

Reading 'Fifty Shades' linked to unhealthy behaviors

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Amy Bonomi is chairperson and professor in Michigan State University's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. Credit: Michigan State University

Young adult women who read "Fifty Shades of Grey" are more likely than nonreaders to exhibit signs of eating disorders and have a verbally abusive partner, finds a new study led by a Michigan State University researcher.

Further, women who read all three books in the blockbuster "Fifty

Shades" erotic romance series are at increased risk of engaging in binge drinking and having multiple sex partners.

All are known risks associated with being in an abusive [relationship](#), much like the lead character, Anastasia, is in "Fifty Shades," said Amy Bonomi, the study's lead investigator. And while the study did not distinguish whether women experienced the [health](#) behaviors before or after reading the books, it's a potential problem either way, she said.

"If women experienced adverse health behaviors such as disordered eating first, reading 'Fifty Shades' might reaffirm those experiences and potentially aggravate related trauma," said Bonomi, chairperson and professor in MSU's Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

"Likewise, if they read 'Fifty Shades' before experiencing the health behaviors seen in our study, it's possible the books influenced the onset of these behaviors."

The study, which appears in the *Journal of Women's Health*, is one of the first to investigate the relationship between health risks and reading popular fiction depicting [violence against women](#). Past research has tied watching violent television programs to real-life violence and antisocial behaviors, as well as reading glamour magazines to being obsessed with [body image](#).

The researchers studied more than 650 women aged 18-24, a prime period for exploring greater sexual intimacy in relationships, Bonomi said. Compared to participants who didn't read the book, those who read the first "Fifty Shades" novel were 25 percent more likely to have a partner who yelled or swore at them; 34 percent more likely to have a partner who demonstrated stalking tendencies; and more than 75 percent more likely to have used diet aids or fasted for more than 24 hours.

Those who read all three books in the series were 65 percent more likely than nonreaders to binge drink – or drink five or more drinks on a single occasion on six or more days per month – and 63 percent more likely to have five or more intercourse partners during their lifetime.

Bonomi, who has a doctoral degree in health services and a master's in public health, said she is not suggesting the book be banned or that women should not be free to read whatever books they wish or to have a love life.

However, it's important women understand that the [health behaviors](#) assessed in the study are known risk factors for being in a violent relationship. Toward that end, Bonomi said parents and educators should engage kids in constructive conversations about sexuality, body image and gender role expectations – and that these conversations start as early as grade school.

Prevention programs can also be beneficial, such as Safe Dates, which targets abuse prevention through relationship skills training and gender role examination.

Finally, kids and young adults should be taught to consume fiction, television, movies, magazines and other mass media with a critical eye, Bonomi said.

"We recognize that the depiction of violence against [women](#) in and of itself is not problematic, especially if the depiction attempts to shed serious light on the problem," Bonomi said. "The problem comes when the depiction reinforces the acceptance of the status quo, rather than challenging it."

The "Fifty Shades" series has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide. A movie adaptation is scheduled for release in early 2015.

More information: *Journal of Women's Health*,
[online.liebertpub.com/doi/full ... 0.1089/jwh.2014.4782](https://online.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/jwh.2014.4782)

Provided by Michigan State University

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