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# TITLE: KISS AND SELL: IS THERE A MARKET FOR EROTICA IN 18- TO 25-YEAR-OLDS?

## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that there is an underserved market for published erotica in 18- to 25-year-olds. The study begins with a discussion of the definition of erotica and traces its history as a genre in conjunction with romance. It also discusses the perceived and real impact of E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* on conversations around erotica and the acceptability of women consuming sexually explicit material. The study builds on the findings of recent surveys that indicate that the average age of romance readers is in decline and that younger readers are inclined towards erotica.

The research finds that 18- to 25-year-olds generally hold a negative view of erotica, which in turn has a negative effect on active readership. It also finds that while most 18- to 25-year-olds have at least some exposure to erotica, its consumption is more prevalent in women. The study concludes that there is a market for published erotica in 18- to 25-year-olds, though it faces challenges such as overcoming stigma and competing with other sexually explicit media including pornography. To appeal to this age group, erotica must be representative of a diverse range of genders, races, sexualities and sexual practices.

KEYWORDS: EROTICA, EROTIC FICTION, ROMANCE, AUDIENCE, READERSHIP, E. L. JAMES



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## FULL ARTICLE

### 1. What is erotica?

In contemporary book culture, erotica is sometimes considered a subcategory of romance. This cross-contamination of genres can lead to some disputable classifications; for example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is classified as erotic fiction on the Waterstones website (see *Figure 1*).

While erotic novels may include romantic elements and vice versa, it is important to recognise a division between the two. The difference lies chiefly in the role of the sexual component: where romance may use sex as a means to “provide conflict and advance the plot”, erotica is “the exploration of one’s sexual identity”.<sup>1</sup> This distinction posits explicit sexual themes as the *only* prerequisite of erotica; where romance requires love and may include sex, erotica requires sex and may include love.

Some argue that there is a distinction between literary pornography and erotica, where literary pornography is qualitatively inferior, without discernible plot or character development. Erotica, then, should have something more to it than ‘just’ explicit sex. Critic Andrew O’Hagan contends that there is a negative correlation between a work’s explicitness and its value, and that erotica should be confined to the highbrow:

When it comes to erotic writing, the more explicit it gets – the more heaving, the more panting – the more I want to laugh. Erotic writing is said to have a noble pedigree: the goings-on in Ovid, the whipping in Sade, the bare-arsed wrestling in Lawrence, the garter-snapping in Anaïs Nin, the wife-swapping in Updike, the arcs of semen hither and yon. But it’s so much sexier when people don’t have sex on the page.<sup>2</sup>

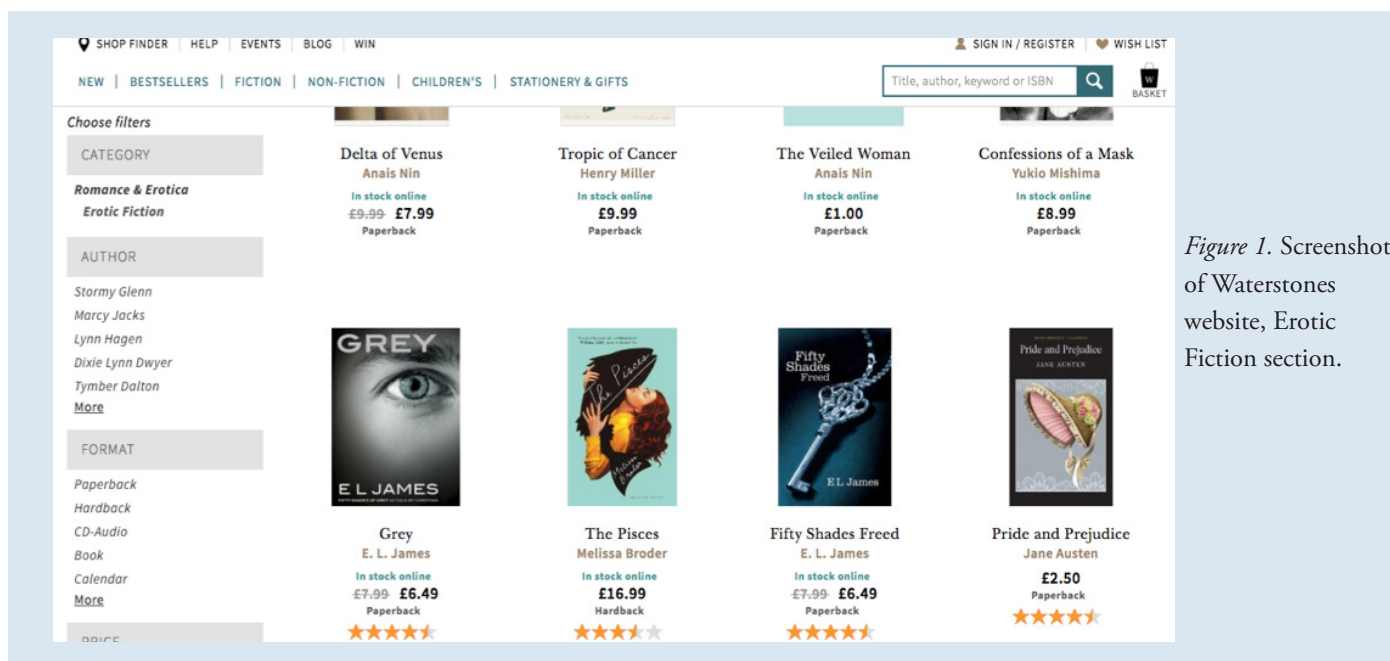


Figure 1. Screenshot of Waterstones website, Erotic Fiction section.

1 Gwenda Bond, ‘Selling Sex in a Recession: Erotica’, *Publishers Weekly*, 3 August 2009 <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/new-titles/adult-announcements/article/5826-selling-sex-in-a-recession-erotica.html>> [accessed 27 July 2018].

2 Andrew O’Hagan, ‘Travelling Southwards’, *London Review of Books*, 34.14 (2012), 29 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n14/andrew-ohagan/travelling-southwards>> [accessed 25 July 2018].



This study will dismiss the idea that erotica and written pornography are independent of one another on the grounds that “requiring an erotic novel to dispense with the sex is like demanding a jam doughnut without the jam”.<sup>3</sup> The study will instead treat the terms as synonymous, positing that explicit sex is one of two requirements a text must meet to be deemed erotica. The second is that the text as a whole must be “designed primarily to arouse”.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Erotica reader demographics

As a result of publishers’ tendency to make no distinction between romance, erotica and their subgenres, there has been little research on erotica in its own right. Insight into erotica reader demographics must rely on general studies of romance as a guide.

### 2.1 Gender identity

Nielsen’s Romance Book Buyer Report 2014 found that women were far more likely to buy romance than men; however, more men were being introduced to the genre, accounting for 15% of romance books purchased, up from 12% in 2013.<sup>5</sup> A study commissioned by the Romance Writers of America (RWA) showed that the figure had risen to 18% in 2017.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.2 Age

Nielsen’s 2014 report also showed a decline in the average age of romance readers from 44 in 2013 down to 42, a similar average age for fiction overall. The study indicated that buyers under 30 trended more towards erotic stories than romantic suspense, the most popular subgenre overall.<sup>7</sup> A more recent Nielsen study built on these findings, discovering a 10% growth in erotica-specific sales between 2014 and 2016.<sup>8</sup> A growing audience of younger readers and a simultaneous increase in erotica sales indicate that the younger market is driving those sales.

The trend continued into 2017, when the RWA found that the average age of the romance book buyer had fallen between 35 and 39, with the highest percentage of buyers in the 25-34 age bracket. The study’s conclusion was that “[t]he future of romance is the *younger emerging readership*. These younger readers are diverse in sexual orientation and ethnicity [and] more male”.<sup>9</sup>

3 Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith, ‘Reading the BDSM romance: Reader responses to Fifty Shades’, *Sexualities*, 16.8 (2013), 932-950 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713508882>>.

4 Lucy Mangan, ‘Erotica through the ages’, *The Bookseller*, 17 October 2012 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/feature/erotica-through-ages-338530>> [accessed 11 July 2018].

5 Nielsen, ‘Literary Liaisons: Who’s reading romance books?’, *Nielsen*, 8 October 2015 <<https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2015/literary-liaisons-whos-reading-romance-books.html>> [accessed 25 July 2018].

6 RWA, ‘About the Romance Genre’, Romance Writers of America, December 2017 <[https://www.rwa.org/Online/Resources/About\\_Romance\\_Fiction/Online/Romance\\_Genre/About\\_Romance\\_Genre.aspx](https://www.rwa.org/Online/Resources/About_Romance_Fiction/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx)> [accessed 25 July 2018].

7 Nielsen, ‘Literary Liaisons’.

8 Nielsen, ‘A Profitable Affair: Opportunities for publishers in the romance book market’, *Nielsen*, 7 May 2016 <<https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2016/a-profitable-affair-opportunities-for-publishers-in-the-romance-book-market.html>> [accessed 25 July 2018].

9 RWA, ‘About the Romance Genre’.



## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Hypothesis

In 2018, there remains an association between erotica and middle-aged women; as such, there is a relatively small amount of published erotica aimed at 18- to 25-year-olds. This investigation aims to explore the findings of recent studies that indicate that younger readers may be inclined towards erotica. It will address the notion that there is an underserved market for erotica in 18- to 25-year-olds by assessing the age group's current attitude towards and experience of the genre. The study then aims to explore how, if at all, the suggestion of interest that has emerged from previous studies could be translated into published erotica aimed specifically at 18- to 25-year-olds that could generate revenue for the publishing industry.

### 3.2 Research questions

The study aims to address the following questions:

1. What is the general attitude of 18- to 25-year-olds towards erotica? Do these attitudes have an impact on their experience with the genre?
2. What experience do 18- to 25-year-olds have of erotica?
3. Is there an underserved market for published erotica in 18- to 25-year-olds, and if so, how can material be produced to best suit consumers' needs?

### 3.3 Data collection

The study used a mixed-method approach to data collection in order to accurately respond to the research questions. Interviews were conducted with twelve people aged 20 to 25, which aimed to determine what experience that age group had with erotica and whether those experiences matched their preconceptions. An online survey was also conducted to discern how often erotica is consumed by 18- to 25-year-olds, in what format and from which sources it is found or purchased and for what reasons. The survey consisted of ten questions and elicited a total of 338 responses.

In order to preserve anonymity, the names of all interviewees quoted in this study have been changed. Likewise, survey respondents will be referred to by number.

### 3.4 Limitations

The investigation faced a number of limitations: firstly, neither the interview nor survey sample is likely to be representative of the 18-25 age bracket as a whole, but rather of certain segments of that age group.

The sensitive nature of the questions meant that those who consented to be interviewed were those who knew the researcher well. Consequently, while their experiences and opinions offer useful insights, they cannot be said to be representative of the entire age group. Furthermore, in several interviews it became evident that the interviewee was uncomfortable with the questions. It is therefore possible that interviewees may have lied or avoided the whole truth during interview. The survey was able to significantly reduce this discomfort by offering anonymity.

It is likely that the sample suffered a nonresponse error, whereby sample members are unable, unavailable or unwilling to respond. There occurred several instances in which potential respondents informally reported that they had declined to take the survey due to a perceived lack of knowledge on the subject, a bias that may mean an overrepresentation of those with previous knowledge of erotica.



## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1 Stereotypes

Two distinct images of erotica emerged from the research. The first was that it is poorly written and of less literary merit than other genres. Words associated with erotica included “trashy”, “pathetic”, “tragic”, “soft”, “seedy” and “twee”.

At the other end of the spectrum were those who had a similar definition to that of O’Hagan, where explicit material veered on “literary pornography” whereas “erotica” represented more highbrow literature.

An unambiguous stereotype of the typical erotica reader also emerged: that of a woman aged between 30 and 60. Other characteristics, such as being white and either single or divorced, were mentioned. Louis described her as,

middle-aged, probably fairly left-leaning, possibly divorced. The kind of person who maybe would enjoy going to a nudist beach on holiday [...] a confident middle-aged woman.

The idea of erotica as poorly-written trash for middle-aged women has had a limiting effect on the genre’s potential audience. Participants with more experience of the genre were conscious of the stereotypes and tended to show an awareness of their potential inaccuracy, stipulating that they were ideas that *other people* incorrectly associated with erotica. This awareness stemmed from the discrepancy that existed between the stereotype and their own experiences of erotica.

I’m thinking of a middle-aged to older woman who is single and who reads these slightly embarrassing erotic novels, which is a bit sad because a lot of erotica can be really beautiful and really hot.  
 (Charlotte)

The stereotype of the erotica reader also closely matches that of the stereotypical *reader*.

If someone said describe a stereotypical reader, I’d probably say a similar thing. If I think about the people I know that read most... I’d say my dad reads a bit but my mum reads a lot more. My aunties read a lot more than my uncles. Women that I know of that age read. (Louis)

Many comments suggested that habitual readers were more likely to consume erotica, and those who were most likely to be habitual readers were seen as middle-aged women.



## 4.2 Permission: a licence to thrill?

Surrounding the discussion of stereotypes and stigma is the question of permission: who is allowed to read erotica?

### 4.2.1 The *Fifty Shades* effect

It is hard to overestimate the effect *Fifty Shades of Grey* has had on erotica. It boasted staggering sales figures, though outstanding sales did not inevitably represent an outstanding reception.<sup>10</sup> The books were widely dismissed as “demeaning”<sup>11</sup> and “dangerous”,<sup>12</sup> as well as being criticised by practitioners of the BDSM lifestyle for presenting an “unrealistic depiction”<sup>13</sup> of their erotic lives, noting that the sex described in the books “fails to be consistently consensual, values the hero’s pleasure over the heroine’s, and ultimately acts as a medium for a destructive and abusive relationship to ensue”.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the series was seen as poorly written to the point of hilarity; although the series was consistently mentioned unprompted by participants, impressions were unfailingly negative. Sales of the series were instead perpetuated by the large amount of media attention that drew a new audience to the concept of erotica. The British mainstream media published over 1,000 stories about the books and their effect in the summer of 2012 alone.<sup>15</sup>

Participants confirmed its impact; despite the vitriol it inspired, they credited the books with helping erotica become a more accepted and widespread form of entertainment. A common theme that emerged was the idea of permission, particularly for women, to talk about sexuality and be seen enjoying sexually explicit material.

I hate it, but *Fifty Shades* was such a phenomenon [...] I do feel as though people just started talking about it more. It became less of a taboo or shameful subject to be able to talk about. (Meghan)

A 2018 study confirmed that *Fifty Shades* had an impact in this area, finding that many women believed the series “made it ‘okay’ for women to be interested in sexually promiscuous stuff”.<sup>16</sup>

### 4.2.2 A more open society?

The more widespread acceptance of erotica and the liberalisation of societal attitudes towards sex seem to have had a surprisingly destructive effect on erotica. The investigation discovered a perceived lack of demand for the genre rooted in the idea that this age group has other means of learning about topics of a sexual nature in modern society. It also suggested that, as discussions around sex have supposedly been normalised, erotica has lost its appeal as “forbidden” (Margaret).

10 Denel Rehberg Sedo, ‘Richard & Judy’s Book Club and “Canada Reads”: Readers, books and cultural programming in a digital era’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 11.2 (2008), 188-206 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180801934487>>.

11 Deborah Arthurs, ‘Samantha Brick slams *Fifty Shades of Grey* on This Morning as “badly written porn that is demeaning to women”’, *Daily Mail*, 2 July 2012 <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2167800/Samantha-Brick-slams-Fifty-Shades-Of-Grey-This-Morning-saying-demeaning-women.html>> [accessed 25 July 2018].

12 Kathryn Casey, ‘Is “*Fifty Shades of Grey*” dangerous?’, *Forbes*, 23 June 2012 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/crime/2012/06/23/is-fifty-shades-of-grey-dangerous/>> [accessed 25 July 2018].

13 Katie Dunneback, ‘Erotica’s Full-Frontal Shelving’, *Library Journal*, 138.3 (2013).

14 Amy Quale, ‘Pursuit of Empowerment: The Evolution of the Romance Novel and Its Readership in *Fifty Shades of Grey*’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Minnesota State University Mankato, 2014), p. 4.

15 Deller and Smith, ‘Reading the BDSM Romance’.

16 Claire Kimberly, Amanda Williams and Stacy Creel, ‘Women’s introduction to alternative sexual behaviors through erotica and its association with sexual and relationship satisfaction’, *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 78.1-2 (2018), 119-129 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0771-x>>.





[18- to 25-year-olds] really wouldn't feel the need or urge to read erotica because I suppose the behaviours that come through in the books are already more present and accepted in society and their lives. It might have had elements of fantasy before – living a different or fantastical life through a book rather than the real thing. Whereas being a bit freer in what you do and who you do it with is more common now. (William)

In direct contrast, many comments suggested that 18- to 25-year-olds are significantly *less* open in discussions about sex than in middle-age:

One of the things that would prevent or skew people in the 18-25 bracket away from talking about erotic literature in a traditional sense is that confidence thing, which comes with age. We pretend to be very enlightened, but I think there probably is quite a reverence for sexual things. (George)

Despite the fact that many participants felt that they are part of a generation that is open about matters pertaining to sex, a sense of taboo pervaded the study. While the majority of interviewees appeared to have roughly homogenous definitions of erotica when questioned, their answers were littered with language demonstrating uncertainty, such as “I guess” or “I would say”. Moreover, the stigma attached to erotica appears to prevent it from becoming a widespread form of literature, and a consistent lack of openness enhances the concept of erotica as something shameful, embarrassing and perhaps a little strange.

[Erotica] isn't exactly publicly spoken about for better or for worse – and certainly can be an awkward conversation starter with a group of friends, your partner, etc. (Respondent 157)

As well as the discouraging effect of erotica's negative reputation, a lack of publicity and clear marketing means that many participants simply do not realise the genre exists as an available option.

I think it's a topic not many of our age range really know about or consider other than the well-known raunchy ones that were famous. May be something I look into further. (Respondent 202)

As a further consequence of an absence of publicity, there is also a lack of practical knowledge around where to find erotica, even in individuals with an interest.

Where do you go to buy [erotica]? A sex shop, I guess? Or there might be a small place or section in Waterstones? (Charlotte)





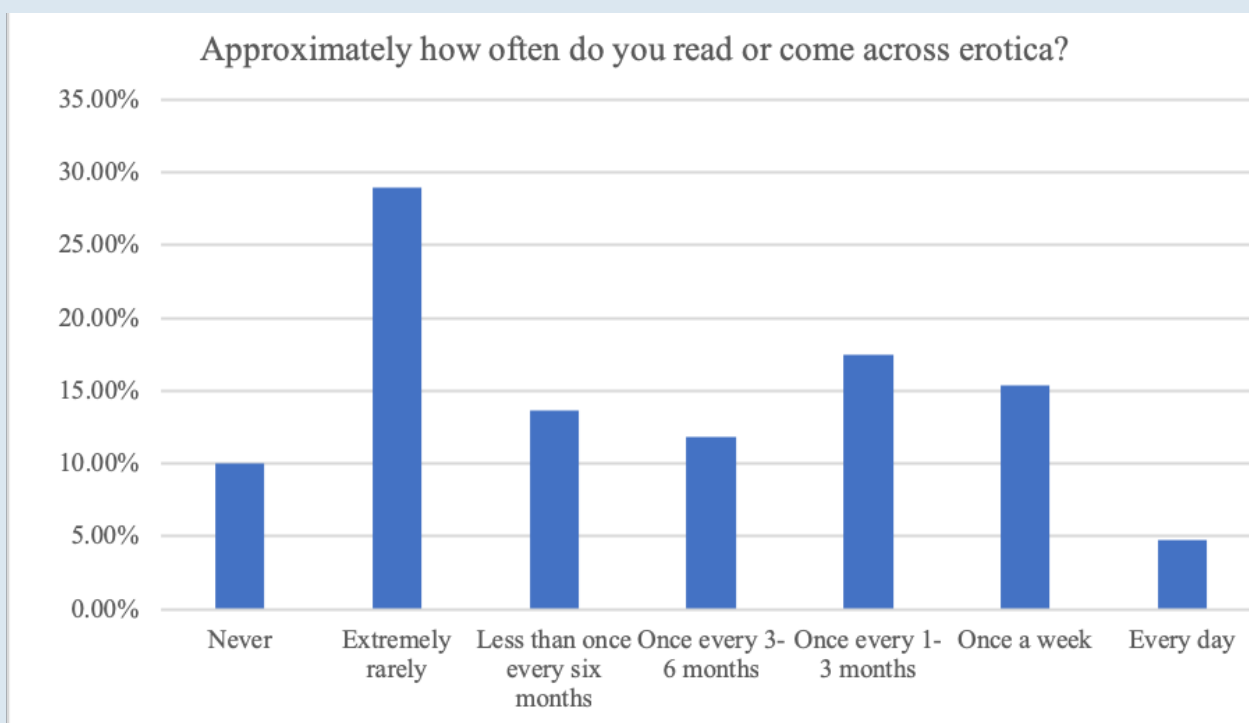


Figure 2. Graph illustrating how often survey respondents access erotica.

## 4.3 Experiences with erotica

The majority of participants had some experience with erotica, though the extent varied widely. According to the survey, 49% of respondents read erotica at least once every six months, with a substantial 38% claiming to read erotica at least once every three months and just 10% claiming to have never read any erotica (see *Figure 2*).<sup>17</sup>

Participants who consider themselves regular or semi-regular readers of erotica perceive the activity to have had a positive impact on their relationships and sex lives.

We could look through [erotica] together which was quite hot. [...] It also brings you closer. You learn a lot about each other by talking about stuff. (Charlotte)

These findings corroborate those of a 2017 study which found a correlation between erotica consumption and an increase in physical satisfaction in women. Erotica consumption was also found to enhance the reader's understanding of herself and her relationship.<sup>18</sup>

### 4.3.1 Gender identity

In terms of gender, the findings of the survey largely matched the studies on romance; when comparing frequency of erotica consumption, women read more often than men (see *Figure 3* and *Figure 4*).

There are a number of potential reasons for this discrepancy, the most obvious being that romance and erotica are generally written for, by and about women. Consequently, participants do not perceive erotica for men – specifically heterosexual men – to exist in the mainstream.

I don't think erotica is written for men at all really, in terms of the viewpoints it's written from and the styles that it's written in. (Anne)

<sup>17</sup> All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

<sup>18</sup> Kimberly, Williams and Creel, 'Women's introduction to alternative sexual behaviors'.



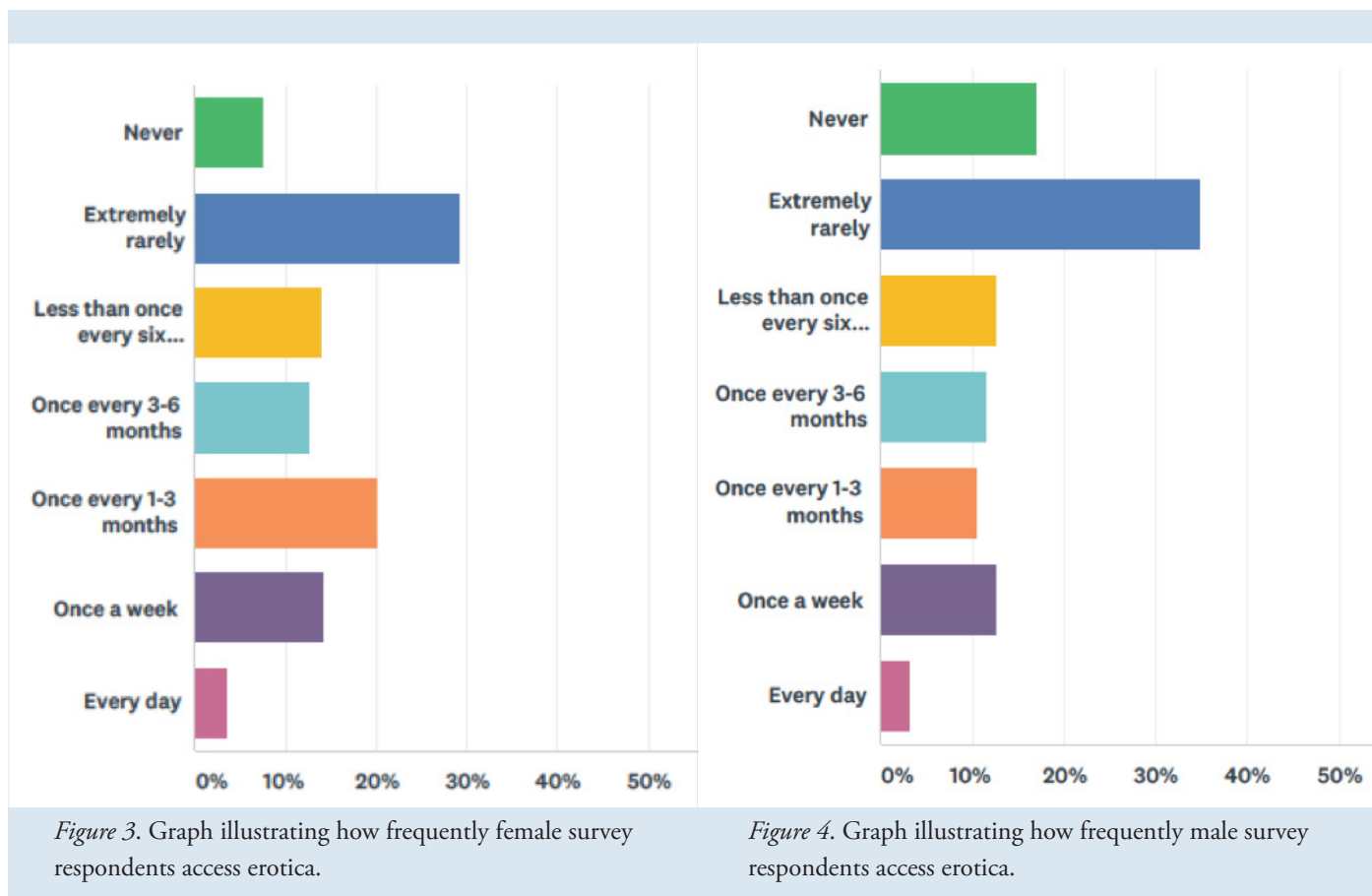


Figure 3. Graph illustrating how frequently female survey respondents access erotica.

Figure 4. Graph illustrating how frequently male survey respondents access erotica.

This gap in male-focused erotica was also linked to the existence of mainstream pornography, which was strongly associated with men rather than women. Indeed, a notable gender difference in the consumption of pornography arose from the survey which, though less pronounced than participants believed, did reflect the perceived gender divide; 49% of women stated that they used pornography compared to 84% of men (see *Figure 5* and *Figure 6*).

Comments from men that help explain this disparity reference the perceived convenience of pornography over erotica, a notion which is surprising given the accessibility of free online erotica. This perception may instead indicate a lack of knowledge of online erotica or a lack of interest in erotica published in a physical format, which is undoubtedly slower to access.

Though men on the whole were more likely to value immediacy when searching for sexually explicit material, several commented on having a richer experience with erotica if they overcame the perceived barriers of stigma and time investment.

I have found that [erotica] can be more sexually stimulating than porn and once you get around the stigma, a better experience if you read with a partner. (Respondent 26)

Additionally, female participants tended to describe negative experiences with pornography and were more likely to find it objectifying, whereas they referenced erotica as inclusive rather than alienating. This has long been the case; a study in 1999 showed that women associated the term “pornography” with “violent” sexual images that “scared” and “disgusted” them.<sup>19</sup> In a 2004 ethnographic study, women reported that pornography generally represented the male contribution to heterosexual sex and that they viewed pornography as a source of “uneasy personal enjoyment and intimate anguish”. Erotica, on the

19 Susan M. Shaw, ‘Men’s leisure and women’s lives: the impact of pornography on women’, *Leisure Studies*, 18.3 (1999), 197-212 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/026143699374925>>.



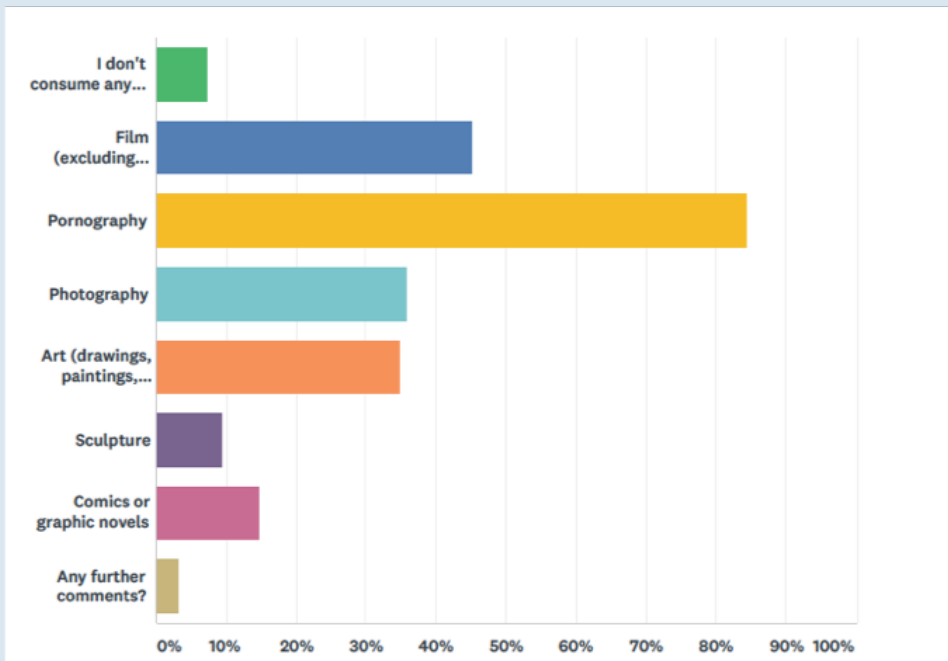


Figure 5. Graph illustrating which other forms of erotica are accessed by male survey respondents.

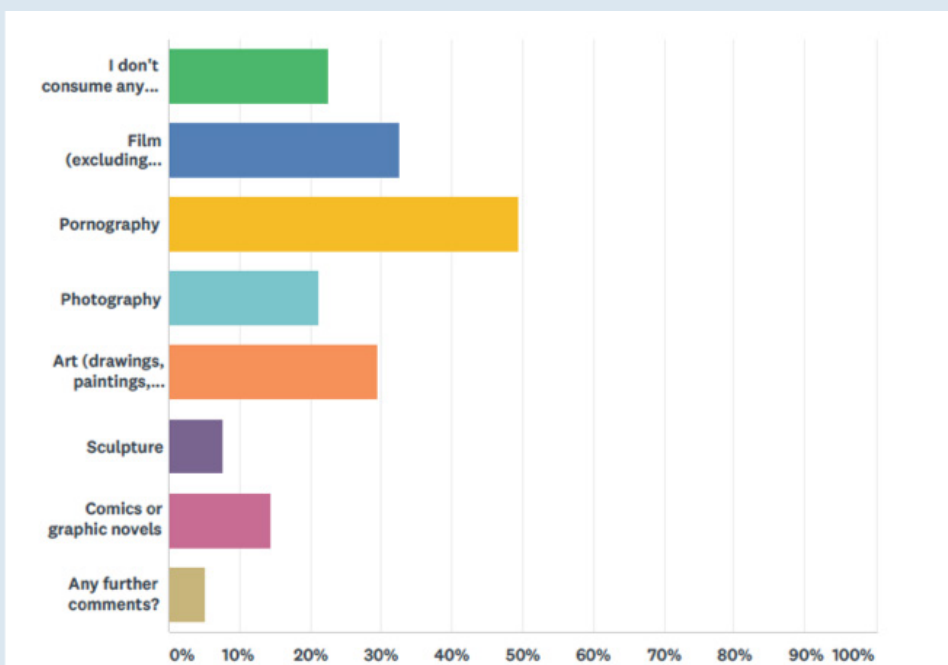


Figure 6. Graph illustrating which other forms of erotica are accessed by female survey respondents.'

other hand, was perceived to be “informative” and “inspiring” and was more likely to be incorporated into escapist practices of solitary pleasure.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, participants noted an element of stigma attached to women consuming pornography, which is lessened around erotica.

I do think that erotica is seen as a more palatable and a more acceptable form of porn. Even though we're opening up conversation about women's pleasure, it still needs to be done in a more acceptable way – so I think that's why it's often geared towards women, whereas it's very common for men to watch porn and discuss porn. A lot of porn is geared towards men. So I think erotica, at the minute, isn't being written and geared towards men in general because they do have this other platform which women are not seen as accessing as much. (Anne)

20 Dana Wilson-Kovacs, ““There is no Mrs. Ordinary doing the washing up”: Women's consumption of erotica/pornography”, presented at *Pleasure and Danger Revisited: Sexualities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (conference, Cardiff University, 2004).



## 4.4 The 18-25 market for erotica

Marketing and selling erotica to this age group faces challenges including overcoming stigma, competition with other sexually explicit media, a lack of access and knowledge and the perceived lack of quality of the literature itself.

Despite the strong awareness of stigma, a sense of individual receptiveness and curiosity pervaded the investigation. Women seemed more responsive to the idea of erotica than men, which corresponds with the fact that women generally had more experience with the genre. Men were more likely to be satisfied with pornography and disinclined to seek out other sexually explicit media. Nevertheless, this was not the case for all men; many gave responses indicating that they would buy – or at least read – more erotica, particularly if it were normalised.

### 4.4.1 Money and quality

When asked about their preferred buying methods for erotica, 33% of respondents stated that they “would never buy erotica”; however, when asked what could encourage them to read more book-based erotica, only 14% of survey participants stated “Nothing”. This implies that though most participants are open to the idea of erotica, paying for it is more of a sticking point. This is understandable considering that the majority of erotica read by this age group is consumed for free online. However, this leaves 67% of the age group that would consider buying erotica and 86% that could be encouraged to read more.

Many negative experiences with erotica centred on the fact that the reader found the writing to be of low quality; 42% of survey respondents stated that they could be encouraged to read more erotica if it were better written. Accordingly, comments made in the survey and interviews also drew a connection between money and an expectation of quality.

You’d want to know what was so good about it that would make you want to pay for it. It’s just like any other product – you’re paying for quality, like you would pay for any good book. (Meghan)

‘Quality’ is a highly subjective term, though it can be inferred from the above comment that it requires a professional standard of writing and grammar.

More subjectively, ‘quality’ can be taken to mean that the customer can be sure that they will enjoy the material, an inference suggested by the 39% of respondents who said they could be encouraged to read more erotica if the stories were more to their taste (see *Figure 7*).

### 4.4.2 Representation

A method to ensure that stories exist to suit all tastes was suggested by the 35% of respondents who stated that they would be more inclined to read erotica if they could better relate to the stories and characters. A low level of representation was an issue that was particularly prevalent for people of colour and the LGBTQIA+ community.

The representation of queer / LGBTQIA characters is often badly constructed / shallow or weirdly heterosexual. (Respondent 107)

Most is about cis characters or fetishizes trans people and as a trans person I would like more genuine representation. (Respondent 300)

I find the erotica that I have read, mainly online stuff, has very little people like me in. When it does have people of colour they are normally serving a “mandingo” image.<sup>21</sup> (Respondent 26)

<sup>21</sup> The term “mandingo” is an offensive term for a black man with a large penis.



### 4.4.3 Fanfiction

Fanfiction dominated survey respondents’ comments, being referenced a total of thirty times despite not being named in the survey. It was also referenced several times in interviews as a space where more diverse literature was available; specifically, material that focussed on queer relationships.

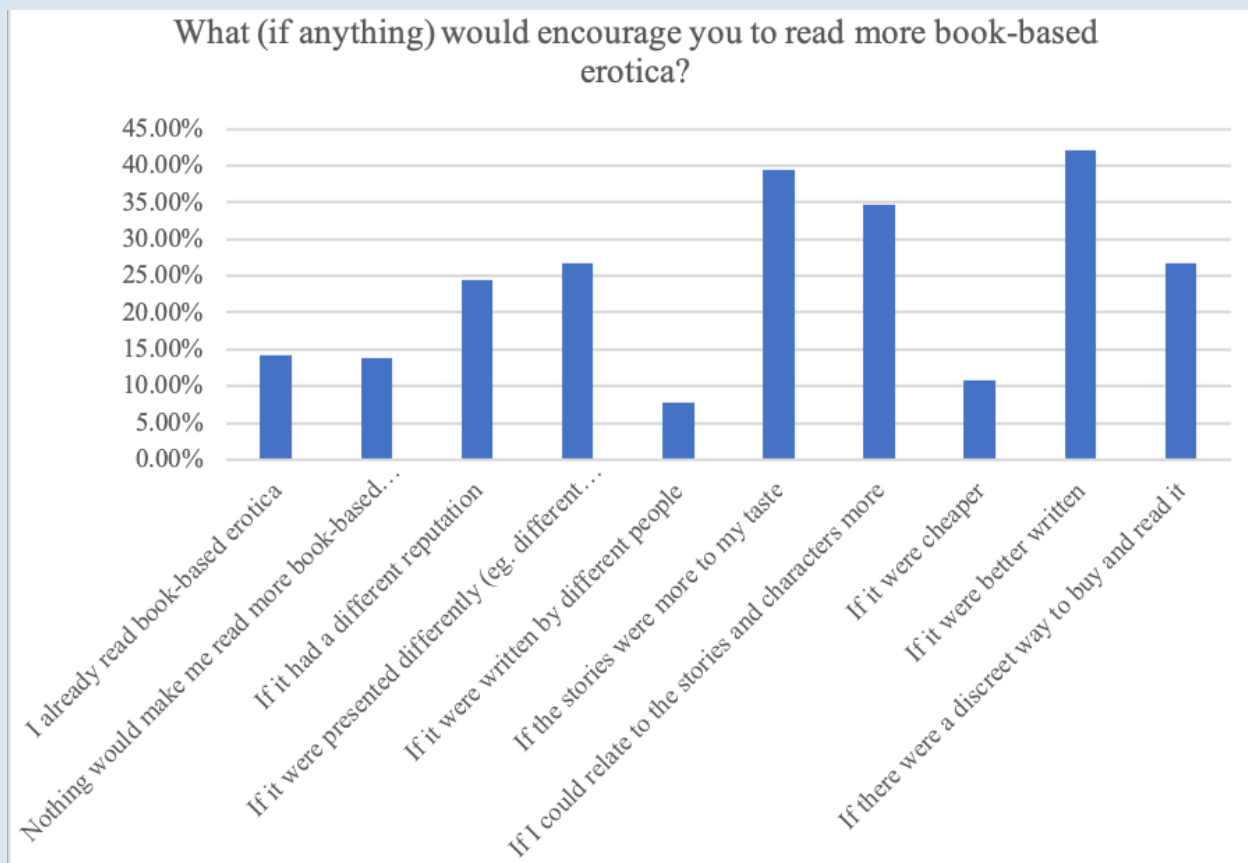


Figure 7. Graph illustrating ways in which survey respondents could be encouraged to read more erotica.

Margaret suggested that a prevalence of queer fanfiction is due to the heteronormative nature of the relationships portrayed in mainstream media:

People are starved of the content they want which is healthy, happy, homosexual relationships – so they create it in fanfiction. It’s mostly LGBT focussed because it needs to be – we don’t have anything else to read.

Elizabeth McDermott and Katrina Roen agree, stating that “young people who feel ‘at odds’ with sexual and gender norms have limited options to access alternative meanings to explain and explore their experiences”.<sup>22</sup> Fanfiction, in this case, represents “the safe, encouraging space to have positive interactions around LGBT literacy events, which allow[s] them to explore their experiences”.<sup>23</sup>

22 Elizabeth McDermott and Katrina Roen, ‘Youth on the Virtual Edge: Researching Marginalized Sexualities and Genders Online’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 22.4 (2012), 560-570 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732311425052>>.

23 Mandy Rita Stewart, ‘Digital Literacies And “glee”: The Role Of Fan Fiction Virtual Writing And Social Commentary In Response To Bullying Themes With Adolescent Writers’ (doctoral thesis, Wayne State University, 2017), p. 566.



#### 4.4.4 Realism, relatability and recognition

Fanfiction aside, there is an urgent need for more diversity of sexuality, race and sexual practices to be represented in erotica. Additionally, there may be a link between a lack of male-focussed erotica and low levels of male readership.

Comments also indicate that readers of this age search for realism in erotica rather than fantasy or escape – they seek to validate and explore their own experiences.

For me, reading that gives a more ‘honest’ depiction of sex [is] not only more interesting, but also show[s] a better kind of discourse. (Respondent 53)

For this age group, it is important to see themselves portrayed in a credible manner. Authors should share common ground with their protagonists, such as queer women authors writing queer women characters. This is linked to another high-ranking concern about the integrity of sexually explicit material; it is important to this age group that the material be produced ethically.

I think younger people view erotica almost as an ethical alternative to pornography metasites like Pornhub (there is less(/no?) stolen content, revenge porn, coerced participants in written erotica). Give the people ethical queer porn, publishing! (Respondent 197)

#### 4.4.5 Format and purchasing platforms

By far the most popular format in which to read erotica was “online (eg. blog or website)”, preferred by 61% of respondents. E-books and physical books were also highly ranked, preferred by 33% and 32% of participants respectively (see *Figure 8*).

I would probably go for a physical book, and I definitely would appreciate it if it was beautiful too. (Charlotte)

I think e-books will be popular because young people who are living with their parents for example might not want it on the bookshelves. E-books are a little bit more private. (Margaret)

Although a majority of respondents stated that they would prefer to consume erotica online, only 18% said that their preferred buying method would be to pay for online access, such as through a subscription to a website (see *Figure 9*). Many more preferred to order erotica online in e-book or print format (39% and 25% respectively).

Based on these figures, e-books seem to be slightly ahead of physical books in popularity due to their increased privacy and lower cost, which translates to a lower financial risk for newcomers to the genre. Physical books were also surprisingly popular for those who were established erotica readers; for these participants, a high standard of production was important.

#### 4.4.6 To judge a book by its cover

A large part of the disinclination to seek out erotica among those who were already regular readers was attributable to the books’ covers.

Stereotypically, [erotica covers have] a male ripped torso on them and a swooning woman. It doesn’t appeal to people our age. (Kate)



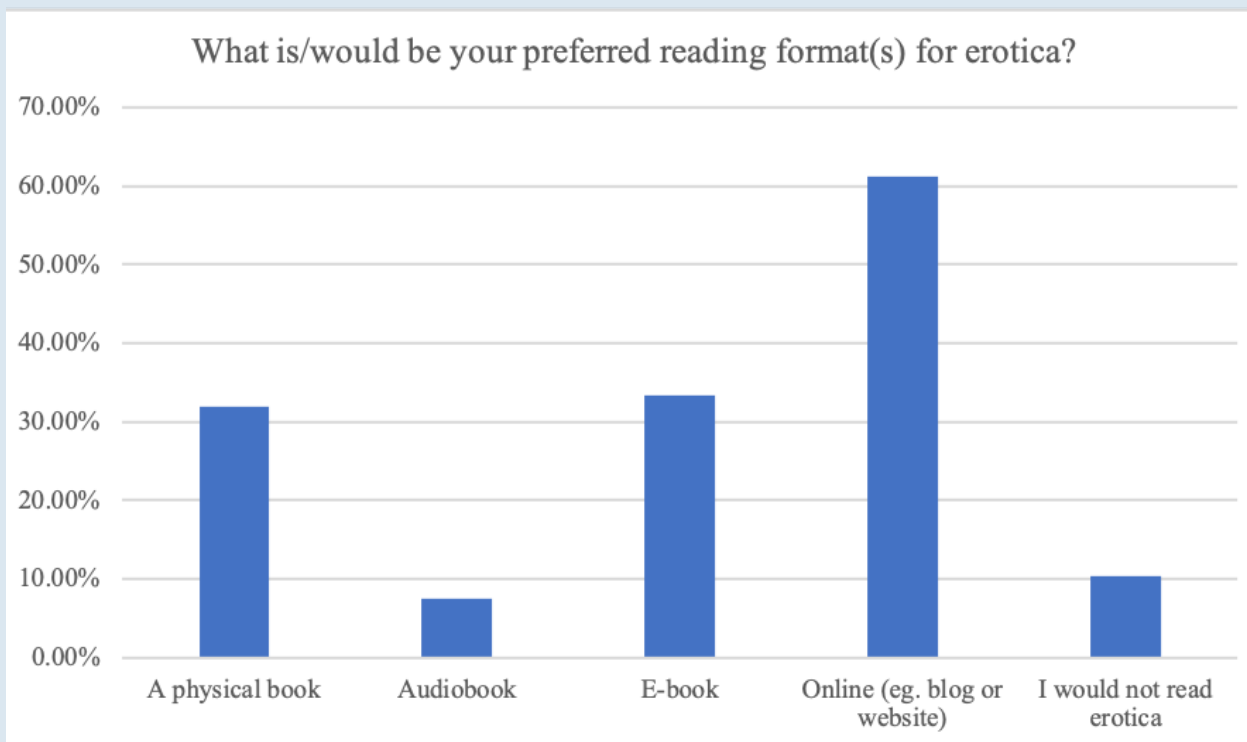


Figure 8. Graph illustrating preferred formats for erotica in survey respondents.

The importance of the cover art depended on the individual and the role of erotica in their life, with many stating that the cover did not matter as they would be unlikely to read erotica in public.

I probably wouldn't read it in public anyway. I'm not necessarily embarrassed by the cover, it's just that that's not what I use it for. (Kate)

I still think there is a stigma. Why shouldn't there be? There would be a stigma if I was reading Zoo magazine on the Tube. (Philip)

With online and e-book erotica, the issue is eliminated; however, since a third of respondents are interested in physical copies of erotica, the importance of the cover should not be overlooked as a strong influencer in buying decisions.

I would personally prefer a physical book just because I quite like physical books and especially if it had a beautifully illustrated cover, I would be very happy to display that on my bookcase. (Charlotte)





## 4.4.7 Form of content

Poetry and novels were often mentioned in interviews as appropriate formats for erotica, as were short stories.

I would say a collection of short stories that you can dip into and out of, partly because it suits our busy on-the-go lifestyles but I suppose also as an intro to the genre generally. You could pick it up, read a few pages... and see. (William)

Maybe a book of short stories, in order to get a lot of diversity involved to show that there's a lot of different 'normals' when it comes to what erotica is or what sex is or what romance is. (Meghan)

These comments are echoed by author Jen Campbell, who states that short stories are a convenient way to try out new genres as you can be exposed to a plethora of stories in a short space of time without committing to a longer read. A short story can often be read start to finish on the way to work or university, making it the ideal format for time-poor students and young professionals.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

At the outset, the study aimed to discern whether the indication of a downward trend in the average age of romance readers pointed to the existence of an underserved market for erotica in 18- to 25-year-olds. The investigation's key findings in relation to the research questions are as follows:

### 1. What is the general attitude of 18- to 25-year-olds towards erotica? Do these attitudes have an impact on their experience with the genre?

- 18- to 25-year-olds generally hold a negative view of erotica: that it is poorly written and aimed at middle-aged women.
- These stereotypes have a negative effect on active readership and knowledge of the genre.

### 2. What experience do 18- to 25-year-olds have of erotica?

- Most participants have had at least some exposure to erotica.
- Experiences are mixed; some found their experiences to affirm the negative stereotypes, whereas some referenced erotica as having had a positive effect on their experience of their own sexuality as well as on their relationships and sex lives.
- Erotica is most often accessed for free online in the form of fanfiction or user-generated content on websites, though some participants purchased physical copies online.
- Erotica consumption is more prevalent in women, though there is also a male readership.
- Erotica consumption is limited by negative stereotypes, a lack of practical knowledge of the genre and competing forms of sexually explicit material such as pornography.

<sup>24</sup> Jen Campbell, *Reading Short Stories: Where To Start*, online video recording, YouTube, 8 February 2017 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4Kb\\_70SHSg&t=10s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4Kb_70SHSg&t=10s)> [accessed 23 August 2018].



### 3. Is there an underserved market for published erotica in 18- to 25-year-olds, and if so, how can material be produced to best suit consumers' needs?

- There is a market for published erotica in 18- to 25-year-olds, though it faces challenges such as overcoming stigma and competing with other sexually explicit media that can be accessed quickly at no cost.
- The literature needs to be representative of a diverse range of genders, races, sexualities and sexual practices. It should describe realistic sex to reflect readers' experiences.
- Anthologies of short stories are an appropriate introduction to the genre for new readers; novels and poetry also have the potential to be popular.
- Erotica for this age group should be published in both e-book and physical format, with high importance placed on production.

## 5.1 Limitations and recommendations for further study

This investigation should be treated as an introductory study that paves the way for further research into the genre rather than a comprehensive analysis. The research was limited in its treatment of the 18-25 age bracket as a singular entity by overlooking discrepancies within it, as well as in its binary discussion of gender.

While preliminary conclusions can be drawn from the data based on age and gender, further market research is necessary. Additional demographic research that breaks down participants by race, sexuality, level of education, reading habits and location is essential to a thorough understanding of the potential market.



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