on diversity in romance publishing.

Most of the 742 reviewed titles were traditionally published, with only a very smaller number of self-published titles. Given the current hazy distinction between small publishing house and self-published works, no firm numbers are available to distinguish between the two. Kensington, Urban, St. Martin's, Strebtor, and Simon & Schuster are the most prevalent publishers. Crimson, a publisher noted by the Ripped Bodice (2017) study as being the most diverse with 29.3% of their titles featuring characters of colour does not appear in any of the 742 reviews examined.

b) What is the trend of erotica/erotic romance reviews post-FSOG?

Publication dates for the books, themselves, ranged from 1992 to 2017 with one outlier title published in 1969. Reviews averaged between 0 and 11 per year through 2004. 2005 showed an increase that continued until a peak in 2008 (with 44 titles reviewed), after which numbers began to drop again. It was not until post-*FSOG* that titles spiked again, and in much larger numbers. 2013 saw 47 titles reviewed with an all-time spike of 153 reviewed titles in 2014. There was some drop off in 2015 with another spike of 124 titles reviewed in 2016.

A combination of events has resulted in erotica/erotic romance to have significantly more reviews than the pre-*FSOG* era, namely there are more review sources focused on the genre. In 2005, the Smart Bitches Trashy Books blog began spreading knowledge of books that might otherwise been under the radar. In 2013, *Library Journal* and *Publishers' Weekly* both began columns dedicated to erotica/erotic romance reviews. Lastly, *FSOG* influenced the recommendation lists reviewed.

c) What erotica/erotic romance is collected in Canadian public libraries?

Findings show a mismatch between the formal and informal review sources examined and public library collections. Approximately two-thirds of the titles are available in Canada, but this does not adequately reflect a full penetration of these erotic titles across Canadian libraries. For example, the novel *If Not for You* is available in Canada, but there are only 5 copies nationwide, versus 996 in the United States. The provinces offering the broadest access to erotica titles include Alberta and Ontario.

Narrowing the scope to a specific, large, library provides further comment on this research question. A sample of a particular library's ILS allowed a genre classification for 'erotic stories'

FSOG, erotica/erotic romance, and sexually explicit themes have been of interest to a small number of library and information science researchers. Pecoskie and Hill (2015) traced the history of *FSOG* from its roots as fanfiction through its emergence as a traditionally published novel. Hill and Harrington (2014) found the definitions and distinctions between various terminology referencing sexual materials (e.g. pornography, erotica, obscenity) in LIS texts to be woefully inadequate. Their findings are confirmed by Martinez, et. al (2016) who found that just over half of librarians surveyed believe that there is a difference between erotica and pornography, which presents some interesting questions about how this might translate to holdings in libraries. Beyond textual materials, the organization of pornography has also been explored to some extent for visual materials (Beaudoin & Menard, 2015; Dilevko & Juris, 2003).

Overall, however, there is a dearth of research around sexually explicit materials, including erotica/erotic romance in libraries. The lack of research around this genre is problematic given its charged and controversial nature for some, in contrast to the popularity of the texts.

2. Research questions

- What erotica/erotic romance titles are reviewed? Our focus here is on formats, publishers, titles, and sub-genres.
- What is the trend of erotica/erotic romance reviews post-FSOG?
- What erotica/erotic romance is collected in Canadian public libraries? Are erotica/erotic romance reviewed titles included in public library collections in Canada? Do the collected titles reflect the reviews?

3. Method

In the fall of 2017, six traditional and nontraditional LIS review sources were searched for erotica/erotic romance reviews. Traditional sources include *Library Journal*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *Novelist*, and *Kirkus*. Non-traditional sources include the *Smart Bitches*, *Trashy Books* blog and *Buzzfeed*. In order to consider the notion of change, we purposefully chose broad, well-known review sources rather than genre-specific resources such as *Romantic Times*. Non-traditional sources were included to ensure a wide variety of reviews that were not all focused on the same audiences, librarians and the publishing industry. Each source was examined for erotica and erotic romance title reviews. The final list of reviewed titles for this research is 742.

These 742 titles were then located in WorldCat, with an initial focus on worldwide English language holdings. Given the large variety of formats available for each title, the focus was only on the version collected by the most libraries - be that print, ebook, audiobook, etc. The WorldCat search was then narrowed to examine Canadian library holdings, with a focus on public libraries.

Lastly, we compared the 742 reviewed titles with the actual holdings of the erotica/erotic romance collection of a large sized public library. In this instance, the library's catalogue includes a genre classification for 'erotic stories' which included 251 titles for comparison with the 742 review titles. Given the variety of possible subject headings for erotica/erotic romance titles, the focus, instead, was on genre classification.

that includes 251 titles. The majority are print titles with a limited number of ebooks and audiobooks. Prominent publishers include St. Martin's, Berkley, Cleis, and New American Library. Publication dates of books in the collection closely match the publication range in the initial list of 742 titles reviewed. The first spike in titles happens in the 2005-2008 period with a small drop until another spike in 2011-2014. Of significant interest is the fact that four authors make up almost a quarter (61) of the library's holdings of erotica/erotic romance.

5. Discussion

The traditional LIS universe experiences constant expansion when new areas of emphasis are conceived, and sexually explicit content seen in the erotica/erotic romance sub-genre is no exception. For example, publishing houses continue to increase their erotica/erotic romance titles (Chalmers, 2015), and scholarly outlets are now available for academic work focusing on research about sexually explicit products and consumption of those products. (See the relatively new Routledge journal *Porn Studies* with the first issue in 2014). Between the increased visibility of the genre for readers, and the fact that the American Library Association (ALA) notes that sexually explicit content remains one of the major reason for challenged and banned books (Doyle, 2016), it is important to study this genre in a Canadian context. But even with this broader level of acceptance comes significant shortcomings in the diversity of offerings from publishers and review sources and, hence, a lack of diversity in public library collections.

There are also significant shortcomings in the numbers of communities that are collecting these works. While the titles recommended by the non-traditional sources might be explained off as not talking to a broad enough audience, even the books reviewed in the traditional sources are not being widely collected. Whether this points to self-censorship remains to be definitively proven and additional study is necessary.

Given the small number of reviews that exist in traditional sources, there was an expectation of larger collection holdings. If collection development librarians are not using these resources, are they using others? Future research will continue to map our set of 742 reviewed titles onto other public libraries across Canada and compare the library-specific genre classification for erotica/erotic romance titles. In addition, genre-specific sources like the *Romantic Times* will provide an even broader variety of titles to help investigate public library collections. A dialogue with collection management librarians at Canadian public libraries will also offer insight into the mismatch between reviewed titles and purchased titles to further understand the landscape of the erotica/erotic romance in Canada. With future work, we will connect the broader issues of library collection policies, self-censorship, and user-driven collections with the relationship among publishers, reviewers and librarians.

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