

Why the film adaptation of EL James' controversial book spells trouble for young women

# 50 shades of grave concern



**Charlotte  
KERR**

*FIFTY Shades of Grey* has potentially damaging ramifications upon our youth, as it normalises domestic abuse.

It does this by glorifying sexualised violence and crossing boundaries.

In the movie, a handsome, wealthy man coerces a young, virginal, female student into performing sexual acts that she doesn't feel comfortable with.

He uses narcissistic dominance and charisma in a targeted attack to break down her defences. He tries to mould every aspect of her behaviour. The possessive nature of this character has chilling parallels to situations that victims of domestic abuse describe.

He outlines what she must eat, wear, drink, and how she must perform sexually if she is to enter into a relationship with him. He limits her contact with people close to her by becoming angry when she plans to visit family and forces her to agree not to discuss their relationship with anyone.

Isolating someone from the people around them to remove support, and be dependent on their partner, is another classic move domestic abuse perpetrators implement.

Although the female character appears to have free will in choosing to enter the relationship, he systematically manipulates her strong feelings for him. A relationship is all on his terms, or not at all.

She has no choice than conforming to his wishes to continue seeing him. He refuses to act in a loving, warm, or affectionate manner with her, asserting she is to expect this because "that's just the way I am".

This paints a picture for young women that they are not entitled to be assertive about their own needs or desires in a relationship. It communicates that it is OK for a man to dictate his terms and that she should go along with them.

The movie romanticises these behaviours with beautiful actors, flash cars and ostentatious displays of wealth. It creates an image that if a man is really into a woman he acts in a controlling way and will pressure her to perform sexual acts she doesn't feel comfortable with.

He pursues her and makes her feel special with how much he wants her, creating the illusion that possessiveness is a demonstration of love.

This blurs the lines between an exciting, romantic courtship, and a damaging, unhealthy and controlling one. It conveys the idea that pain and degradation are sexy and that women enjoy being controlled.

Because the popularity of this movie has been astronomical, young men may deduce that young women find it appealing to have their partner behave in a way that is domineering and demeaning. Women have seen this message depicted with their peers

responding overwhelmingly positively to it, so they may believe that this is what men want.

Alarming, this appears to be a spectacularly successful first Hollywood foray into desensitising hardcore bondage and sadomasochism by marketing it as mainstream. It has catapulted this otherwise violent and fringe sexual preference into a seemingly fun exploration of one's sexuality.

Hollywood appears to be communicating to young people that abuse may not only be acceptable in some situations, but that sometimes it is actually desirable or romantic.

A healthy relationship is where there is an implicit understanding that both partners are free to be themselves, to be loved, celebrated and appreciated.

Another disturbing theme projected is the idea that if you love an abusive partner enough, they may change. But standing by someone who mistreats their partner and hoping they will improve, leads to a damaged sense of self-worth, injuries or possibly death.

We could see this movie as an opportunity to take advantage of curiosity and have important discussions with our teenagers. We can ask them what the movie means to them and how it relates to their perception of love.

It could be used to define relationships. It should be communicated in no uncertain terms that physical and emotional abuse are never acceptable, and are not part of any relationship. A healthy relationship involves mutual trust, safety, support and respect, and never leaves one partner feeling they lack choice about how they are treated.

Too many people in domestically violent situations are murdered by their partner.

Domestic violence is a larger killer of women than breast cancer and heart disease combined. In real life, domestic abuse situations rarely have happy Hollywood endings.

Charlotte Kerr is a member of the Australian Clinical Psychological Society. She is an adult and adolescent psychologist with Chris Mackey and Associates in Geelong.



**Jodie  
WHITTAKER**

FIFTEEN-year-olds can watch *Fifty Shades of Grey* a year before they are legally able to provide sexual consent.

The Australian film Classification Board's MA 15+ rating means children can see graphic and explicit scenes of sexual violence. Pre-pubescent kids can also see this film, provided their ticket is bought by an adult and they're accompanied by someone over 18.

I cannot comprehend how this decision was made.

I am troubled that young people yet to embark on their sexual discoveries will look to this film to define adult intimate relationships.

Impressionable children will learn more in 205 minutes than during any school sex ed classes.

The *Fifty Shades* trilogy seeped into public consciousness four years ago as "mummy porn" inexplicably topped multiple international bestsellers' lists. The atrocious writing in the *Fifty Shades* series does not faze me. I understand the joys of trashy escapist reading.

My concern is with the messages presented by *Fifty Shades of Grey*. These come from being a mother with daughters who could end up trapped in an abusive relationship.

Having people I adore who are survivors of sexual and domestic violence, I see too much reality in this supposed erotic fantasy.

Toxic messages celebrating and normalising the abuse of power through financial, physical, emotional, social and sexual torture are core to this movie.

The *Fifty Shades* books and movie are thinly veiled instruction manuals on sadism and domestic violence, providing step-by-step guides on how to take a vulnerable individual and destroy them.

The plot takes the sweet, naive, trusting virgin Anastasia Steele. It clashes her lower socio-economic status and lack of intimate experience against the male lead, Christian Grey.

Under the guise of romantic attraction, the film and books attempt to bring yin and yang together. But that is not what is really happening.

The male protagonist is multi-squillionaire, a misogynistic narcissist with a lust for cruelty. He holds all the power, experience and, ultimately, choices in their "relationship". Grey symbolises the ultimate bad boy, who uses their attractiveness and charisma to always get their own way.

Through seduction and mind games he commands Steele to sign two contracts, to ensure his manipulation is unchecked. There is a suggestion of an "out", with the use of safety words, however an enraged aggressor is unlikely to listen to reason. Many victims wish a magic word could stop their attackers' violence.

The first contract is a non-disclosure form, so Steele cannot discuss her abuse with anyone. Perpetrators seldom want their victims to speak up as this maintains their sense of control. A victim who finds their voice can seek assistance and protection, turning the tables on their abuser and depriving them of their power.

The second contract provides Grey with the ability to use her body, strip her dignity and control every element of her life. He even creates a windowless, sound proof venue for her torture.

By signing, Steel is promised boundless wealth, some access to Grey's softer, warmer side, but the cost is all rights to make choices.

This document could also be seen as the bonds of a violent relationship, an abusive marriage, the right to immigration or the cruel ties of an inequitable mortgage. The emotional hold manipulators have over their victim doesn't necessitate paperwork.

Once an agreement or relationship is formed, the offender can control and abuse their submissive victim in any way they choose.

Dominators like Grey choose their victim's clothing, diet, hair style and access to medical professionals. Their ability to freely travel, have a career, associate with friends or family and expression of personal mannerisms may be controlled. Any non-compliance of an abuser's desires might result in withdrawal of affection, humiliation along with emotional, physically and sexual violence.

Real love cannot exist if one partner holds more power or control. It is not a role-playing game. Releasing yourself into the genuine, honest and trusting bond of another is a risk. The rewards of a nurturing, caring relationship of equals who build each other's strength and support each other in challenging times — is what love truly is.

There is never room for violence in any relationship.

For anyone who sees elements of their relationship in *Fifty Shades*, there are choices and help is available. May you ultimately reclaim your voice so you can find the support and means to be free from your abuse.



**What do  
you think of  
this film?**

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**WRONG MESSAGE:** Dakota Johnson and Jamie Dornan in a scene from *Fifty Shades of Grey*.  
Picture: AP/UNIVERSAL PICTURES AND FOCUS FEATURES

