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*Sneers and Leers: Romance Writers and Gendered Sexual Stigma*

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In the article *Sneers and Leers: Romance Writers and Gendered Sexual Stigma*, authors Jennifer Lois and Joanna Gregson sought to explore the stigma romance authors face for the nature of their work. They discovered that romance authors are stigmatized in two distinctly different ways, thus the title *Sneers and Leers*. They also found a variety of ways in which romance authors respond to these criticisms, and how criticism and responses vary greatly due to the gender of the author.

In background research, Lois and Gregson found that women’s sexuality is more stigmatized and repressed by society, while men’s sexuality is encouraged (Armstrong). They found research that suggests that this social construct is one means of asserting social dominance (Stein). Interestingly, although romance authors face stigma due to the content of their work, romance is the most widely sold genre of literature today (Romance Writers of America). The researchers found several studies exploring the stigma faced by romance readers, such as those by Puri and Brackett, but discovered that there was no research on the stigma faced by the authors themselves. Thus, this study began.

In order to study romance authors, these two researchers immersed themselves in the romance community for four years. They started reading romances, attending romance authors’ conventions, and even tried their hand at writing a few books. Though the romance writing community is 99% female and predominantly white, the researches made sure to include males and women of color in their study to consider how these factors might affect the stigma they face. Using interviews and observational data, they found that the responses to romance authors generally fall into two categories ─ “sneers and leer.” Sneers refer to stigmatizing romance authors for their lack of shame about sexual content. This shaming also either directly or indirectly refers to the authors themselves, an indirect form of slut-shaming. Many think that women who write romances are too sexual and too open about sexuality. However, male authors got a considerably different form of sneering for writing romances. Instead of shaming them for their presumed sexuality, male authors were shamed for their presumed femininity. While women were shamed for sexual content, men escaped stigma by referencing the sexual content of their books. One author specifically said in an interview, “When I talk to males [about what I write], I never say ‘romance.’ Never. It’s ‘sex.’” Men also frequently reference how their job surrounds them with women and they get to think about women all day to reinforce their masculinity. While sneers are directly shaming, leers are false statements of appreciation. Many romance authors reported interactions with others who praised them for not being shy about sex and then followed these comments with inappropriate glances or actions or highly personal questions about their sexuality, such as “Have you done all the things you write about in your books?” Female authors respond to stigma in two main ways. Some embrace the controversy and invite conversation about sexuality. These women make a point that they should not be ashamed of who they are and what they write. Other women emphasize their role as a creator of literature and say that the sexual content is essential to the story and purpose of the literature. These women focus more on professionalism than the stigma around female sexuality.

The study had many interesting findings. Few people realize the stigma romance authors face for their work. It was also fascinating how the stigma is based around completely different concepts based on the gender of the author ─ sexuality for women and femininity for men. The section on leers also showed how people who may be attempting to seem supportive actually come across as intrusive and sexually suggestive. The methods were valid and repeatable, though repetition would take considerable work considering the years these women devoted to immersing themselves in this culture. While the interviews were enlightening, some quantitative data about the frequency with which romance authors experience both types of stigma and how they respond to it would have enhanced the findings of the study.

Romance authors face an excessive amount of criticism for their work, despite writing the most popular genre in the country. Men and women face different stigmas and deal with them in different ways. Whether women defend their work by defending female sexuality or by defending the professional qualities of romance literature, they are trying to make their work more accepted and celebrated in mainstream culture, and this article sheds light on the struggles of romance authors and how they are fighting back.

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