

Who's your Daddy? The Sugar Baby
Phenomenon and Intimacy in a
Neoliberal Era

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I believe that one of the tasks, one of the meanings of human existence – the source of human freedom – is never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile. No aspect of reality should be allowed to become a definitive and inhuman law for us.
Michel Foucault

Si je veux me définir, je suis obligée d'abord de déclarer: je suis une femme; cette vérité constitue le fond surquel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation.
Simone de Beauvoir

Declaration

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I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all critical and other sources (literary and electronic) have been specifically and properly acknowledged, as and when they occur in the body of my text.

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Abstract

‘Sugar dating’ denominates the dating dynamic in which two persons agree to an exchange of company and, in some cases, sex, for financial assistance. Since sexual services are regularly included in a ‘sugar’ dynamic, it falls into the realm of transactional sex. A ‘sugar’ relationship is ordinarily formed by a younger woman (‘Sugar Baby’) and an older, more affluent man (‘Sugar Daddy’). Despite anecdotal evidence suggesting an increase in the number of British university students participating in sugar dating in the last decade, sugar relationships in the United Kingdom are under-researched. This study offers a pioneering academic approach to sugar dating by locating these transactional relationships in the context of British higher education institutions and the neoliberal precarization of university students in the UK. Among the numerous sugar dating websites that have proliferated in the last decade in Britain, Seeking.com stands out not only for being the most popular platform providing an online, ‘sugaring’ meet-up place, but also for operating as the matrix where the ‘sugar’ discourse is constructed. Through its discursive power, the site produces the Sugar Baby as a subject inasmuch as Sugar Babies and Daddies are subjected and subjugated, through a process of *assujettissement*. Through semi-structured interviews conducted with ten Sugar Babies, this study analyses how Seeking.com’s discursive power affects the development of their relationships with their Sugar Daddies, how gendered inequalities are reproduced in sugar dating, and how the neoliberalisation of higher education in the UK influences the participants’ decision to sugar date. The data showed that the participants’ entrance into sugar dating was influenced by multiple factors including insufficient student loans, underpaid part-time jobs, and lack of parental support. A postfeminist approach towards femininity and sexuality, aided by a neoliberal mindset of self-responsibilisation, constituted the ideological framework that facilitated participation in sugar dating. This study concludes that sugar dating is informed by a complex gendered transactional dynamic of sex and power whose popularity is favoured by the current ideological and material neoliberal milieu. This context facilitates the sexual and emotional exploitation of Sugar Babies against the background of university students’ increased impoverishment.

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Introduction

There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures.
bell hooks

This thesis springs from a broad interest in understanding how sexuality, specifically young women's sexuality, is shaped by neoliberalism in both its current ideological form and its material configurations. When designing this research project, I was interested in understanding how an ideology that operates at a 'macro' level – i.e., macroeconomically and globally – permeates subjects at a 'micro' level and manifests itself in the most intimate of practices: those that constitute sexuality. The impact of neoliberalism, and more so after the financial crisis of 2008, is itself gendered: women are considered 'ideal' neoliberal subjects as they tend to control themselves following principles of self-responsibilisation – and, arguably, self-blame – more effectively than their male counterparts (McRobbie, 2007; Shain, 2013; Scharff, 2016). Women are also more affected by structural inequalities: not only are they the ones who suffer(ed) more from the economic recession of 2008¹, but also economic recessions tend to be accompanied by an abandonment of policies that promote gender equality, as if equality is reserved for times of plenty (Negra & Tasker, 2014).

Yet, investing in 'macro' levels of power and subjugation without delving into the daily experiences of individuals will not suffice to understand the extent to which women's sexuality is embedded in and affected by gendered neoliberalism. In order to address the ideological operations of neoliberalism in women's lives, we need to seek a paradigm that will include "an understanding of ways to transform consciousness", as bell hooks suggests (1996: 193). If we wish to transform unjust structures, we need not only a historical account of how neoliberalism and gender politics operate together, but also the scrutiny of the formation of subjects, i.e. their consciousness. Sugar dating constitutes the 'micro' practice I have chosen in order to understand current configurations of neoliberalism and its effects on young women's sexuality.

¹ March 2008 "saw the beginning of an economic recession in the UK, marked by the first quarter of negative growth in gross domestic product (GDP) since 2001 [...] In the UK the 2008 economic recession was preceded by rising levels of house repossessions and unmanageable household debt and followed by sharp rises in redundancies, unemployment, an increased proportion of part-time employed (under-employment) and reduction in wages" (Coope et al., 2014: 76).

‘Sugar dating’, also called ‘sugaring’, can be described as the practice of setting up a transactional relationship between an older, affluent person (‘Sugar Daddy’ if male, and ‘Sugar Momma’ if female) and a younger, financially disadvantaged one (‘Sugar Baby’). These types of arrangements ordinarily involve the exchange of company and sexual services for financial assistance, whether in money and/or in kind (Kuate-Defo, 2004; Motyl, 2013; Nayar, 2017), which places sugar dating in the realm of transactional sex. Heterosexual sugar dating², the most common type (Deeks, 2013), has been thoroughly researched in some countries of the global South such as Kenya (Longfield et al., 2004; Luke, 2005), and South Africa (Brouard & Crewe, 2013; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013; Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2014). In the last few years, sugar dating as a research topic has acquired notoriety in the Anglo-Saxon world, with research conducted predominantly in the US (Deeks, 2013; Motyl, 2013; Nayar, 2017; Mixon, 2018) and Canada (Daly, 2017). Nevertheless, sugar dating is still under-researched in the UK³. This study offers a pioneering academic study of the practices of sugar dating by locating these transactional relationships in the context of neoliberal British higher education institutions and the increased precarization of university students in the UK.

As I intend to show, sugaring represents a paradigmatic example of how neoliberalism, heterosexuality, and postfeminism operate against the background of increasing impoverishment of students in Britain; and how their union fosters the creation of a gendered dating dynamic where economic necessity and a postfeminist sexual agency blend together to favour the commodification of women’s lives and bodies. Gender works as the key analytical category here as sugaring adapts to the current context but builds on a long tradition of women capitalizing on their own erotic power in light of (relative) poverty, and men exploiting the possibility of accessing women’s bodies, as well as their emotional labour.

In sugar dating, ‘agency’ and ‘choice’ are key notions that complicate previous attempts to theorise transactional sex in oppositional terms - either coerced or freely chosen. The relational

² Homosexual sugar dating is beyond the scope of this work. While lesbian ‘sugar’ relationships are under-researched, more attention has been paid to gay sugar dating (see Kruks, 1991; Adam, 2000; Minichiello & Scott, 2014).

³ Roberts, Jones and Sanders (2012) briefly mention the increase in students engaging in sugar dating as their debt grows, but their paper focuses on the sex industry as a whole rather than the practice of sugar dating.

dynamics of sugar dating, especially those practised by university students, differ from the dynamics of more straightforward practices of sex work such as street prostitution: university students are, to an extent, privileged agents that accumulate and mobilize different types of capital. Nevertheless, obscured uses of ‘choice’ and ‘agency’, as well as unsubstantiated sex-positive analyses of sex work as an unproblematic type of work, similar to any other type of work that requires the use of the body (see Nussbaum, 1998, or Kesler, 2002, for example), fail to address the nuances of the ways in which subjectivity operates in sugar dating, and consent may be coerced by different structural forces. This argument will be explored in more depth later in the thesis. A thorough analysis of sugar dating must be anchored in the material conditions of the Sugar Babies. By placing sugar dating in its material and historical context, it becomes possible to make apparent the otherwise obscured pervasive structural injustices that motivate student sex work and sugar dating experiences. The neoliberalisation of the university, the heightened impoverishment of students, and the current sexualisation of young women and girls operate together in the subjugation of female individuals. I situate myself as part of the contemporaneous current of thought that wants feminism to recuperate socialist politics and claims of economic redistribution (Oksala, 2013). However, “class analysis is a beautiful piece of work, but limited” (Firestone, 2015 [1970]: 6). Focusing solely on a material analysis will not suffice. Neither will centring the analysis exclusively on circulating discourses on sugar dating and their effects. Thus it is equally important to listen to the subjects involved and their experiences in order to navigate how sugar dating operates and how it impacts on them. This is the motivation that underpins the use of multiple research methods and different theoretical corpuses, with a strong emphasis on the voices of the Sugar Babies themselves.

This thesis is divided into four parts which (i) explain the methodology and methods that I have employed to conduct this research; (ii) position and contextualise sugar dating in the United Kingdom; (iii) critically evaluate ‘sugar’ discourses in circulation; and (iv) analyse in-depth interviews with ten Sugar Babies. The first part consists of two different theoretical chapters. In Chapter III: The Path Towards a Neoliberal Education and Chapter IV: Gendered Neoliberalism, I aim to address the processes of neoliberalisation that the higher education sector has experienced in Britain since the 1980s. I highlight the key measures that have unequivocally affected students: the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 and their subsequent rise, the elimination of maintenance grants, and their substitution with student loans to be repaid after graduation. This sectoral transformation occurred in parallel with the adoption of an unmitigated version of neoliberalism in Britain that departed from the Keynesian post-war

economic approach which had made Britain one of the most equal countries in the world (Jones, 2012), a title long lost. The new economic model was accompanied by an ideological rhetoric of self-responsibilisation that conceived success (or lack thereof) solely as an individual endeavour and therefore separated the individual from their socioeconomic milieu - what has been denominated a neoliberal governmentality (Oskala, 2013). Students, economically affected by the elimination of maintenance grants, and facing an economy where salaries for part-time jobs have steadily decreased in the last decades, are left with no vocabulary to highlight structural forces that affect their lives. Neoliberalism has obscured the notion of structural inequalities: students are now encouraged to look for personal solutions to collective problems.

Chapter III will show that, simultaneously with this process, the hegemony of second-wave feminist theory - highly critical of patriarchal domination and its entanglement with capitalism - was being eroded. Postfeminism, as a new 'sensitivity' which is "at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas" (Gill & Scharff, 2011: 145) and which "offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics" (Negra, 2009: 2), became the norm. Postfeminism's emphasis on bodily agency obscures an insidious view of women's (hetero)sexuality as a commodity that can be sold, if necessary. Furthermore, postfeminism operates in a context of gender inequality and discrimination without engaging with their structural nature, instead encouraging women to change themselves in response to their environment (Negra & Tasker, 2014). Within this framework, the encouragement of women to capitalize their sexuality conceals the fact that it is the dominant group (i.e. men) who perpetuate their access to women's sexuality. It is within this context that heterosexual sugar dating flourishes: against the background of a neoliberal governmentality that extends the notion of commodification to private realms in every individual's life, and yet affects women in very specific and distinctive ways.

The second part of the thesis includes critical discourse analysis of Seeking.com and its sister website, Letstalksugar.com (hereinafter LTS). Seeking.com, created in 2006, is the most successful online meet-up platform for sugar dating in Britain, as well as globally. Together with LTS, these platforms form what I denominate 'the Seeking conglomerate', as they are

both owned by the same company and share the same CEO (Brandon Wade)⁴. LTS was created in 2015, nine years after the launch of Seeking.com. When navigating Seeking.com users can find links that will lead them to its sister website in order to learn more about how to behave in the ‘sugar bowl’ (which means, in Seeking.com’s ‘terminology’, the platform’s ‘pool’ of daters). LTS works as an online blog that markets itself towards female university students who wish to know how to become a Sugar Baby, or how to behave once they are engaged in sugar dating. Content offering a code of conduct towards one’s Sugar Daddy, and/or disciplinary bodily techniques of self-improvement, is regularly uploaded to the site.

In 2010, Seeking.com launched their own site, the Sugar Baby University ProgramTM⁵, in the United States. Following the initial success of the site, the British version was created five years later, simultaneously to LTS. Currently both websites are still active. This ‘program’ targets female university students by advertising sugar dating as an effective way of relieving student loans and debts related to the costs of higher education, as well as a means to attain an upper-class lifestyle by virtue of dating a ‘successful benefactor’ (Seeking, 2021). Seeking.com establishes a direct correlation between the rise of tuition fees, the acquisition of student loans, and the number of members that have joined their Sugar Baby University ProgramTM in the last years:

The value of outstanding student loans at the end of March 2020 reached £140 billion. As many as 83% of student loan borrowers in the UK will never be able to repay their debts, according to a 2019 report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies. It makes sense that the number of college Sugar Babies seeking Sugar Daddies on SeekingArrangement rose 4 percent from the previous year. The UK has the second-largest population of members on SeekingArrangement (Seeking, 2021)

A ranking of British universities, classified according to the number of students that have registered on Seeking.com with an email account provided by them, is displayed on the site. The University of London, University of Portsmouth, and University of Salford occupy the top three, respectively. Although the data regarding the number of new student members is not segregated by sex, the website offers information about the gender chosen by their existing

⁴ Both websites (as well as other similar websites such as Whatsyourprice.com, where people can bid to go on dates with a person) are owned by a third company called InfoStream Group, based in Las Vegas (NV, USA). Brandon Wade is the CEO of Seeking.com, Letstalksugar.com and Whatsyourprice.com, but not of InfoStream Group.

⁵ The Sugar Baby University ProgramTM is a way of joining Seeking.com: a premium account is offered to those users who register as Sugar Babies with an email account provided by a higher education institution. Conversely, those who register with an ordinary email address are not offered premium accounts. The benefits of obtaining a premium account are described in Chapter V.

members upon registration: circa 2,050,000 female Sugar Babies (93.2%), 150,000 male Sugar Babies (6.8%), 500,000 Sugar Daddies (97.3%) and 14,000 (2.7%) Sugar Mommas were registered on the website by January 2021 (Seeking, 2021). The reliability of these figures cannot be verified as there is no other official census of Sugar Daddies, Mommas, and Babies; and the fact that there are more Sugar Babies than Sugar Daddies can be interpreted as an advantage for the Sugar Daddy, and therefore a mechanism that the website employs to attract them.

Nevertheless, if we assume that the data provided is reliable, these numbers suggest that female university students are more attracted to sugar dating than their male counterparts, and that it is relevant to interpret sugar dating within the framework of heterosexuality, since most of the arrangements are formed by a male Sugar Daddy and a female Sugar Baby (Deeks, 2013). This thesis, therefore, focuses on heterosexual arrangements.

Analysing sugar dating as a social phenomenon rather than an individual choice is imperative since the dynamic is affected by structural social factors such as gender, level of education, and student impoverishment. Chapter V shows that sugar dating has no obvious legal definition⁶, which creates a vacuum that opens the door for websites such as Seeking.com to offer their own interpretation of what sugar dating should be. Seeking.com has succeeded in creating a discursive definition of sugar dating that deeply affects their users: lengthy descriptions of what it means to be a Sugar Daddy or Baby are available on the site. It is argued in this chapter that the discourse reproduces heteronormative scripts where women's sexuality and desires are subjugated to the Sugar Daddies. The website is characterized by a consistent use of euphemisms to describe transactional sex: intimacy, companionship, being 'pampered', 'no strings attached', etc. This veiled language replaces previous definitions that could be found online a few years ago (before 2012)⁷, when the website defined itself as an "online matchmaking site for 'wealthy benefactors' and willing women – women who understand there will be no long-term romance, who understand their Sugar Daddy may be married, who understand that sex, and secrecy, is expected" (Miller, 2011, qtd. in Cordero, 2015: 26). Now

⁶ Sugar dating, in contrast to other sexual transactional dynamics such as escorting or lap-dancing, is not regulated by law. Although in the UK it could potentially be covered by prostitution laws, sugar dating falls into a legal limbo as there is no specific regulation.

⁷ In 2012, Seeking.com's language was redesigned: any reference to an expectation of sex in the relationships was removed, as well as words related to infidelities or secrecy. The site also included postfeminist ideas on women's empowerment that were previously absent (that a sugar relationship is suitable for 'empowered' women, for example) (Cordero, 2015).

the website announces that it constitutes a place “[w]here beautiful, successful people fuel mutually beneficial relationships” (Seeking, 2021b). All direct references to sex have been deleted, yet the sexual aspect of the relationships is hinted at.

The third and last part of this thesis is constituted by two chapters: Chapter VI: I have bills to pay! Paving the Way for Sugar Dating and Chapter VII: Blurred lines: Lived Experiences of Sugar Dating. In both chapters I analyse and discuss the empirical data generated through semi-structured interviews that I conducted with UK-based women who were sugar dating at the time or had previously done so. Nine out of ten participants had sugar dated while attending university. The testimonies of the participants are placed in dialectic opposition to the description that Seeking.com offers for sugar dating. In this sense, the interviews are analysed not as isolated texts but rather as part of a number of discourses circulating on sugar dating. Participants are asked to identify the circumstances that motivated their entrance into sugar dating, and to reflect on the development of their relationships. These open-ended questions allow the placement of the interviews within the context of the neoliberalisation of higher education in the United Kingdom, as well as within a framework characterized by compulsory heterosexuality and a postfeminist approach to female sexuality.

The data showed that the participants’ entrance into sugar dating was influenced by multiple economic factors: insufficient student loans, underpaid part-time jobs, and lack of parental financial support. A postfeminist perspective on femininity and sexuality, aided by a neoliberal mindset of self-responsibilisation, constituted the ideological framework that facilitated participation in sugar dating. The analysis of the interviews revealed that Seeking.com constitutes a powerful discursive force which, in many cases, acts as a technology of coercion. A high number of participants assumed that sex was expected in the ‘sugar’ relationships and therefore that they could not refuse to engage in intercourse or other sexual practices, effectively eroding their capacity to voice or refuse sexual consent.

This thesis argues that sugar dating is a dynamic resulting from a broader neoliberal governmentality that treats all aspects of Sugar Babies’ lives as potentially commodifiable. Seeking.com utilises this context to create a discourse that subjects the sexual desires and even the wellbeing of the Sugar Babies to the Sugar Daddies. This, in turn, favours the creation of relationships where the imbalance in power is such that the possibility for abuse becomes in-built. Consequently, many participants experienced situations that can be thought of as

liminally consensual and/or as sexual assaults. The findings of this thesis have implications for the understandings of notions of consent and sexual exploitation as complex, nuanced, and affected not only by material contexts but also by ideological discourses such as neoliberal governmentality and postfeminism. Thus this analysis can be applied not only to sugar dating but also to other dynamics where exploitation occurs within a postfeminist and neoliberal context, especially if they are connected to higher education. This thesis constitutes a pioneering and original study of the ways in which macrostructures – patriarchy and neoliberalism - shape contemporary micropractices and reproduce gender inequalities.

Methodology & Methods

*Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction.
Perhaps this is the core of revolutionary process.*
Adrienne Rich

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology and methods that I have implemented in this research. It is divided into two distinct parts which inform each other: theory and practice. I will firstly explain the methodology, understood as the theoretical underpinnings that frame this research (Landman, 2006); and secondly, the methods - the techniques I have used to gather data, which in this case have been content analysis and semi-structured interviews. Theory and practice interact with each other in this work, as I have consciously tried to challenge patriarchal notions of what constitutes 'knowledge' (Haraway, 1988). The methodology and methods I have employed are shaped by a feminist epistemology and ontology: I have consciously rejected hegemonic, masculinist notions of objectivity and impartiality by moving away from totalizing visions of sugar dating and instead beginning "with the material" (Rich, 1986: 213): the lives of the participants here interviewed.

As a feminist researcher, I was preoccupied with a series of methodological obstacles: how to find the nexus between feminist theories and women's experiences while avoiding universal claims (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002), and how to "challenge positivist notions of objectivity and truth" (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002: 315). Standpoint theories provide a possible solution to this problem, as they take "women's experience as fundamental to knowledge of political relations between women and men" (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2020: 61). These experiences are enclosed within a temporal and geographical frame in order to avoid universalizing presumptions. They are, in this sense, "an account of radical historical contingency" (Haraway, 1988: 579). Treating women's experiences as a legitimate locus where valid scientific knowledge is produced is part of a feminist methodology that seeks to change the definition of what has historically constituted legitimate knowledge (Barret, 2014; Haraway, 1988) in social sciences. What follows is a description of my own standpoint.

II.I. Feminism as a methodology

II.I.I From Badajoz to Nottingham: A politics of (re)location

I draw from Rich's politics of location and her urge to "[begin] with the material" (1986: 213) in order to challenge abstraction in the production of knowledge. The disembodied production of knowledge has been defined in scientific areas as neutral, as if the scientist were a blank canvas disconnected from corporeal realities, but that positionality has often proved to be male, white, and upper-middle class. Cartesian dualism, where the body is obliterated and the mind is sovereign, is nothing more than a futile attempt at neutrality:

It is this founding system of binaries which has served to negate the feminine and locate women outside the realm of the subject [...] the feminine, (and the female body) has historically been constituted as that which must be defined, directed and controlled through the application of disembodied, objective, masculine knowledge (Budgeon, 2003, qtd. in Coffey, 2013: 5).

The social meaning of the body is imprinted on us and affects the lived reality of individuals, including researchers. Adrienne Rich proposes to use her position as a woman to question how gender - understood as the political relation between men and women - affects women, and not only 'abstract' bodies: she asks "where, when, and under what conditions have women acted and been acted on, as women?" (1986: 214).

My own experience as a woman is intertwined with my feminist politics, and therefore it becomes relevant when trying to apply the latter to an academic task. I was born in an ordinary, middle-class, Spanish household: my father is a medical doctor, and my mother works in a trade union. They were both first-generation university students who came from working-class backgrounds and managed to reach a comfortable position by virtue of social mobility. My nuclear family fits perfectly into Bourdieu's (1984) description of the 'petite bourgeoisie', which entails a certain anxiety to acquire as much educational capital as possible to secure their position and their offspring's as new middle class, informed by an almost reverential approach towards culture.

Nevertheless, the material reality of my family changed in 1997 after my parents divorced, when I was five years old. My mother effectively became the head of a single-parent household, which hindered our access to economic capital as is the norm for women after marital

separation (Weiss, 1984). Despite this change in circumstances, I was able to attend university by virtue of both my mother's economic efforts and a series of government scholarships I was granted. These scholarships were exiguous when I was a first-year student, but then became even more meagre after the Spanish government, led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, implemented a series of austerity-driven policies in 2010 (López & Rodríguez, 2011). Even then, I was not forced to acquire a student loan since my university fees were covered by a scholarship and I had parental support. During the politically tumultuous years of my undergraduate studies, I was very aware of the fact that the welfare state was being questioned in Spain and subjected to constant scrutiny from national right-wing parties, following the global financial crisis of 2008. This could mean that I was perhaps one of the last generations to be able to attend university thanks to government-funded scholarships, which was one of the measures under attack.

A couple of years later, when I was already living in England while doing my MA, I came across an article about sugar dating in a British tabloid newspaper. The article humorously explained how a young woman, described as a 'Sugar Baby', was dating a 'Sugar Daddy' in order to pay her tuition fees. Reminiscing about my undergraduate years, I started wondering if that could become a reality in Spain; if that could have been *my* reality had I been born in the UK instead of Spain and therefore forced to pay several thousand pounds per year in tuition fees. Unknowingly, I was using my own standpoint to formulate research questions, asking how the lives of women have been affected *as women*⁸. Why was the fact that young women were bargaining sex in exchange for money to attend a higher education institution in the fifth largest economy in the world (World Bank, 2019) being described humorously in this article? Surely the British economy was not as precarious as the Spanish economy, so how was it possible that I could attend a university thanks to a scholarship, and that the same financial aid was not available to women in the UK who were in the same situation as me? The fact that I was (now) an economic migrant, still alien to the UK, and a young, university-educated woman such as the Sugar Baby described in the article, fueled my interest to turn sugar dating into the object of my research: these are the politics behind my location.

⁸ In that particular article, no reference was made to homosexual sugar dating or Sugar Mommas. I later learned that was the norm.

II.I.II Woman as a place of location

As I consider myself a subject whose embodied history affects her research, I applied the same logic to my research participants. Their own gendered bodies would shape their understanding of sugar dating. Sandra Harding calls this “the social location” of research, “the place in race, gender, and class relations from which it originates and from which it receives its empirical support” (1991: 12). Reflecting on the social location of a doctoral thesis means questioning the inherent power relations in its field: considering who has traditionally been a subject worth researching and, conversely, whose experiences and life stories have been most marginalized. The goal, then, is to design a research project that can potentially challenge this discrimination. Since women are considered a ‘muted’ social group (Devault, 1990) who have been systematically silenced, forgotten, or erased from history and from academic research (Harding, 1991) until feminist efforts fought for their inclusion, the empirical data had to be gathered from women in order to challenge this discrimination.

By using the word ‘woman’, I am not resorting to essentialist ideas of women sharing the same social position or the same social experience; rather I propose to conceptualize ‘women’ as a “non-unified group: a group that exists by virtue of having a genealogy” (Stone, 2004: 136). According to Stone, women acquire an identity as women by “reworking pre-established cultural interpretations of femininity, so that they become located - together with all other women - within a history of overlapping chains of interpretations” (2004: 136). Women are a ‘non-unified group’ whose category can be used in order to socially locate the research. Spivak has also navigated the tension between essentialism and researching women as a ‘muted’ group. By using the concept of “the strategic choice of a genitalist essentialism” (Grosz, 1985: 183), Spivak defends in an interview with Grosz using ‘women’ as an encapsulating word:

The universalism that one chooses in terms of anti-sexism is what the other side gives us, defining us genitally. You pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side and what you are throwing away by doing that is your theoretical purity. (Grosz, 1985: 184)

It is necessary to strategically use the notion of ‘woman’ if we want to create emancipatory works that will challenge patriarchal epistemologies, even if that means throwing away our ‘theoretical purity’. Therefore, in this work I will strategically talk about ‘women’, understood as a non-unified social group that share a common genealogy. Nevertheless, the choice of interviewing women posed some challenges and ethical issues that I carefully considered.

II.I.III. Ethical considerations

Researchers are often aware of the potential negative effect that an interview can create for their participants. In order to lessen the potential damage, certain strategies have been adopted in previous qualitative studies, such as offering participants the opportunity to complete a survey to assess the experience (Ruzek & Zatzick, 2000), reflecting on and explaining one's own positionality within the research (Lloyd & Hopkins, 2015), or ensuring several times during the interview that the interviewee is comfortable and wishes to proceed with the conversation (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009).

Another approach taken by a number of qualitative researchers is to posit that their research offers a platform where participants can express 'their voices' (de Souza, 2004; Rojas, Susinos, & Calvo, 2011). However, this term is not appropriate for my own work, since this practice "can actually reinforce the very systems of oppression that it seeks to redress [...] hierarchies of power and privilege are re-inscribed when the researcher presumes to give voice to someone else" (Ashbey, 2011). The idea that the researcher can 'give voice' to the participant places the researcher in a privileged position and assumes that the subject does not have a voice that they are already actively using to articulate their own reality (Ashbey, 2011). In addition, the idea of 'giving voice' implies that the voice of the participants runs untransformed through the work, which does not accurately represent the process of interviewing a person since the interviewer is also invested in the production of the answers:

It is the interviewer's investment in finding answers, her own concern with the questions she asks and her ability to show that concern, that serves to recruit her respondents as partners in the search: the things said are responses to these words of this particular researcher. The researcher is actively involved with respondents, so that together they are constructing fuller answers to questions that cannot always be asked in simple, straightforward ways. (Devault, 1990: 100)

Thus the interviewer does not 'give voice' to the participant; rather, utterances are constructed collaboratively with the interviewer during the interview process. However, the analysis of the interviews is necessarily a solitary process: the interviewee is not involved in that second part of the interview and it is in this moment when the power imbalance is more pronounced (Letherby, 2004). What I have done in this research is not to 'give voice' to my participants, but rather to place the collaborative conversation within the context that I have previously developed in the chapters of this thesis. This interpretative framework allowed me to analyse

and situate their voices, yet it necessarily implies an imbalance of power as it constitutes solitary endeavour.

When analysing the testimonies of the participants, I have avoided universalising claims. The reader should thus be mindful that the presentation of data in this research is shaped by my own interpretation of the lived experiences of a specific number of Sugar Babies, adhering to Donna Haraway's advocacy for "radical historical contingency" (1988: 579). Therefore, I do not claim that the experiences of my participants constitute *the* universal experience of sugar dating. Rather, my claim is for my own analysis of the empirical data gathered with these specific participants. My aim in this research is to combine my own feminist politics, an embodied standpoint, and the utmost respect towards the testimonies of my participants in order to create a situated research that produces partial visions of the truth, which is the only truth there is (Haraway, 1988).

II.II. Objective of the study

The objective of this research is to contribute to the academic literature on sugar dating in the Anglo-Saxon world, focusing on the case of the United Kingdom; and, to a lesser extent, to academic research on the participation of students in the sex industry. This investigation was led by several research questions, as well as by the goals of social emancipation and transformation of what has been perceived to be an unjust social order which sustains "(hierarchically) gendered social arrangements" (Lazar, 2007: 141):

- How is sugar dating discursively constructed by Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com and what are the implications of this discourse?
 - Can sugar dating be considered an activity within the sex industry?
 - How does this discourse reproduce or challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity?
 - How does this discourse reproduce or challenge a hierarchical social order?
 - How does this discourse reproduce hegemonic heterosexuality?

- What is the narrated lived reality of the women here interviewed and how does this data correspond with those gathered from Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com?
 - What were the economic circumstances that the participants experienced prior to and during their engagement with Sugar Daddies? Were these circumstances impactful?
 - How do the participants describe their relationships with their Sugar Daddies?
 - How do these relationships conform to notions of hegemonic heterosexuality?
 - How do participants negotiate their agency and power within these relationships?

And finally:

- How is sexual consent affected by sugar dating?

A mixed-method approach that combines two different qualitative methods has been formulated to conduct this investigation.

II.III. Qualitative methods

As is common in feminist qualitative research (de Souza, 2004), this work uses a mixed-method approach for data collection. For data analysis, feminist discourse analysis (FDA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) have been employed.

Qualitative methods have often been prioritised over quantitative in feminist research as it is generally acknowledged that they constitute a more effective tool to reflect the lived experienced of women. In investigations where the researcher is preoccupied with their own positionality and accountability, qualitative methods are also considered a more suitable option (Landman, 2006). Henwood and Pidgeon argue that qualitative research methods accommodate “an approach to the total process of research which fully recognizes the critical, and indeed necessary, inter-relationship between the subjectivities of both researcher and her

participants in the social construction of knowledge” and thus “can represent context-specific understandings” (1995: 9-10).

The use of qualitative methods instead of quantitative provides both advantages and disadvantages that have been carefully taken into account prior to the commencement of this research. While quantitative studies use “established procedures, leading to results that are generalizable to populations” (Malina, Nørreklit & Selto, 2011: 61), qualitative studies do not normally produce generalizable results, as is the case in this thesis. Qualitative methods are also unsuitable for creating statistical data; however, they overcome more effectively the abstraction inherent in quantitative data collection (Malina, Nørreklit & Selto, 2011). Although quantitative research has been considered impartial and neutral, as opposed to qualitative methods’ supposed ‘subjectivity’, especially that of interviews (Devault, 1990), qualitative research is also subject to strict methodological rigor. In addition, qualitative methods are preferred when researching hard-to-reach populations (Baltar & Brunet, 2012) because they permit a deeper analysis of the data, and therefore can compensate for a potentially small sample.

For these reasons, a qualitative approach was most appropriate for this research. Empirical data has been gathered from two websites - Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com - and from semi-structured interviews. The use of at least two different data-gathering methods has been defined with the term ‘triangulation’ (de Souza, 2004), often describing the use of two different qualitative methods (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Triangulation “gives access to different versions of the phenomenon” (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 137). In this case, the analysis of the websites shows how sugar dating is discursively produced, whereas the interviews provide first-hand testimonies of the participants’ lived experiences of sugar dating.

II.III.I. Data collection strategy I: Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com

Treating digital media as a valid source of data is a relatively new phenomenon in feminist studies, except in pornography or online dating studies (Race, 2018). Websites can be difficult to analyse as they present some distinct features that distinguish them from more traditional texts. In the case of Seeking.com, for example, it not only operates as a ‘blog’ from where data

can be extracted, but also as an online dating site. Content from Seeking.com as a dating site is not suitable empirical data since it is not in the public domain⁹.

Nevertheless, websites are social artefacts, “embedded in their context of production, distribution and reception in the social, economic and cultural world” (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018: 5), and therefore can be subjected to sociocultural analysis. I have employed the ‘technical walkthrough method’ in which the researcher must engage with the website as the users would do, systematically exploring the different interfaces (Light, Burgess and Duguay, 2018), to gather digital media data from Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com. Screenshots and pictures have been used as data collection units. Additionally, a textual analysis as well as a semiotic analysis has been conducted. The analysis of the websites can be found in Chapter VI and Chapter VII.

II.III.II Data collection strategy II: Semi-structured interviews

The second method to generate empirical data that I have used in this project has been one-to-one, semi-structured interviews¹⁰. One-to-one, semi-structured interviews are an optimal qualitative method for conducting research on sugar dating as they are typically “used as a research strategy to gather information about participants’ experiences, views and beliefs concerning a specific research question or phenomenon of interest” (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009: 309). Contrary to other methods, interviews allow participants to narrate their own lived reality using their own words, something still revolutionary when interviewing young women as it can be considered “an antidote for centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women” (Reinharz, 1992: 19).

Ten interviews were conducted between August 2019 and December 2019. Of these, six were face-to-face, one telephonic, and three were written interviews. It is acknowledged that the size

⁹ A username and a password are necessary to enter the online-dating portal; therefore, it is no longer considered a ‘public’ website and consent from its users is needed to reproduce any of the data. In addition, usernames and profile pictures populate the private site. For ethical reasons of confidentiality, usernames and pictures will not be reproduced in this thesis. For more information about ethical considerations while conducting research on online dating forums, see Ashford (2009) and Diebel-Fischer (2018).

¹⁰ For the interview script, see Annex I.

of the sample requires caution when extrapolating my findings. However, smaller samples are generally accepted when conducting research with hard-to-reach populations (Faugier & Sargeant, 1996). There is no claim that the voices included here are representative of a particular category of people, in this case Sugar Babies. Other experiences of sugar dating, different from those presented here, are equally valid. More research regarding sugar dating should be encouraged in order to offer different perspectives.

During face-to-face interviews, the role of the interviewer is key in order to ensure that the experience is not distressing for participants. Interviewers need to establish rapport and trust with their interviewees, as well as ensure that they are actively listening without judging (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009). Being of the same sex as my participants has facilitated the interview process, as women have been socialized to ask others how they think and feel (Reinharz, 1992). Spender has argued that “woman-to-woman talk is quite different from talk in mixed groups - because women speakers are more likely to listen seriously to each other - and [...] it affords opportunities for women to speak more fully about their experiences” (Spender, 1985, qtd. in Devault, 1990: 98). Therefore, developing rapport was a smooth experience. The fact that the interviews were conducted in the chosen settings of the participants, often while sharing a drink - a ‘symbolic exchange’ (Chapple, 1999) - created a comfortable environment for the women interviewed and ensured the process was successful.

Sampling method: Criteria

Participants were targeted using purposive sampling: I sought a “closely defined group for whom the research question [would] be significant” (Chapman & Smith, 2002: 127). The criteria were the following: UK-based women who were sugar dating or had previously done so, between 18 and 30 years old. Focusing on that age cohort guaranteed not only that they had been affected by the economic, political, and social circumstances that I have described in Chapter III, but also that they had come to adulthood embedded in that particular ideological climate. Moreover, since Seeking.com targets young women for the role of Sugar Babies, searching for participants that belong to that specific age cohort maximized the possibilities of finding them.

The resulting participants were Suzanne, Rebecca, Nora, Melanie, Patricia, Jessica, Yasmin, Rosa, Elisa, and Ruth. Their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-seven. Although Patricia was slightly older at the time of the interview, she had sugar dated when she was in her early twenties; therefore that is the age considered for research purposes. The totality of the participants had sugar dated in the United Kingdom, which was one of the criteria: seven in England and three in Scotland. All participants were British nationals. Three participants described themselves as Black (Suzanne, Rebecca and Yasmin), five as White (Rosa, Nora, Melanie, Ruth, and Elisa), and two as Asian British (Jessica and Patricia). All the participants had engaged in heterosexual, 'sugar' relationships. However, only one, Rebecca, considered herself heterosexual. Rosa, Ruth, and Suzanne self-described their sexual orientation as queer, Jessica, Patricia, and Yasmin as bisexual, Elisa as lesbian, and Nora as pansexual. Melanie chose not to define her sexuality. All of them had at least a graduate degree or were pursuing one, with the exception of Elisa. Regarding their sugar-dating status, Rosa, Ruth, Nora, Melanie and Yasmin had already finished their studies and were no longer sugar dating at the time of the interview; Jessica had not graduated yet but had stopped sugaring; and Suzanne and Rebecca were simultaneously studying and actively sugar dating. Elisa was sugar dating and working full time, and Patricia had stopped sugaring and was also working full time.

There was a strong interest in the testimonies of women who were highly educated - those who had attended a higher education institution or were doing so at that moment - owing to Seeking.com's particular emphasis on recruiting university students under their Sugar Baby University Program™. Thus, despite the fact that being college-educated was not one of the criteria, 90% of the participants had earned at least an undergraduate degree or were in the process of doing so at the moment of the interview. Nevertheless, the testimonies of those who were not college-educated proved to also be extremely valuable, as the circumstances that affected their decision to sugar date were embedded in the same political and economic context that I have provided in Chapter III.

All the participants were familiar and at ease with the terms 'Sugar Baby' and 'Sugar Daddy'; none of them found these offensive or diminishing, and all of them referred to themselves as being, or having been, Sugar Babies. With the exception of Jessica and Rosa, none of them identified themselves as sex workers, and therefore that term is not used in this work to refer

to the rest of the participants. However, the term is used during the interviews with Rosa and Jessica, as they described themselves as such.

Sampling method: Recruitment strategies

After obtaining approval from the ethics committee of Nottingham Trent University, different participant recruitment strategies were designed in order to maximize the possibility of finding them. Any social group who engages in either illegal or illicit behaviour is considered a 'hidden' or hard to reach population (Magnani et al., 2005), which means that they are less inclined to participate in any type of research than other, non-hidden, groups. Sugar Babies can be considered a hard-to-reach population due to the transactional and intimate character of sugar dating. The possibility that the same stigma that affects people involved in the sex industry - such as those in prostitution (Benoit et al., 2018) - could also impact sugar dating was not dismissed.

Two different recruitment methods were employed in order to maximize the possibility of reaching Sugar Babies: online-based and the snowball method. The first strategy consisted of seeking participants through online platforms, especially through the social network Facebook. Although the Internet population "constitutes a biased sample of the total population in terms of demographic characteristics" (Baltar & Brunet, 2012: 58), this demographic bias was actually useful for my research purposes, as younger people tend to use the Internet more frequently than older cohorts (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). I created a post in several women-only support groups explaining that I was looking for women who had sugar dated and would be willing to be interviewed, and posted it in these groups. Three participants reached out and agreed to have face-to-face interviews and three consented to a written interview.

The second strategy derived from the first and consisted in employing the snowball method: once a willing research participant is found, this person gives the investigator the name of another possible participant, who provides another name, and so on. This technique is often used when participants are hard to reach or belong to a vulnerable group (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Three participants were referred by a former participant. The last participant was referred by another person who ultimately decided not to be involved in the project.

II.IV. Analysis of the data: Discourse Analysis and Feminist Discourse Analysis

The empirical data obtained through the walkthrough of the websites, as well as the interviews, has been analysed using discourse analysis, focusing specifically on feminist critical discourse analysis (hereafter, also FCDA) as defined by Lazar (2014), which will be described below. However, the hybridity that characterizes this work - in terms of using mixed methods, for example - also applies to its theoretical underpinnings. I have drawn on other theoretical corpora different from feminism such as critical theory and poststructuralism, commonly used in non-feminist discourse analysis. The theories I used to conduct the critical discourse analysis were never 'pure' or 'isolated'; they informed each other, talked to each other, sometimes even opposed each other. I resorted to Sandoval's description of oppositional consciousness, which I understand as an attempt to gather several distinct theories and make them work together:

It is no accident that over the last twenty years of the twentieth century new terms such as "hybridity," "nomad thought," "marginalization," [...] entered into intellectual currency as terminological inventions meant to specify and reinforce particular forms of resistance to a dominant social hierarchy. Taken together, such often seemingly contending terms indicate the existence of what can be understood as a cross-disciplinary and contemporary vocabulary, lexicon, and grammar for thinking about oppositional consciousness. (Sandoval, 2000: 68-69)

Oppositional consciousness does not imply that theoretical traditions that can be accused of Eurocentrism, androcentrism, and even anthropocentrism remain unchallenged; but rather that strategic coalitions are created between them to produce emancipatory theories and practices. Deconstructing oppressive discourses is one of the first steps towards equality since "any given theoretical text can generate practical implications" (Barret, 2014: XII). Therefore, adopting an oppositional consciousness was key for conducting the critical analysis.

Along the same lines, Lazar describes feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) as a "critical perspective [that] has developed at the intersection of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist studies, both of which are guided by goals of social emancipation and transformation" (2014: 182). Feminist theory has traditionally been used to deconstruct power asymmetries that are discursively produced (Lazar, 2014) and to unravel structural domination that is reproduced and reinforced through discourses. Despite the strong focus on gender and gender relations as analytical categories, the analysis performed here needs to be considered intersectional in the sense defined by Nira Yuval-Davis:

Unlike those who view the intersection of categories of social difference in an additive way, I see them as mutually constitutive. As to the question of how many facets of social difference and axes of power need to be analysed – this is different in different historical locations and moments, and the decision on which ones to focus involve both empirical reality as well as political and especially ontological struggles. (2016: 369)

Because categories of social difference do not operate in isolation but rather intersect and affect one another, others besides ‘gender’ have been included in the analysis, e.g. age, race, and class.

Seeking.com, Letstalksugar.com and the transcripts from the interviews were treated as texts subjected to critical analysis. This analytical approach is part of the ‘linguistic turn’ in humanities and social sciences that places emphasis on the role of language - i.e. the symbolic - in constructing what has been coined as ‘social reality’ (Talja, 1999). The empirical data gathered was embedded in the real basis of the social world but language plays a key role in the construction of this social reality, and sugar dating is no exception. I start from the idea that “neither the real nor the imaginary is assumed to exist independently of the symbolic” (Cruikshank, 2012: 40), hence the importance of analysing the symbolic and its connections with ‘the real’.

Chapter III: The Path Towards a Neoliberal Education

An education sold as an investment good that has no economic return for most buyers is, quite simply, a fraud.
Guy Standing

III.I. The rise of neoliberalism and corporate culture

We can understand neoliberalism as being, primarily, “a theory of political economic practices which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets and free trade” (Harvey, 2006: 145). Nevertheless, neoliberalism goes beyond the economic realm as it “is not only a political rhetoric, or ideology, but a wide project to change the institutional structure of societies at a global level” (Pritchard, 2007: 452). This expansion of an economic theory into the production of a new social subject has been defined by Foucault as neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008). The resulting subject can be described as an “entrepreneurial self” (Peters, 2001: 58); a reborn *homo economicus* whose nature has shifted from being a citizen who depends (to an extent) on the (welfare) state, to a self-reliable being who wishes to become an entrepreneurial actor. This mentality has acquired in Western societies a status of quasi-common sense: it has grown to be the lens that we use to understand the world, and it has transformed our everyday practices (Harvey, 2006). In the sector of higher education, the adoption of the neoliberal rationale has translated into what Peters calls “enterprise education and the enterprise curriculum” (2001: 58). This includes eliminating, or at least eroding, the notion that education is intrinsically good for society and should therefore be considered a collective good, and substituting it with the idea that students are the only beneficiaries of their own education, and thus solely responsible for making an investment.

Giroux (2002) has argued that the neoliberal system has changed from being ‘only’ a neoliberal ideology to a mechanism that serves the purpose of a few private interests to maximize their profits. Certainly, the data seems to validate his theory.¹¹ Harvey goes as far as to affirm that

¹¹ “[T]he top 1% of income earners in Britain have doubled their share of the national income from 6.5% to 13% over the past twenty years” (Harvey, 2006: 149).

neoliberalism has effectively functioned as a “system of justification and legitimation for whatever had to be done to restore class power” (2006: 149). This goal has been achieved in the case of the United Kingdom through the steady dismantling of unions during the Thatcher era, among other practices. Neoliberalism should not be understood as a neutral economic theory, but as a system created to fortify the position of power of the ruling elite (Harvey, 2006).

One of the core principles of neoliberal ideology is a lack of confidence in the capacity of the state to resolve economic problems, while simultaneously relying on it to create an institutional framework that will enable the uninterrupted development of entrepreneurial freedoms such as property rights, free trade or individual liberty:

The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to be concerned, for example, with the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police, and juridical functions required to secure private property rights and to support freely functioning markets. Furthermore, *if markets do not exist [...] then they must be created, by state action if necessary.* (Harvey, 2006: 145, emphasis added)

The ‘market’ - that diffuse entity mainly constituted and dominated by the richest global corporations - has been described by neoliberal ideology as a more efficient mechanism for regulating societal and economic matters than the government; therefore, according to neoliberal ideology, it should be left unscathed by social policies and regulations (Giroux, 2002; Grimshaw, Vincent, and Willmott, 2002). The term “governance” has been coined by Wendy Brown (2016: 5) to denominate this merging of political and business practices that is pervasive in the Western world and that characterizes late modernity.

Neoliberal ideology emphasizes the relevance of market *competition* for the prosperity of a given country, as opposed to classical liberalism’s emphasis on market *exchange*, but not on competition (Read, 2009). Competitiveness has become the Holy Grail of every nation’s economy, the rationale behind every government measure: policies have been and still are taken to increase the ‘flexibility’ of different markets in order to make them more competitive, often without regard for the social consequences. In the UK, for example, the pursuit of ‘flexibility’ in the labour market has caused an increase in precarious, part-time jobs and non-standard forms of employment (Canny, 2002), particularly among students. For higher education institutions the neoliberal impact has been twofold: their curricula have been altered to promote a “national economic competitive advantage and future national prosperity” (Peters,

2001: 60), and there has been a rise in market-based policies aimed at improving the quality of universities (according to neoliberal standards) in order to make them more competitive (Dill, 2007).

Giroux (2002) argues that market logic and market 'language' have permeated Western societies to the point that their citizens have absorbed that logic as their own, and they are beginning to recognize themselves primarily as consumers rather than as citizens of a particular society. Western countries are currently immersed in a "corporate culture" (Giroux, 2002: 427) along the lines of Peter's aforementioned "enterprise culture" (2001: 58), where civil discourse has been altered and new terms, arising from the semantic field of the economy, have become suitable definitions of social behaviour and action. Consumerism, individualism, and competition are now valid nouns to describe what drives social agents to act, constituting our contemporaneous *zeitgeist*. At the same time, this new paradigm has translated into what Çalişkan and Callon (2009: 369) have called "economization": the alteration of non-economic social spaces such as public parks or libraries, activities, and subjects.

Neoliberalism has managed to appear almost natural, a lifestyle that is not being questioned or challenged¹² in political spheres. Neoliberalism has secured itself in a position that is both 'non-ideological' and inevitable, to the extent that "[i]t is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson, 2003: 73). Understanding how neoliberal ideology has affected citizens is crucial to the analysis of sugar dating, since this dynamic is permeated by both structural inequalities and a discourse that appeals to the individual's self-entrepreneurship and self-commodification. It is within this context that sugar dating flourishes. A historical perspective that traces the development of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom is therefore imperative to comprehend the social context in which sugar dating operates.

¹² There are some critical voices that challenge the current neoliberal mindset, but they are scarce and come from 'the margins' (hooks, 2015). The truth is that despite neoliberalism's considerable fatal consequences regarding economic equality, the environment, or education, there are no alternative economic and social models currently being discussed in the political spheres of the Western world (Hursh & Henderson, 2011).

III.II. Neoliberalism in the UK and its impact on Higher Education

Neoliberalism as a political imperative commenced in the United Kingdom in 1979, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was elected. However, this new system was embraced not only by the Thatcher administration and successive Conservative-led governments, but also by other parties on the political spectrum such as Tony Blair's New Labour. In Britain, the beginning of neoliberalism was marked by a radical turn in politics: from the prevalence of Keynesian policies since the end of World War II, to the identification of the welfare state as the 'problem' of the economy and the focus on its downsizing (Kus, 2006). The 'solution' to this so-called problem was to adopt an approach based on minimal governmental intervention in the markets, as well as the reduction of welfare programs that served to correct what had been previously identified as market failures (Kus, 2006). This new economic and political trend was accompanied by a rhetoric of self-responsibility and personal liberty, along with the notion that the failure or success of citizens was no longer due to structural factors¹³. This mentality influenced the policies that Thatcher and her Conservative government implemented in Britain during the years in power (1979-1990), specifically the progressive reduction of social expenditure on unemployment benefits, the attempt to privatize social security (Kus, 2006), the slow but firm reduction of social housing (Jones, 2012), and the increased burden of taxation on less affluent households. Her politics translated into a steady worsening of living conditions throughout the 1980s for people in need in Britain (Kus, 2006).

Thatcherism also had an impact on universities: the aim of reducing the designated governmental funding was the principal leitmotiv, placing them under significant financial pressure (Shattock, 1999). In 1981, HE institutions were requested by the government to create a plan to reduce their budget by 18% in three years, and circa 3,000 posts were erased (Pritchard, 2007). The reduction of staff, however, was not followed by a diminishment in the number of students (Kopp, 1988). In 1988 the Education Reform Act was passed, effectively making the British university system more centralized and extending the control of the government at the expense of educational professionals or local education authorities (Kopp, 1988).

¹³ Poverty, for example, shifted from being considered a social problem to an individual one, close to a personal failure (Jones, 2012).

After almost eighteen years of Conservative rule, New Labour, under the leadership of Tony Blair, won the 1997 general election with a landslide victory. For some, the expectations were that the neoliberal path followed by Thatcherism would be, if not reversed, at least not encouraged anymore (Jessop, 2015). However, reality proved to be different: Blair's government did not reject neoliberal ideology, and "in many ways [...] took the neo-liberal transformation of Britain yet a step further" (Jessop, 2015: 1). New Labour's economic plan for Britain, optimistically called the 'Third Way' - which involved an oxymoronic combination of neoliberal policies with a pursuit for social justice and equity (Lunt, 2008) - translated into a shift towards a "knowledge economy" (Boden & Nedeva, 2010: 39) as part of a wider strategy whose aim was to increase the competitiveness of Britain in an economy that was increasingly dependent on global markets.

The knowledge economy relies on activities whose aim is the creation of knowledge that will contribute to scientific and technological advance. It has been progressively embraced by Western countries in opposition to other types of economies that rely on natural resources or physical inputs (Powell & Snellman, 2004), an arena where Western economies are lacking competitiveness. One of the consequences of this shift is that governments place more and more importance on the contribution that "intangible capital" makes to the gross domestic product (Powell & Snellman, 2004: 201). This implies that it is in the interest of the different governments to control the centres where knowledge is being produced – such as universities - as well as supervising what kind of knowledge is produced, and in whose interests. State intervention in HE has coincided with the development of an economy increasingly based on the production of intangible capital.

As part of its strategy to make Britain more competitive in global markets that require highly skilled workers, New Labour followed the path started by previous Conservative governments of widening participation in higher education without increasing the budget for it. Tony Blair's emphasis on education - represented by his now famous mantra 'Education, education, education' (Lunt, 2008) - was translated into the implementation of several of the recommendations made in the Dearing Report, published in 1997 (NCIHE, 1997). This report was commended by the previous government with the aim of attracting more students to the British higher education system. The strategy, however, was economically challenging:

The major expansion of student numbers that took place between 1987 and 1997, when the age cohort participation rate more than doubled from around 15% to 33%, had resulted in a serious funding crisis, since the amount paid by government to universities per student (the 'unit of resource') had been effectively halved. (Lunt, 2008: 742)

New Labour's solution was to place more economic responsibility on the shoulders of students - the 'unit of resource' - and households by dramatically reducing maintenance grants¹⁴ and special support grants, and replacing them with student loans to be repaid after graduation¹⁵ (Lunt, 2008). Tuition fees were established in 1998 at £1000 per year for full-time students. In 2006, the tuition fee cap was raised in England, Northern Ireland and Wales up to £3000 per academic year for full-time undergraduates, and was to be subsequently increased according to the inflation rate (Wilkins, Shams & Huisman, 2013). Since then, the notion that students are the sole beneficiaries of a higher education degree and therefore bound to the duty of payment, has remained, at least governmentally, unchallenged.

The same neoliberal rhetoric of self-responsibility and investment that has permeated crucial areas of the individual's life has also affected areas of social life that, at first glance, appear detached from governmental reach, such as dating. Currently, higher education in the UK is both a saleable product, with its own form of branding and marketing strategies, and a site of production of vulnerable individuals who are not only indebted by the acquisition of an education but are also made responsible for their own lack of economic means. The entanglement between the university system in the UK and sugar dating is such that sugar dating websites, confident in their sustained stream of students willing to engage in a transactional relationship with older and richer men, advertise themselves as a 'Sugar Baby University' and proclaim that they offer "a different type of university experience" (Seeking, 2021). Wendy Brown uses the notion of human capital to illustrate the idea that the individual must now behave as a firm even in areas unrelated to the market, such as dating:

Contemporary neoliberal economization of political and social life is distinctive in its discursive production of everyone as human capital [...] Consumption, education, training, mate selection and more are configured as practices of self-investment where the self is an individual firm. (Brown, 2016: 3)

¹⁴ The amount of the maintenance grants varied depending on the annual income of the student's household. They did not need to be repaid (Bolton, 2019).

¹⁵ Subject to the condition that the payer earns over a certain monthly amount. Currently, at £352 a week or £1,527 a month for those students who started their course before 2012; and £480 a week or £2,083 a month for those who started later (GovUK, 2019).

Services that were previously provided by the (welfare) state such as retirement pensions, healthcare, and education, are now regarded as private investments where companies can find a market niche to profit from. The moral rhetoric of self-reliance is used to justify further increases in the contribution that citizens are forced to make towards these arenas; a paradigmatic example is the gradual increase in tuition fees. In fact, part of the task of the Dearing Committee was to “provide solutions to the challenge of financing of higher education and to *find a politically acceptable way of introducing a student contribution to tuition fees*” (Lunt, 2008, emphasis added).

The current state of affairs derives from the resignation in 2010 of then prime minister Gordon Brown, which gave rise to a coalition government led by David Cameron (Conservative Party) with Nick Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister (Liberal Democrats). The financial crisis of 2008 - the ‘Great Recession’ (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011) - provided the political excuse for the government to continue pursuing the goal of shrinking the state, in a moment when the dire economic situation of the country was already affecting the most vulnerable population¹⁶. The decision of the Conservative-led government to follow the path of austerity took British society by surprise since “in May 2010, Cameron’s party had spent the last two years trying to convince voters that it would not slash social spending and would actually be better than New Labour at providing public services” (Blyth, 2013: 59). The justification provided was that it was impossible for the government to continue with the prevailing spending rate while at the same time reducing both the budget deficit and the debt burden of the country (O’Hara, 2014). This argument, however, is weak, if only because austerity measures were not imposed on Britain by supranational entities such as the IMF in the same way that they were imposed on other countries of the OECD. In fact, there were no structural adjustments imposed on Britain after 2008 (O’Hara, 2014), which means that there was no external pressure for Britain to reduce its debt.

In 2009 a new report called the Browne Review, whose aim was to provide new strategic ways of funding British HE, was commissioned. One of its findings was that the gradual increase in tuition fees (at £3225 in 2009–2010) had not prevented participation from widening (Wilkins,

¹⁶ In 2011, governmental figures showed that “nearly six out of every ten households in poverty had at least one adult in work” (Jones, 2012: 32).

Shams and Huisman, 2013). Although the report also showed that the maximum acceptable cap for tuition fees for the majority of British households was £6000 per academic year, the government decided to increase the cap to £9000 in 2012, which is still the current tuition cap for full time undergraduate students¹⁷.

The implementation of market values in higher education has meant that “universities are under pressure to adopt principles of value for money, costs-minimisation, flexibility, and quality enhancement” (Lunt, 2008: 747-748). The introduction of other measures such as international rankings of universities, quality measurements and the deterioration of working conditions for university staff have all been part of HE’s directional shift towards privatization and competition. International competition is especially relevant owing to the increased dependence of UK universities on the revenues acquired through the payment of tuition fees by international students, which are significantly higher than for domestic and European students (Lunt, 2008).

The shift towards a market-oriented university has produced increased state intervention (Pritchard, 2007) in universities, mainly through the introduction of quality assurance practices, teaching audits, and frameworks of excellence. Neoliberalism, as Foucault states, “should not therefore be identified with laissez-faire, but rather with permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention” (2008: 131-132). Thus the liberalization or marketization of universities in the UK has been heavily regulated and promoted by successive governments after Thatcher, often generating substantial opposition from both academic staff and students (Pritchard, 2005).

The marketization of the university has unevenly impacted on the student community; according to Giroux (2002), it has affected primarily the working-class (and to an extent, also the lower-middle class), who have seen their opportunity for attending a HE institution reduced owing to ever-increasing tuition fees and the reduction of financial aid. Currently, many undergraduate students need to support their studies through the acquisition of part-time, low-paid jobs, including sex work. This situation is especially prevalent among students who come from a working class background, and it has been shown that it negatively impacts their academic results (Leathwood & Read, 2009; Reay et al., 2001).

¹⁷ The price of tuition fees increases every year the equivalent of the increment of the CPI, so in 2019 it rose to £9250.

Despite the increasing number of students attending a higher education institution in the United Kingdom, access remains strictly class biased (and, to a lesser extent, race biased). The neoliberalization of the university has mainly benefitted the white middle classes, who are overrepresented in the system (Reay et al., 2001). Additionally, state intervention has created a hierarchy of universities, in which the top ones - those that belong to the Russell Group¹⁸ - remain mostly white, upper-middle class spaces (Reay et al, 2001), while the non-white population is concentrated mostly in post-1992 universities. This series of consequences has led to the creation of ‘the corporate university’.

III.III. The corporate university

Giroux argues that the university “should play as a site of critical thinking, democratic leadership, and public engagement” (2002: 427). The dismantling of this – admittedly utopian – type of university is part of the transformation of citizens into consumers, with students increasingly attending university in order to acquire a degree that would enhance their employability skills (Moreau & Leathwood, 2007). As part of the development of a knowledge economy, knowledge is reconfigured as a commodity that can be sold and bought (Tomlison, 2016), and the university is now conceived as a site of private investment (Giroux, 2002). This works in two different ways: on the one hand, corporations are progressively entering universities “through licensing agreements, the control of intellectual property rights, and promoting and investing in university spin-off companies” (Giroux, 2002: 432), which effectively undermines the power of universities as autonomous entities and makes them more dependent on external funding and investment. On the other hand, it transforms the very nature of students who are now considered by universities as ‘customers’ or ‘clients’ while simultaneously fostering a culture of self-entrepreneurship.

The development of corporate culture can be, in a very literal sense, seen *outside* the university, and not only inside. Universities employ marketing techniques such as creating their own brand and logos that they proudly stamp on mugs, hoodies and tote bags. Words such as ‘employability’ or ‘acquisition of skills’ populate the curricula of British institutions (Moreau

¹⁸ The Russell Group represents twenty-four British universities that are leaders in research in Britain.

& Leathwood, 2007), in a clear gesture towards the language that the labour market uses to ask for non-specific requirements from graduates. The employability discourse has been particularly embraced by British institutions that have willingly adopted the diffuse notion of 'employability' and included it in their curricula (Boden & Nedeva, 2010), mainly through the advertisement that some classes are aimed at enhancing the employability of students. This idea, which not so long ago belonged to the realm of the labour market, now acts as a "performative function of universities, shaped and directed by the state" (Boden & Nedeva, 2010: 37). This has generated many implications, perhaps the most obvious being that the goal of educating students has shifted from creating critical citizens to producing an employable workforce that will generate profit for those hiring graduates, effectively establishing a straightforward relationship between earning a university degree and being both a more 'employable' person and an 'entrepreneurial' one. This new nature of the university system performs three functions:

First, [universities] can produce the knowledge that underpins economic growth. Second, universities can effectively produce the worker/consumer citizens that Foucault would refer to as 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977) on which such growth depends. And third, they represent important areas of profitable business opportunity in a globalised HE environment. (Boden & Nedeva, 2010: 40)

The result is the emergence of the corporate university, which effectively introduces principles of the business culture such as "efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of the corporate order [and which] have restructured the meaning and purpose of education" (Giroux, 2002: 442). In this corporate university, the student becomes a consumer rather than a learner, and education becomes a business transaction which automatically means that the university has no responsibility whatsoever for the student beyond satisfying a consumption desire. As institutions¹⁹, they do not need to provide any type of financial aid, nor do they need to genuinely care about those students who are financially struggling or actually investigate what types of financial alternatives they are resorting to; ensuring that they are (at least moderately) happy customers will suffice.

III.IV. The student as consumer of higher education

¹⁹ This is not to say that lecturers and other staff do not genuinely care, which would be far from the truth.

There is a growing body of scientific literature analysing the effects of the heightened marketization and branding of universities, and the selling of the ‘university experience’ to prospective students who are increasingly treated as consumers. At the same time, some HE students are experiencing economic precarity, with some authors affirming that “youth make the core of the precariat” (Standing, 2011: 66). This double perception of students will be analysed later in this chapter.

Bauman posits that we currently live in a society that has shifted from being organized around a work ethic into what he calls ‘the aesthetic of consumption’ (2005: 23). While modernity was characterized by production, and social agents were catalogued and classified based on what type of labour they did and what type of goods they produced, our current society segregates its members according to their purchase power:

Ours is a ‘consumer society’ in a similarly profound and fundamental sense in which the society of our predecessors (modern society in its industrial phase [...]) used to deserve the name of a ‘producer society’ [...] The reason for calling that older type of modern society a ‘producer society’ was that it engaged its members primarily as producers [...] In its present late-modern, second-modern or post-modern stage, society engages its members - again primarily - in their capacity as consumers. (Bauman, 2005: 24)

Bauman’s argument can be applied to HE in two different ways. Firstly, students are attending ‘corporate’ universities that increasingly treat them as consumers and education as the commodity being sold, which effectively leaves them disenfranchised from the academic community and alone when coping with financial hardship. This feeling of disenfranchisement translates into a series of consequences, such as the epidemic of mental health problems that is currently affecting students throughout the UK (Brown, 2018), or their initiative to resort to ‘alternative’ job markets in order to navigate their economic situation. For those students who resort to sex work or sugar dating, this feeling of isolation is heightened as they often keep that part of their lives private and do not share it with their peers, since sugar dating may be considered as an abject practice or “dirty work [which carries] physical, social and moral taints” (Tyler, 2011: 1478).

Secondly, the treatment of students as consumers is part of a much bigger trend that involves society as a whole in nearly all Western countries, and which has profoundly altered the way they perceive themselves through the acquisition of a neoliberal ethos based on immediate consumption. This neoliberal ideology facilitates a view of themselves as self-entrepreneurs

and therefore as potential profit sources. In this sense, the university acts as a catalyst for this apparently contradictory ethos, partly because of its power to mould students and transform them into 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1978) at a crucial moment when they are, as young adults, constructing their identity; but also because it is the first time, at least for some, that students are less economically dependent on their parents, and therefore more responsible for their finances. Students learn to see the university experience through the optic of neoliberal consumption, which ultimately clashes with many of their individual material realities. This learned 'docility' merges with the lack of resources some of them experience, and it is in this nexus where they employ their entrepreneurial agency to resort to the ultimate commodity that they can barter: themselves. Considering themselves a 'profit source' might shape their attitude regarding self-commodifying activities such as sugar dating.

Bauman (2005) argues that consumption functions in contemporaneous neoliberal societies as a way of filling an identity 'void', left there by the slow disappearance of manufacturing work that used to provide workers with a social identity. Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) apply this notion to students using Fromm's theory of *having vs being*. They argue that students are not interested in becoming learners of the academic subject they are studying; rather, they want to possess a degree that will open for them the doors to a secure future and a well-paid job that will prepare them "for a life of consumption" (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion, 2009: 278). A life of consumption, however, has become a rather utopian objective owing to the increasing evidence that well-paid and secure jobs are not likely to be a possibility for all future graduates (Bauman, 2005; Oinone, 2018). Although the average monetary gain in the United Kingdom during a lifetime for a male graduate was around £200,000 in 2010 (Standing, 2011), revenue is not distributed equally in advanced market economies, which means that "a shrinking number of students gain the high income returns that produce the mean average. More will gain jobs paying well below the mean" (Standing, 2011: 67). This is especially true for women, who tend to occupy positions considerably more precarious, with a lower salary, and less likely to lead to promotion than men (Barret, 2014).

Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009) link the idea of becoming 'employable' to the massification of the university in the United Kingdom: they argue that the overgrowth of university students has been designed by political entities with the goal of creating an improved workforce for the labour market. The massification of the university has led to a growth in the number of citizens that hold a university degree, which has driven the 'value' of a degree down

in the job market, meaning that a growing number of graduates - especially women and people of colour - end up in precarious, low-paid jobs. Simultaneously, the state bears no responsibility for these citizens. Following neoliberal ideology, the state has created a market that will favour companies and business while effectively leaving citizens on their own. Moreover, the state profits from the indebtedness of students: the interest on the loans offered by the British government is high. Students will finish HE with an average debt of £50,000 (Connington, 2018).

One may wonder what happens once students have invested in their human/cultural capital in the form of a university degree and have tried to become employable but have failed to do so, as they see no access to secure, well-paid jobs. Additionally, for the majority of students, student loans do not completely cover daily life expenses, let alone offer the possibility of saving money, and they do not receive any type of financial help from their universities. This leaves them with little resources to cope with an increasingly complicated labour market once they finish, and may cause serious struggle while they complete their studies. This is where the rhetoric of self-entrepreneurialism and self-responsibility plays a part and they may consider alternative methods of self-commodification, such as sugar dating, as viable paths to accessing economic capital.

Therefore, we need to think of university students as both privileged agents with sufficient capital to attend a post-secondary education institution, and as individuals who are experiencing huge levels of debt and economic precarity while simultaneously being encouraged to engage in endless consumption. They often possess few tools to weather this (neoliberal) storm:

youth live in a commercially carpet-bombed and commodified environment that is unlike anything experienced by those of previous generations. Nothing has prepared this generation for the inhospitable and savage new world of commodification, privatization, joblessness, frustrated hopes, surveillance and stillborn projects. (Giroux, 2011)

In this current world as described by Giroux, one may wonder to what extent students have been affected by their new status as consumers of higher education. Students increasingly see a university degree as an extremely costly commodity that can be purchased, and this may produce in them a sense of entitlement towards this store-bought education. At the same time, economic precarity and uncertainty place them in a fast-paced, ruthless society that treats them

as disposable bodies. The consequences of this double impact of neoliberal ideology on students will be analysed in the next section.

III.IV.I. Consequences of the student's new status as consumer of HE

Numerous scholars have previously researched the different consequences that a new consumer mindset poses for students in HE institutions. According to Pritchard, in a more market-oriented university sector, students' decision to attend a certain university may be highly influenced by rankings and teaching awards (Pritchard, 2005). This may result in universities taking the needs of students more seriously than a less marketized university environment would. Nevertheless, this attention is not accompanied by financial aid. Barnes (1999) has suggested that the US system, where universities, especially elite ones, make sure that their students are comfortably enjoying campus life, has now become a popular model for European universities. Ensuring that students feel taken care of by their institutions may be a form of bringing future funding to the university in the form of alumni donations (Clark, 2004). The HE sector in the United Kingdom is turning towards a more privatized system which is making them more dependent on private and individual funding, hence universities' renewed attention towards students as prospective donors. The acquisition of business-like practices such as branding are openly used "as a mechanism to increase engagement of alumni and potential donors [...] brand identification correlate[s] with choice to donate, increased donation dollar amount, and the number of donations" (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014: 765).

Another consequence of this new status of students as consumers is that they feel more entitled to demand from lecturers a type of education that they perceive will promote their employability (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009). The introduction of tuition fees, which has arguably put some students in a precarious situation regarding economic means, may at the same time have given rise to a sense of entitlement among students which allows them to demand a pass or a good grade in a subject because they feel that they have paid a great sum for it (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2016). Because of this, current generations of students have been nicknamed 'Gen Me': "the entitled generation of millennials whose high self-esteem and self-worship have been encouraged since childhood, and who end up disengaged, anxious, and self-absorbed adults" (Genz, 2017: 23).

The adoption by many HE institutions of indicators such as surveys to measure student gratification can also contribute towards a university excessively fixated on the metrics of 'consumer' satisfaction which may not necessarily correlate with an improvement in teaching quality, especially because "students' 'satisfaction' [...] can easily be conflated with the fulfilment of short-term goals which may involve the attainment of desired outcomes and have limited relation to genuine quality or the intrinsic value of those experiences" (Tomlison, 2016: 5). Student satisfaction surveys have been proven to be a very problematic tool, since they are systematically biased against female lecturers and professors (Mengel, Sauermann, & Zölitz, 2018). Authors such as Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn are highly critical of the consequences that what they call "academic capitalism" can pose for students. Empirical research

appears to confirm these concerns about the impact of market subjectivities on pedagogy, such as the dominance of a conservative and instrumental rationality to learning, a lack of critical perspective, the subordination of socio-economic inequalities to individual monetised returns and anti-scholarly sentiment. (2016: 2)

An increasingly market-oriented education that places significant importance on student satisfaction damages learning because it encourages a model of consumption by presenting education as a commodity that can be bought and sold, and promotes a culture of self-entrepreneurialism that has been proven to be detrimental for the wellbeing, as well as for the sense of identity, of university students (Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2016). Attending a university is increasingly seen by students as a way of experiencing HE as a lifestyle choice which involves a focus on leisure and hedonistic activities prior to entering 'real life', characterized by the acquisition of a full-time job (Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2016). This 'university lifestyle' often includes considerable consumption of both alcohol and illicit drugs, with university students exceeding sensible weekly drinking guidelines at a higher rate than the general population (Newbury-Birch, Lowry, & Kamali, 2002).

Therefore, students navigate a complex field where they may feel entitled but disposable, experiencing university as a lifestyle and yet worried about debts and money, engaged in low-paid jobs and acquiring thousands of pounds in debt every year. The experiences of higher education in the UK are complex and affected by multiple factors that I have covered in this chapter. Not all university students are entitled consumers of higher education, nor do they all experience economic precarity. Yet all of them are attending university in the contradictory context that I have described. This is not surprising: neoliberalism itself is contradictory,

inasmuch as it promotes a logic of consumption while furthering systematic crisis that leaves a significant part of the population dispossessed and economically vulnerable. In the case of those students who have resorted to sugar dating, evidence provided in this work in the form of personal interviews shows that insufficient loans, lack of parental help, and low-paid jobs against the background of intense educational commitments were key factors that favoured their entry into sugar dating. Many had resorted to sugaring because it provides ‘quick’ and ‘easy’ money that they use to pay everyday expenses, such as rent and groceries. This does not mean that they do not or have not engaged in hedonistic behaviour, or that some may not use the money to experience a previously unaffordable lifestyle. This apparent contradiction is inherent to the development of a neoliberal selfhood amidst economic insecurity.

Authors such as Standing (2011) have highlighted the economic pressure that part of the student population experiences and defines them as the ‘new precariat’. An exploration of this concept has shown that some students can be considered as such.

III.V. Students: The new precariat

Students have been disproportionately affected by the economic crisis of 2008. Those who attended a higher education institution and entered the labour market during the recession are to feel the consequences for a long time:

Graduating from college during a recession has large, negative, and *persistent* effect on wages. Lifetime earnings are substantially lower than they would have been if the graduate had entered the labour market in good times. Furthermore, cohorts who graduate in worse national economies tend to end up in lower-level occupations. Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2009) suggest that the period of early adulthood [...] seems to be the age range during which people are more sensitive to macroeconomic conditions [...] youngsters growing up during recessions tend to believe that success in life depends more on luck than on effort [...] Recessions seem to make youngsters more pessimistic about their lives. (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011: 260, emphasis original)

However, this is not a new phenomenon. Students have been experiencing economic precarity for decades now. The number of British students taking up low-paid, part-time jobs in order to cope with the expenses of daily life has been steadily increasing in the United Kingdom since the 1990s (Canny, 2002), as well as the number of hours that they work every week (Roberts et al., 2000; Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005). Although the recommended maximum number of hours for students to work weekly according to the UK government is ten, many part-time contracts are for sixteen hours per week (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005). It is also increasingly

common for students to work during evenings, weekends, and even twilight hours (Canny, 2002). This may prevent them from fully embracing the aforementioned ‘university lifestyle’ and can also affect their academic performance, since “taking on part-time employment by necessity [...] can adversely affect academic achievement” (Bachan, 2014: 850). Yet, the fact that students work more hours does not translate into higher salaries:

Student income from paid work fell by 37% [by 2013] in real terms, not because students are working less (on the contrary, students seem to be working more), but due to ‘a change in the quality and duration of job opportunities’ (BIS 2013, 337). Data report that more students are working in casual jobs and that the pay of these jobs is falling in real terms (BIS 2013, 337). Most recently, students have also featured among the category of people more likely to use zero-hours contracts (ONS, 2016). (Antonucci, 2018: 892)

Standing defines the precariat as different from “‘the squeezed middle’ or an ‘underclass’ or ‘the lower working class’”, with its own “‘distinctive bundle of insecurities’” (2011: VII). Living a precarious existence in terms of economic capital not only means earning a meagre monthly or weekly salary, but also implies not knowing how much money one will have at the beginning of each month. The rise of zero-hour contracts exemplifies this paradox: the person is not officially unemployed, but the nature of the contract makes it nearly impossible to foresee the amount of money that the worker will receive in their next payslip. For those who are unemployed, the consequences can be devastating. A study conducted by The Prince’s Trust in 2009 and 2010 revealed that unemployed young people tend to feel

ashamed, rejected, lost, anxious, insecure, down and depressed, isolated and unloved [...] less happy with their health, friendships and family life [...] and more likely to say that they had turned to drugs, that they had nothing to look forward to, and that their life had no direction. (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011: 260)

Students who are in this situation may not necessarily be working-class; they could come from a middle-class background and be unemployed without support from their families, for example. In fact, one of the consequences of the financial crisis of 2008 is that job insecurity is no longer solely experienced by young people who have traditionally been excluded from secure labour markets (for example, those coming from underprivileged areas with no further education); it also affects highly educated people such as graduates and university students (Antonucci, 2018).

It is important to make a distinction between precarious work and precarity. Even though both terms allude to job insecurity, their meanings differ: precarious work refers to any job whose

characteristics involve several aspects of precariousness, such as an unreliable working timetable, while precarity “refers specifically to the detrimental effect of labour-market insecurity on people’s lives” (Antonucci, 2018: 888). Therefore, it is possible that some of the students who decide to engage in precarious work during term time do not experience precarity thanks to, for example, a solid network of family support. On the other hand, others who may lack family- or state-guaranteed sources of income can experience precarity as a result of the insecurity attached to their job (Antonucci, 2018).

Contrary to the diverse negative portrayals of students as idle and hedonistic, there is enough evidence to suggest that an important number of them experience a rather different lifestyle than that shown in many media outlets. For instance, HE students increasingly suffer from anxiety and/or depression during their undergraduate studies (Newbury-Birch, Lowry, & Kamali, 2002), which has translated into an increase in the use of university counselling services (Brown, 2018). This suffering is, to an extent, affected by gender: female students are more likely than their male peers to experience significant psychological stress (Dodd et al., 2010; Brown, 2018). However, some scholars view with scepticism what students would define as a ‘necessity’ and therefore question the reality behind the precarity experienced by students. Broadbridge and Swanson suggest that students are increasingly taking on part time jobs to earn “extra cash to keep up with lifestyle and youth pressures” (2005: 237), which may involve investing money in acquiring symbolic objects or sharing experiences with peers such as long-distance trips, and not necessarily using the money to cover daily expenses such as housing or paying bills. If they do, students would be doing nothing more than reproducing the logic of consumption to which they are constantly exposed (Giroux, 2011). A culture utterly fixated on consumption can alter the idea of what a ‘necessity’ is, and this may differ from one generation to another. However, basic commodities such as food or rent are generally perceived as necessities. Thus, even though it is possible that for some a desire to engage in consumption of symbolic and superfluous commodities is the driving force to work during term time, there is enough data to trace a direct correlation between belonging to an underprivileged background and having to work while attending university (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005). This suggests that students may actually be using the money they earn to pay basic living expenses.

One of the alternatives offered to students to navigate the market of precarious jobs is, in line with neoliberal principles of education, to cultivate their “entrepreneurial self” (Holdsworth, 2018; Oinone, 2018). University curricula, as has already been stated, are increasingly oriented towards employability, but if employability fails and students are not able to get a job, then entrepreneurship is offered as an alternative. Students are then encouraged to be - and, when they fail, held responsible for being - in charge of their own ability to be both employee and (self)employer, to see themselves and invest in themselves as human capital (Foucault, 2008). Of course, students do not actually have the power to intervene in job markets, and they can do as much as they can to become employable; yet, especially for those who do not have access to social capital, actual employment may never come. Even if it does, there is a strong likelihood that it will be low-paid and precarious. Authors such as Ikonen (2013: 469) have bridged the two terms to illustrate this idea: employee-entrepreneur is transformed into “entre-employee” (in the original language, *Arbeitskraftunternehmer*), to describe “the employee who manages himself or herself in an entrepreneurial manner”. This draws on Foucault’s examination of neoliberal governance and its interest in transforming the self into “a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise” (Foucault, 2008: 241). University Sugar Babies are the paradigmatic example of this phenomenon: they are highly educated, and yet they cannot make ends meet nor lead the lifestyle they desire, so they transform themselves into their own enterprise by commodifying their intimacy.

The employability discourse is, however, problematic, since “it focusses on individuals’ potential to secure employment rather than their employment status and displaces the responsibility of securing work to the supply rather than the demand side of the labour market” (Holdsworth, 2018: 1217). At the same time, the rhetoric of the entrepreneurial self assumes that every student is an agent playing in a level field - the so-called free market - and is oblivious to biased social structures that clearly benefit some and are detrimental to others, informed by age, gender, geographical origin and location, ethnicity, and social class (Ikonen, 2013; Oinone, 2018). Thus the idea that students can become more employable if only they work hard enough, if only they cultivate the right skills, shifts the responsibility from companies or the state to the shoulders of the student, and obscures some of the circumstances that can hinder their potential ‘employability’. This places the student in a loop of perpetual improvement, as

[t]he interpretation of entrepreneurship as a creative process emphasises how the making up of the entrepreneurial self will always be in development and this continual process of subverting and making up the enterprising subject will be individualised and regulatory. It is individualised as individuals engage in an ongoing project of self-development and innovate new ways of self-expression. (Holdsworth, 2018: 1225)

This demand is not expressed straightforwardly, but rather is internalised, alongside notions of self-control and self-responsibility (Ikonen, 2013). This is aided by the common-sense status of neoliberal ideology, alongside a pervasive notion of symbolic violence that encourages youth to engage in self-regulatory practices of self-improvement in order to become more 'employable' and more 'entrepreneurial'. The university acts as a space where this neoliberal logic is reproduced and encouraged, and students have internalized it. They are

caught in the neoliberal trap, often struggling to develop the selfish resourcefulness demanded of them to counteract the threat of downward mobility [...] viewed as potentially dispensable, holding on to the meritocratic promise that talent and ambition can be converted into economic capital, while simultaneously facing an insecure future of increasing debt and itinerant internshipping. (Genz, 2017: 20)

The alternative paths that students may feel inclined to take to cope with their reality may also be affected by these social categories, especially, in the case of sugar dating, by gender. Women in Western countries are more likely than men to be employed in part-time or temporary work (Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2003; Petrongolo, 2004), and the gender pay gap for full-time employment is 13.1% (Fawcett Society, 2019). This may be one of the reasons why Seeking.com took the opportunity of creating a 'Sugar Baby University'. There is a pool of *female* university students willing to become self-entrepreneurs, and those who have assumed the job market can no longer provide them with a decently-paid job are willing to be involved in their own capitalized 'projects of the self' (Giddens, 2008) which would allow them to "make sense and profit from their own biography by updating and upgrading the self" (Genz, 2017: 18).

Sugar dating can be understood as a new 'twist' on more established, transactional sex dynamics, but the steady increase in the number of students who enter the sex industry (Roberts, Jones & Sanders, 2012) in order to cope with daily expenses acts as a precedent. In order to understand how sugar dating has grown to be a fairly common practice among university students, it is important to analyse how sex work and university life are intertwined, and how this relationship has been altered to transform 'sex work' into 'sexual labour'.

III.VI. From the student sex worker to sexual labour

Participation in non-standard²⁰ forms of labour such as sex work has steadily increased in the last decade, especially for those social groups who are more prone to experiencing precarity and financial hardship such as women, young people, and migrants (Sanders & Hardy, 2013). It has coincided with Britain's aforementioned adoption of neoliberalism, which suggests that there may be a casual relation. The number of female university students entering sex work has also grown. Research conducted in the United Kingdom by Roberts, Jones and Sanders (2012) estimates that between 2.7% and 9.3% of the student population participates in some branch of sex work, and the number of students who report knowing someone who works in the sex industry increased from 25.7% to 30% in only two years (from 2010 to 2012); they also state that these figures are likely an underestimation. 91.7% of those students who reported participating in the sex industry were female (Roberts, Jones, & Sanders, 2012).

University students who engage in sex work can be considered a "hidden population" (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010: 1), which means that it is hard to obtain precise and detailed data about the exact number of students currently practising sex work. However, some organizations such as The English Collective of Prostitutes and the National Union of Students have already highlighted that students may be finding financial relief in the sex industry and base these claims on an increase in the number of students reaching out for help since the introduction of tuition fees, the elimination of maintenance grants, the introduction of student loans and the economic recession of 2008 (Sanders & Hardy, 2015). Despite the difficulty in obtaining an exact figure, there is enough evidence to claim that the participation of students in sex work seems to be an increasing trend in Western countries (Duval Smith, 2006; Nayar, 2017).

Several studies have been conducted in the United Kingdom with the aim of discovering the conditions that favour student' entrance into the sex industry. Financial struggle was

²⁰ "Since the early 1970s [...] [t]here has been a decline in what used to be seen as standard, full-time employment and a marked growth of non-standard or so-called atypical forms of employment, such as homework, self-employment, temporary, part-time, casual, agency work and contracting" (Allan, 2000:188)

consistently the main reason provided by the participants for engaging in different forms of sex work (Roberts, Bergström, & La Rooy, 2007; Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010; Roberts et al., 2010; Sanders & Hardy, 2013; Sagar et al., 2015). In studies conducted in the early 2000s by Roberts et al. (2010), students who were working in the sex industry argued that the main reasons for doing so were to cope with the costs of everyday life such as household bills, along with student fees; and because it provided ‘quick money’. In later research, the link between the rise in tuition fees, the introduction of student loans, and students entering the sex industry appears to be even more straightforward:

Whilst there may always have been some incidental student presence in the industry prior to the restructuring of higher education, there can be little doubt that the growing impoverishment of the student population has gone hand in hand with a growth in the number of student sex workers, a correlation that serves as a reminder that sex work, among other things, may be seen as ‘an act of resistance to the experience of relative poverty’. (Roberts, Jones, & Sanders, 2012: 349)

The sex industry can be relatively well-paid (Roberts et al., 2010) if compared with other part-time jobs that are popular among students, such as working in retail, hotels, or bars (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005). It also offers other advantages such as flexible hours, and the ratio of revenue per working hour is usually higher than that in other jobs, which allows students to have more free time to dedicate to other activities. However, framing sex work as an ‘act of resistance’ to poverty can be considered part of the aforementioned neoliberal trend of self-responsibilisation of the individual for structural problems such as poverty. Rather than engaging with romanticized descriptions of sex work, understanding the complex reality of student sex workers means mapping out the myriad factors that affect this reality. Although economic distress appears to be an almost universally recognised motive for engaging in sex work, other factors may also play a role; for example, the anticipation of “fun”. According to Sagar et al., some of the participants of a survey conducted among students involved in sex work “were [...] found to be intrinsically motivated for doing this type of work (in terms of anticipated enjoyment) rather than feeling forced into it” (2015: 41), which actually matches some of the findings of my own work. Additionally, being a student seems to be an attractive feature for many of the clients who demand sexual services from female sex workers (Roberts, Bergström, and La Rooy, 2007; Roberts et al., 2010). This may be perceived by students as an advantage when entering the industry, as will be further explored later on.

Despite the positive gains that being involved in the sex industry may generate for higher education students, this type of activity can have negative consequences. Regarding economic revenues, the nature of the job makes earnings highly unpredictable, and these have been greatly reduced since the economic recession of 2008 (Sanders & Hardy, 2013). The income that the majority of the students involved in sex work obtain is usually low, especially for non-contact sex work, and is mostly spent on daily life expenses (Sagar et al., 2015b). Furthermore, being involved in sex work may pose a serious risk in terms of mental health: in a study conducted by Blum et al. about transactional sex among university students and the link with mental health problems, they concluded that “transactional sex [...] was associated with a range of impulsive or compulsive behaviours that may affect students’ health and well-being” (Blum et al., 2018: 271). Being involved in the sex industry has been found to be linked to poorer psychological well-being, increased rates of substance use (drugs and alcohol) (Roberts, Bergström, & La Rooy, 2007), cognitive dissonance, significant symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, trauma, low self-esteem, gambling disorders, and compulsive sexual behaviour (Blum et al., 2018). These findings are consistent with the conclusions reached by other researchers such as Farley and Barkan (1998), who interviewed one hundred and thirty persons²¹ working as prostitutes in San Francisco (US) and found that almost 70% of the participants met the DSM III-R criteria for PTSD. According to several studies, the majority of women in prostitution have suffered from rape and physical assault (Farley & Barkan, 1998; Monto, 2004; Ellison & Weitzer, 2016).

Sexual assault is not solely experienced by women who are involved in street prostitution. In research performed by Haeger & Deil-Amen (2010) with students working in strip clubs and/or pornography, women explained that the main disadvantage was the threat of violence. They also experienced degrading behaviour and violence, as well as the feeling of being stigmatized by fellow students and teaching staff (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010), which is consistent with my own findings. In another study conducted with female college students who worked as strippers in Austin, Texas (US), stigmatization and widespread abuse from managers and clients were also cited as the main disadvantage of the job (Trautner & Collet, 2010). Several authors have consistently reported that women working in lap-dancing venues tend to suffer from alienation from others (Philaretou, 2006), internalization of negative stereotypes

²¹ 75% of the sample were women, 13% were men, and 12% self-identified as transgender (Farley & Barkan, 1998).

associated with lap dancers (Price, 2008), and diminished self-esteem and sense of self (Trautner & Collet, 2010). The alternation of the identity of lap-dancer with that of student, however, can help the person navigate the two activities and cope better with stigmatization, especially if they engage in strategies such as distancing themselves from other dancers who are not students:

Women reject stripper as a salient identity by drawing on other important identities in forming their selves [...] This is particularly easy for student strippers who are able to draw heavily on their positive student identity in constructing the self. (Trautner & Collet, 2010: 266)

The women interviewed by Trautner and Collet (2010) reported using stripping as a way of supporting themselves throughout their studies, mainly because it provided them with the aforementioned advantages of working in the sex industry: higher revenue for fewer hours. Students were also aware that stripping while attending university would not leave any 'gaps' in their resume, so they could apply for another job after finishing their studies and just omit their involvement in the industry, therefore highlighting the short-term character of sex work (Trautner & Collet, 2010). The fact that they could draw on their 'student identity' to cope better with the negative aspects of the sex industry may suggest that a discursive construction of the self may affect the capacity of the individual to resist the negative effects of the 'job', such as stigmatization. The same phenomenon may apply to sugar dating, where women can identify as Sugar Babies but not necessarily as sex workers, therefore potentially avoiding the stigma and the diminished self-esteem and sense of self reported by Trautner and Collet (2010).

The fact that more students are engaging in sex work in order to fund their studies may have acted as a precedent for sugar dating. The proliferation of cases of student sex workers may have contributed to the increase in the perceived respectability of sugar dating. Several of the women interviewed in this work have reported having simultaneously participated in sex work and sugar dating, or to have found a Sugar Daddy through sex work (i.e. escorting). However, some caution is needed when defining sugar dating as sex work because (i) the women interviewed for this thesis who had been both sex workers and Sugar Babies referred to sugar dating and sex work as two different categories of monetized activity whose nature differed in several aspects, and (ii) other participants have been adamant in referring to themselves as Sugar Babies and not as sex workers, not considering sugaring a 'job'. Therefore, I propose a nuanced understanding of sugar dating as sexual labour rather than sex work.

III.VII. Sexual labour

The lack of academic literature regarding sugar dating in the United Kingdom makes it difficult to produce a systematic analysis of literature on the topic: sex work has been more widely studied and can be considered related to sugar dating but does not quite encapsulate what sugar dating entails. A more nuanced concept than 'sex work' or 'prostitution' is needed when researching sugar dating²², one that captures the specificities of this dynamic and moves beyond the binaries of the feminist 'sex wars' (Abrams, 1995). As has already been mentioned, some of the participants interviewed for this thesis considered themselves sex workers. However, it is important to note that only those doing other types of sex labour, such as escorting or webcamming, alongside sugar dating, were the ones who identified as sex workers; the rest were more comfortable with the term 'Sugar Baby'.

Many participants struggled to articulate the difference between sex work and sugar dating. One of the reasons for this may be that, in contrast to prostitution, there is no legal framework for sugar dating in the United Kingdom. While the sale and purchase of sexual services is legal in England and Wales, several related activities are not (Great Britain, House of Commons, Home Affairs Committee, 2016). According to the Code for Crown Prosecutors, as per the Street Offences Act 1959, controlling prostitution (pimping), managing a brothel, or selling and purchasing sex in public (kerb crawling) are all illegal activities (Crown Prosecution Service, 2019). While escort agencies are illegal, working as an independent escort is legal (InBrief, 2019). It is worth noticing that demanding sexual services from a minor is illegal; yet the definition of 'sexual services' is diffuse. Generally, penetrative intercourse and masturbation are considered sexual services, but not activities like stripping or lap dancing (Crown Prosecution Services, 2019). The "use of force, threats (whether or not relating to violence) or any other form of coercion" as well as "any form of deception" are completely illegal (Crown Prosecution Service, 2019). While Scotland has similar legislation to England and Wales (Scottish Government, 2007), Northern Ireland has adopted another approach and

²² Mixon (2018) describes sugar dating as a way of financing investment in one's 'human capital'. Nevertheless, Mixon draws from sex-work literature and does not differentiate between sugar dating and sex work, which leaves his analysis of sugar dating incomplete. Kuate-Defo (2004) writes about sugar dating and describes it as romantic relationships, which obscures the labour and capitals involved in sugaring.

criminalised the purchase of sexual services. Selling them, however, is decriminalised (Nldirect, 2019).

Sex workers in Britain can join several organisations, such as the UKNEA UK (UK National Escorts Association), the ECP (English Collective of Prostitutes), or SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement). While Sugar Babies could potentially join one of these collectives, there is no specific organisation for Sugar Babies, which effectively hinders the possibility of mutual support and collective action. The fact that sugar dating may not fit the category of sex work/prostitution does not mean that there is no labour involved in sugaring. On the contrary, participants interviewed in this work have repeatedly reported that sugaring involves a huge amount of labour in terms of engaging in beautifying routines, self-discipline techniques such as exercise, and providing sexual services and emotional labour to their Sugar Daddies. Sugar dating has proven to be so extremely draining that several participants have reported that they would never do it again, while they would still be open to engaging in sex work (i.e. escorting).

A similar phenomenon to sugar dating could be the one described by Rachel O'Neill (2018) in her book about the 'seduction community'. Although her research focuses on men and masculinity, O'Neill (2018) has theorised extensively about how seduction is mediated by media, not only traditional media such as women's or men's magazines but also online technologies. Seduction as defined by her is understood as a skill that can be perfected, and therefore involves an extensive amount of labour, and ongoing investment. In a similar fashion, sugaring should be considered a type of sexual labour that goes beyond sex work and involves other sets of skills. Sugar dating is not covered by labour laws, and Sugar Babies often do not recognize themselves as workers; hence the use of the term sexual labour, a notion that acknowledges both the comprehensive set of skills that Sugar Babies must employ, and the 'undefined' aspect of sugaring.

To sum up, the strong correlation I observe between the rise in tuition fees, the elimination of maintenance grants and the introduction of student loans, and the rise in students engaging in sex work or sexual labour suggests that the restructuring of HE and the current economic situation in the UK are linked to these emergent forms of transactional sex. In this sense, we can understand student prostitution as a precedent for sugar dating. Additionally, some of the consequences derived from working in the sex industry, such as substance abuse, low self-

esteem and other mental health problems, may also affect those students who sugar date. Hence sugaring should be understood as a dynamic that is located within the realm of sex work, as a type of sexual labour that is affected by contemporaneous discourses of neoliberalism and sexual entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, neoliberalism and its material effects cannot fully explain why some women are attracted to capitalizing their own bodies. What makes sugar dating a viable path for many young women is an ideology that specifically targets women and frames femininity as a saleable commodity: postfeminism.

Chapter IV: Gendered Neoliberalism

IV.I. The postfeminist subject

The resulting subject of neoliberal governmentality - the entrepreneurial self that I described in Chapter III: The Path Towards a Neoliberal Education - is the product of a series of knowledge-power relationships, a process which Foucault conceptualised as *assujettissement* (Milchman & Rosenberg, 2007), and which involves both the subjection of the individual and their subjugation. Judith Butler asserts that

power not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being. As a condition, power precedes the subject. Power loses its appearance of priority, however, when it is wielded by the subject, a situation that gives rise to the reverse perspective that power is the effect of the subject, and that power is what the subject effects. (Butler, 1997: 13)

In neoliberal societies, power is

[n]o longer exercised through normalization, but through diversification and individualization - or, as Deleuze suggests, in a way that transcends the individual as an entity still too substance-like and inflexible, towards the “dividual,” where discipline as a fixed mold is replaced by a continual modulation and control in an open territory. (Wallenstein, 2013: 28)

Therefore, power is a continuum that precedes the formation of the subject, and not the other way around. It is precisely through these power relations that subjectivities emerge (Foucault, 1979) and the subject comes into being. Power acts partially through discourse through knowledge-power relations. The process of subject formation is not purely passive or oppressive. Power produces the subject but simultaneously creates the possibility of resistance: “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault, 1978, qtd. in Mills, 2000: 269). Nevertheless, Butler, perhaps less myopic in terms of gender than Foucault, offers a different nuance. In the words of Magnus:

The subject can protest her situation and “talk back” to socially constructed authorities but she cannot escape her situation of fundamental subjection [...] Indeed, for Butler [...] the subject quite literally is “called” into being by an authority whose interpellation locates her in a subordinate position. (2006, 84-85)

The use of the female pronouns in Butler's writing is not incidental as neoliberalism impacts distinctively on men and women, and therefore the knowledge-power relations that form the female subject are necessarily different. In the case of young, contemporary women, these power relations are shaped by two ideologies that are intrinsically linked: postfeminism and neoliberalism.

Authors such as Shain (2013), Scharff (2016), and McRobbie (2007) argue that girls and young women constitute the ideal neoliberal subject: girls because their academic achievements and hard work compared with their male peers are used as an example of meritocracy (McRobbie, 2007); young women because, once they have absorbed the necessity of this disciplinary behaviour, they continue it through early adulthood and lead "responsibilized and self-managed lives through self-application and self-transformation" (Scharff, 2016: 217). This self-transformation necessarily involves certain docility of their bodies (Foucault, 1979), as well as constant self-surveillance to monitor their conformity to the prescribed notion of self. Female bodies are more likely to be 'docile' than male ones in the sense that they tend to engage in bodily disciplining, such as makeup and exercise routines, in order to conform with patriarchal notions of femininity (Bartky, 1990). This occurs partly because a lack of conformity can have negative repercussions in terms of accessing economic capital.

Thus the ideal female neoliberal subject is one who regularly engages in self-improvement routines through consumption, favouring the continuity of the neoliberal economic system. The ideal subject of late neoliberalism is not the *homo economicus* anymore; it has evolved into a flexible, autonomous, middle-class, *female* subject. In addition, a postfeminist environment hinders the creation of the necessary space for a feminist consciousness to arise, as subjects need to navigate fracturing spaces such as neoliberal labour markets with a high rate of turnover (Martin, 2003) and tend to be increasingly disconnected from one another, in what Bauman (2003) has termed a process of 'disembedding'. McRobbie has argued that this new conceptualization of women serves to establish "the renewed institutionalisation of gender inequity and the re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy by means of a generational-specific address which interpellates young women as subjects of capacity" (2007: 718).

If the 1970s and 1980s were characterized by a revival of the feminist movement in the form of the Second Wave and its demands, contemporary postfeminism has been optimal at absorbing *some* of these feminist claims while effectively depoliticizing the movement.

Feminism has not been completely erased from the social vocabulary, nor have young women been oblivious to the feminist struggles of previous decades. Yet it has been effectively deactivated in a postfeminist context that has substituted the radical potentials of feminism with hollow notions of ‘choice’, ‘empowerment’, and sexual ‘freedom’ that resemble the individualistic discourses celebrated and promoted by neoliberal ideology (McRobbie, 2009). This paradigm shift facilitates the rise of the ideal postfeminist subject: a subject that is always female, middle/upper class, isolated from structural notions of gender and class oppression and therefore solely responsible for her success – or lack thereof. Simultaneously, this subject is constructed through a postfeminist discourse that uses the notions of agency and freedom to justify any kind of behaviour without critically examining it, as long as the individual enjoys what she is doing. As one of my interviewees said, ‘I don’t mind what people think about it [sugar dating] because it’s my life, my body, and I am having fun’.

Contemporary postfeminist ideas of female empowerment and neoliberal ideology are intrinsically connected by their emphasis on endless self-realization in the form of consumption. Nevertheless, this relation must be updated to accommodate recent economic changes in contemporary Britain, particularly after the economic crisis of 2008, as the economic situation in many countries has changed since the birth of postfeminism circa 1990. If early forms of postfeminism encouraged women to empower themselves through consumption (Negra & Tasker, 2005), this idea needs to be

recalibrated and reassessed in the aftermath of the boom-and-bust economic model. Certainly, if late twentieth and early twenty-first-century postfeminism was marked by optimism, entitlement and the opportunity of prosperity, such articulations have become more doubtful and less celebratory in a post-2008 recessionary environment where the neoliberal mantra of choice and self-determination is still present but becomes inflected with the experiences of precarity, risk, and the insistence on self-responsibilisation. (Genz, 2017: 18)

In the aftermath of 2008 and against a background of financial precarity, postfeminist subjects are encouraged to empower themselves not only by buying but actually by *selling* their assets in order to keep up with the demands of their lifestyle, or simply to be able to afford a living. This is the most important shift that postfeminist ideology has experienced in the aftermath of 2008. Websites that promote the commodification of women’s bodies and the capitalization of their company, such as Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com, use postfeminist narratives of empowerment to attract young women (see Chapter V: The Discursive Construction of the Sugar Subject). Along the same lines, the increased social acceptability of transactional

activities considered liminal to the sex industry (e.g. pole dancing) (Bernstein, 2007), or belonging to the sex industry (e.g. lap dancing), and their advertisement as empowering (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009; Gavey, 2012), can be considered a sign of the hegemony of postfeminism and its adaptation to new economic circumstances.

Postfeminist discourses need to be recalibrated through the optic of economic precariousness that I have described in the previous chapter: in a society where cultural and social capital are not enough to secure economic stability, women are given the option to commodify and profit from their bodies through sites that act as mediators. In sugar dating, we are witnessing women turning to the commodification of their own bodies in what can be understood as a transformation of body capital into economic capital, thus engaging in ‘sexual entrepreneurship’ (Harvey & Gill, 2011). The fact that Seeking.com aims to attract young women sustains the argument, elaborated by McRobbie (2007), that contemporary postfeminist ideologies are generational, as they specifically target young women or those in early adulthood. Young women are likely to have accumulated less economic capital than older ones, which makes them more susceptible to discourses that advertise an economic benefit. The notions of body capital and sexual entrepreneurship will be analysed in the next section through the dual optic of the process of *assujettissement* and the experience of economic vulnerability.

IV.II. From body capital to erotic capital: The Sugar Baby

The Sugar Baby can be understood, as has already been mentioned, as a postfeminist subject who is discursively produced by ‘authorities’, or knowledge-power relations. However, it is worth questioning who constitutes the authority in this case. The answer is twofold: firstly, inasmuch as Seeking.com is the most popular website worldwide for sugar dating, and it offers to its users the definition of Sugar Baby and Sugar Daddy, it can be considered an authority since its definitions are accepted as hegemonic. Secondly, the users (and in this case, the Sugar Daddies hold a more privileged position for reasons that will be explained later on) constitute another type of authority: if the Sugar Baby does not behave as such, the Sugar Daddy can terminate the agreement, and vice versa. The role of the website in discursively constructing the subject is explored in Chapter V: The Discursive Construction of the Sugar Subject, while

the nature of sugar relationships is analysed in Chapter VI: I Have Bills to Pay! Paving the Way for Sugar Dating and in Chapter VII: Blurred Lines: Lived Experiences of Sugar Dating.

Women who decide to capitalize their own body as Sugar Babies may find that they need to conform to a series of prescribed nominal categories in order to be recognized as an intelligible, female, sexually entrepreneurial subject. By assuming the name 'Sugar Baby', a woman is both subjected - she *is* now a Sugar Baby - and subjugated, for she needs to conform to what a Sugar Baby *is* if she wants to be recognized by others as such. Sugar Babies do not have the power to redefine this concept, and therefore are, as subjects, "bound to seek recognition of [their] own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of [their] own making" (Butler, 1997: 20). Sugar Babies need to surrender to the discursive power of the word if they want to be intelligible to the proper audience:

If the subject is dependent on the categories, names and norms of power for its existential survival, then to transgress or fail to properly reiterate these makes the subject vulnerable to dissolution. If one fails to reinstate social norms properly or completely, one's own existence as a socially recognisable subject is brought into question, and one becomes subject to social castigation and sanction which threaten one's future survival. (Mills, 2000: 271)

Arguably, a failure to comply with the necessary requirements to be socially recognised as a Sugar Baby may not result in social castigation - indeed, an identity such as that of the Sugar Baby may be hidden from everybody but Sugar Daddies in order to avoid stigmatization - but may result in failure to be considered a suitable 'sugar partner' by potential Sugar Daddies.

The nominal title of 'Sugar Baby' is associated with other socially constructed notions such as femininity and beauty. If a woman wants to profit from the commodification of her body and become a sexual entrepreneur, she needs to adhere to a series of beauty standards associated with femininity that are out of her control:

The neoliberal incitement to self-transformation is also associated with femininity (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). It is mainly women who are called on to transform themselves, which becomes particularly visible with regard to the management of the body and sexuality. (Scharff, 2016: 218)

In order to profit from it, the body needs to be treated as a commodity subjected to its proper management: aesthetic labour must be performed (Harvey, Vachhani, & Williams, 2014) in order to generate commercial value from the flesh. The monetary value of the body is not set

by the individual, but is dictated by the rules of the field, as “[c]apital exists and functions because of the valuations made by these [the field’s] rules” (Shilling, 2004: 475, emphasis original). In the case of sugar dating, the field is a complex one where notions such as class and taste dictate the appropriate behaviour of the Sugar Baby. For instance, Seeking.com targets university students as prospective Sugar Babies through their “Sugar Baby University Program™” (Seeking, 2021), which means two different things. Firstly, university students are likely to be young, as undergraduate university students tend to be between eighteen and twenty-two years old. Therefore, Sugar Babies are likely to be in early adulthood, which immediately increases their body capital in a society that values youth as a beauty asset (Wolf, 1991). Secondly, and even more importantly, university students are in the process of acquiring a higher education degree: they are, as I have suggested, privileged to an extent. University students are statistically more likely to belong to a middle-class background than their peers who do not attend a HE institution (Reay et al, 2001). By targeting university students, Seeking.com is signalling what type of capital is valuable in the field of sugar dating: youth and education.

Belonging to a middle-class background is in itself an advantage in the accumulation of capital, and body capital is no exception. According to Shilling (1991: 654), “individuals have unequal opportunities for acquiring that physical capital most valued in society, as its initial accumulation requires an investment of spare time and economic capital”. The dominant classes are more able to invest in their body capital if only because they have more spare time to ‘work’ on it through dieting or exercise routines (Shilling, 2004). Moreover, the ideal body that the postfeminist subject must aspire to own is configured through the optic of class: it is lean, toned, shaved or waxed, smooth, and well dressed - in short, female, and middle- to upper-class. As will be explained in more detail later on, the analysis of the discourse employed by Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com has shown that Sugar Babies are encouraged to perform middle and upper ‘classness’ through the acquisition of certain types of clothes, shoes, bags, and a specific type of disciplined body that is normatively beautiful (see Chapter V: the Discursive Construction of the Sugar Subject, and Chapters VI and VII). This indicates that Sugar Babies are required to consider more elements than their own bodies when trying to find a suitable partner - appropriate clothes, makeup, accessories, and so on. Their body is still the central element, but it is adorned by the pertinent symbolic objects.

Catherine Hakim has coined the term 'erotic capital' to exemplify the symbolic and potential economic value of an individual, which works within and beyond the body: "a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts" (Hakim, 2010: 501). Erotic capital is a comprehensive concept that addresses the areas in which a Sugar Baby needs to invest if she wants to succeed in sugar dating. There are six elements involved in erotic capital: beauty, sexual attractiveness (defined as having a sexy body²³, which young people tend to have simply by virtue of being young, but this "can fade rapidly with age" (Hakim, 2010: 500)), social skills, liveliness (as in good levels of energy and an affable character), appropriate social presentation in terms of stylish clothing and makeup, and sexuality itself, defined as "sexual competence, energy, erotic imagination, playfulness, and everything else that makes for a sexually satisfying partner" (Hakim, 2010: 501).

According to Hakim (2010), both sexuality and erotic capital can be considered a performance, a learned act. It is certainly arguable that sexuality is performed, and that as human beings, we learn how to properly perform it according to narrow gendered standards. However, the idea that one can perform erotic capital must be questioned, as in general capital is that which one accumulates (Bourdieu, 1990) rather than performs. Moreover, Hakim claims that women "have more erotic capital than men, and this gives them a significant potential advantage in negotiations with men" (2010: 505). Although it may be true that women possess more erotic capital than men, which may simply mean that women are more valued for their perceived attractiveness than men are, it is hard to see how that would help them in undefined notions of 'negotiations' with them. The possession of erotic capital does not necessarily imply that an economic reward is obtained as happens in sugar dating, as I will discuss in more depth in Chapter VII.

Although the concept of erotic capital helps us identify key areas in the analysis of the construction of the 'sugar' subject, it needs to be understood within the context of gender and economic inequalities, as well as cultural constructions of femininity. Failing to acknowledge that sugar dating operates within a social organization where men as a social group oppress

²³ The social perception of what constitutes a 'sexy body' is historically and geographically located. In this case, it should be assumed that the features of a 'sexy body' are those that apply in contemporary Western countries, and specifically Britain.

women as a social group (Scott, 1986), and where a considerable number of young women, even those who would self-identify as middle-class, are experiencing economic distress, means being oblivious to the possible constraints that women may have to face when capitalising on their erotic capital. In addition, the notion of sexual entrepreneurship cannot be understood without a closer look into how sexuality is constructed within a male-dominated society. Sexuality has been identified by scholars such as MacKinnon (1987) and Bartky (1990) as a key site for the reproduction of gender inequality; thus

a close examination of how sexuality is constructed under these circumstances is imperative in this research.

IV.III. From radical sexuality to sexual entrepreneurship

A feminist theoretical framework that highlights the structural inequalities between men and women in different social realms is the optimal lens to analyse sugar dating in order to provide a holistic approach to a dynamic that is affected by several interconnected contexts, such as those explained in the first chapter. Feminist epistemological approaches to sexuality become especially relevant owing to the direct relation between ‘sugaring’ and commodification of women’s sexuality, as well as profiting from their erotic capital. Second-wave feminists’ analyses of sexuality, as well as more recent postfeminist insights, will be revised and applied to sugar dating.

IV.III.I. (Hetero)Sexuality

When analysing sugaring, to consider it a level field where men and women enter on equal terms if we leave economic constraints aside, would be to forget that women as a sex class have been - and still are - historically oppressed *as women*, which translates into a series of effects that I will analyse further down the line. Sugar dating, as a dynamic, is biased in favour of men, if only because the inherent gender - and therefore power - asymmetry places them in a position of superiority in a male-dominated society. Second-wave feminists (also called ‘radical feminists) have argued that gender inequality affects all women, independently of other factors such as their access to different types of capital. Other currents such as sex-positive (also called ‘pro-sex’) feminism focus on personal agency to the extent of arguing that not only can heterosexual sex occur between fully equal individuals, but also that transactional sex can be a viable labour option and a rational economic judgment within a restrained economic and

social situation, rather than a consequence of women's subordination to men (Pitcher, 2018). Kari Kesler, for example, (2002: 223), argues that sex workers who have voluntarily chosen their profession "are no more victims than non-prostitute women under our current patriarchal capitalism system", implying that the negative consequences of prostitution derive from the capitalist system and not from patriarchal domination. Sex-positive feminism, however, has been portrayed as complicit with neoliberal discourses that promote inequality and obscure structural inequalities (Jeffreys, 2009). By failing to understand sex work as part of a broader system of domination in which heterosexuality plays a key part in the subjugation of women as a class, sex-positive feminism remains oblivious to the pervasive subjugation of women *as women* in almost aspect of their lives, and therefore fails to produce a nuanced approach to the notion of sexual consent. Radical feminism, on the other hand, has extensively theorised the consequences of belonging to a non-dominant class, which go beyond those experienced by those oppressed by capitalism (or neoliberalism), and therefore constitutes a superior theoretical approach to analyse sugar dating, a dynamic where gender *and* class operate together to constraint the ability of the Sugar Baby to voice or refuse sexual consent.

Sandra Lee Bartky explains that all women, as members of a male-dominated society, have potentially experienced

the low self-esteem that is attendant upon cultural depreciation, the humiliation of sexual objectification, the troubled relationship to a socially inferiorized body, the confusions and even the anguish that come in the wake of incompatible social definitions of womanhood; women of all kinds and colors have endured not only the overt, but also the disguised and covert attacks of a misogynistic society. (Bartky, 1990: 9)

The subordination of women in a misogynistic society manifests itself in myriad different forms, and it is itself affected by other factors beyond gender, such as race, age, class, etc., as I have explained.

Catherine MacKinnon, one of the key figures of radical feminism, (1982) argues that social domination of men over women would not be possible without heterosexuality as it is exercised today. For MacKinnon, hegemonic heterosexuality is constitutive of the eroticization of male dominance and subsequent female submission. The socialization of women as inferior beings occurs through a mechanism of segregation which is gender-coded: society is organized through the separation of its members into two different sex classes: men and women. This division is not only deeply hierarchical, but also involves firm social control over women's sexuality which reveals itself in specific practices such as "abortion, birth control, sterilization,

abuse, domestic battery, rape, incest [...] sexual harassment, prostitution, female sexual slavery, and pornography” (MacKinnon, 1982: 529). This socialization occurs both at an individual level (for example, through gender-based violence, incest, or rape), and at an institutional one (through policies that limit women’s access to techniques to control their own reproductive capacity such as contraceptives, or to surgical procedures such as abortion). The socialization of women as inferior is maintained and reproduced through mechanisms such as pornography and prostitution (MacKinnon, 1982).

The socialization of women could be understood as another type of *assujettissement* (Milchman & Rosenberg, 2007): women’s lack of full control over their own sexuality affects the creation of the subject. If we agree with Hakim (2010) and accept that one needs to learn how to perform sexuality, the fact that this sexuality is constructed through a patriarchal notion of heterosexuality necessarily means that women need to surrender to categories that are not “of [their] own making” (Butler, 1997: 20). Authors such as Adrienne Rich (1986) have argued that heterosexuality as an institution socializes women to exist solely for the service of men, instead of for the purpose of being human beings in their own right. This idea should not be understood as totalizing, but rather as a social norm, and a plausible explanation for women’s systematic prioritising of their male partners’ desires over their own (Gavey, 1992; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). In fact, recent research conducted by Kristen Jozkowski and Zoë Peterson on heterosexual sexual couples found that “men are conceptualized as sexual initiators and women as sexual gatekeepers, and [...] men’s sexual pleasure is primary whereas women’s experience of pleasure is secondary” (2013: 517), which suggests that arguments developed decades ago are still in force.

Bartky, along the lines of MacKinnon, argues that women have historically been psychologically oppressed, which means that they have been subjected to a process whose aim was their “internalization of intimations of inferiority” (1990: 22). Women’s assimilation of inferior social status works to maintain male supremacy since it undermines the will of the oppressed groups, allowing the system of domination to continue without using overt force or, at least, using less overt acts of violence towards the oppressed (Bartky, 1990). According to Bartky, this assimilation occurs through gender socialization, which in the case of women includes three different but interconnected processes. The first is being subjected to social stereotyping. Focusing on white women, she explains that they

have been seen as incapable and incompetent [...] we cannot be autonomous, as men are thought to be autonomous, without in some sense ceasing to be women [...] White women, at least, are psychologically conditioned not to pursue the kind of autonomous development that is held by the culture to be a constitutive feature of masculinity. (Bartky, 1990: 24-25)

White women's purportedly 'natural' lack of the notion of independence permeates cultural products that influence women's consciousness as they grow up, which impairs their ability to think of themselves as autonomous beings. Websites such as Seeking.com exploit this idea by presenting Sugar Daddies as mentors and providers to women (Seeking, 2021), which implies that they are somehow more knowledgeable, and more capable of economically supporting somebody else. Nevertheless, while I agree with Bartky's fundamental argument, I believe that women's lack of autonomy - albeit rooted in cultural representations of white women as damsels in distress - also derives from their inferior economic power when compared with men. Because Black women have always worked outside the home (Davis, 1983), in contrast to their white counterparts, they cannot be represented as lacking autonomy. This is also the reason why Seeking.com targets economically disempowered women.

The second process described by Bartky is cultural depreciation, which means that women are alienated from culture and cultural productions because they reproduce or reinforce a discourse of male supremacy. Although some cultural products may challenge this norm, the fact that they remain social anomalies proves that sexism is still normalised, albeit concealed.

The third process, arguably one more relevant to sugar dating, is sexual objectification. A person "is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (Bartky, 1990: 26). Therefore, since sugar dating involves capitalization of women's sexual 'functions', to use the same terminology, it can be understood as a paradigmatic example of sexual objectification. Of course, it can be suggested that sexual objectification can produce a certain pleasure for the objectified subject, and according to postfeminist logic, this would be enough for an argument to render sexual objectification unproblematic. Bartky refutes this notion by stating that firstly, much of women's sexual objectification occurs without their consent; and secondly, that "there are delights of a narcissistic kind that go along with the status "sex object"" (Bartky, 1990: 29). Thus, that women learn to see themselves as sexual objects and might obtain pleasure when they fulfil this role does not change the fact that the experience of objectification can also be

alienating and can have calamitous consequences, such as the current obsession of women with their bodies and the disciplinary regimes they engage with in order to comply with the requirements of being a sexual object (Orbach, 1985; Wolf, 1991).

Nevertheless, if we analyse Bartky's argumentation in the light of erotic capital (Hakim, 2010), we could argue that women may capitalize on their own sexual objectification, effectively using it to their advantage. In the case of sugar dating, both phenomena can happen simultaneously. In fact, it has been indicated during the interviews by several participants that they were dating actively yet unsuccessfully before deciding to sugar date. The women were already performing the beautifying work - investing in their own erotic capital - without any perceived reward, which contributed to their decision to sugar date. This can be interpreted as active participation in one's own sexual objectification, as well as the exercise of sexual entrepreneurship. Although I will further develop this idea in Chapter V, Bartky's argumentation can be blended with the concept of erotic capital in order to illuminate the nuances of sugar dating.

Economic inequality as a reinforcing site for male supremacy

To highlight that women's interiorization of an inferior status is made through mechanisms such as stereotyping and sexual objectification need not be understood as a denial of the impact that material reality, especially the lack of economic capital, has on women's decision to enter sugar dating. Male social dominance should not be reduced to asymmetric sexual relations but rather defined as a systemic form of domination that also operates through a series of material and institutionalized relations which, *grosso modo*, means that men as a class oppress women as a class (Willis, 1984). MacKinnon's approach to women's oppression does not focus solely on women's sexuality to explain the subordination of women. Rather, she argues that sexual oppression and economic disempowerment go hand in hand. In the words of Adrienne Rich:

Women are not only segregated in low-paying service jobs [...] but that "sexualisation of the woman" is part of the job. Central and intrinsic to the economic realities of women's lives is the requirement that women will "market sexual attractiveness to men, who tend to hold the economic power and position to enforce their predilections". And MacKinnon documents that "sexual harassment perpetuates the interlocked structure by which women have been kept sexually in thrall to men at the bottom of the labor market. Two forces of American society converge: men's control over women's sexuality and capital's control over employees' work

lives". Thus, women in the workplace are at the mercy of sex as power in a vicious circle. (Rich, 1986: 41)

Thus economic inequality cannot be separated from the social control of women's sexuality, as they are intertwined forces. Although Rich refers to the US context, the same can be said of Britain. Sugar dating needs to be evaluated, through this prism, as an activity where the erotization of male dominance and the submission of women is exposed in a more obvious way than those in non-commodified forms of dating; but it is itself embedded in what can be considered a normal dynamic within the relational realm of heterosexual sexuality and class. Research conducted by Nancy Luke (2005) on sugar dating in Kenya, for example, showed that 'sugar' relationships tend to be less equal owing to the greater age gap between the Sugar Daddy and the Sugar Baby, and thus the greater economic assistance that the Sugar Baby receives. These inequalities were reflected in actions such as engaging in unsafe sex - not using condoms, for example - and were more prevalent in relationships where the Sugar Baby was receiving more economic support from the Sugar Daddy, demonstrating that the economic context where the relationship emerges affects its development.

For MacKinnon, "men's power over women writ large is structured around male sexual power. Power and sexuality are intimately intertwined [...] with power structuring sexuality and sexuality reinforcing power" (MacKinnon, qtd. in Chambers, 2005: 329). A dynamic such as sugar dating (or prostitution), characterised by a stark imbalance in power, is considered as an exertion of force by the dominant partner and therefore, violence. It is through sexuality that women are kept as members of an inferior social class. But it is also owing to a significant imbalance in the acquisition of economic capital that an asymmetric relationship is maintained.

Therefore, according to MacKinnon's logic, which I share, sugar dating would work in two different ways. Firstly, it is rooted in men's superior earning power and men's sexual power: it constitutes another form of demanding constant availability of female bodies in order to use them sexually, in line with other social practices such as prostitution or pornography. Secondly, the fact that the discourse surrounding sugaring distances this practice from prostitution would serve to reinforce male sexual supremacy by making this dynamic subtler and ideologically more palatable, as sugaring is described in Seeking.com almost as a form of philanthropy (see Chapter V: The Discursive Construction of the Sugar Subject). The social acceptance of sugar-type dynamics would then be both a product of heterosexual sexuality and a producing site of

sexual meaning, in a perpetual loop of reinforcement that socially validates the sexual availability of women to affluent men.

Nevertheless, it may be argued that women are free agents that willingly choose to participate in sugaring, as many women choose not to do so. I believe this to be partially true: there are a series of preconditions that have to occur for women to think about capitalizing and profiting from their bodies, as the women interviewed in this work have expressed. However, these preconditions do not invalidate the agency of the women who took the decision to engage in sugar dating, but it means that those decisions were taken within a context characterised by compulsory heterosexuality and economic precarity.

IV.III.II. Compulsory heterosexuality

All the women interviewed in this work, independently of how they described their sexual orientation, had engaged in heterosexual 'sugar' relationships. Because heterosexuality is more than a sexual orientation - authors such as Adrienne Rich (1986) have argued that it should be considered as a political institution that works to maintain male dominance, perpetuated through a series of mechanisms that employ more or less overt force - it needs to be carefully evaluated and analysed to understand how 'sugar' relationships are affected by hegemonic notions of heterosexuality.

Alix Shulman (1980), a pioneer in feminist analysis of sexuality, has argued that heterosexual sexual relations, inasmuch as they are defined by roles where women are subsidiary to men, work to maintain a political end, i.e. male domination. In addition, because women are generally economically poorer than men and entering a heterosexual relationship may provide them with financial security and stability, women are drawn to these relationships in order to improve their economic realities. Heterosexual relations are therefore permeated by general inequalities that are reproduced through the relationship (Shulman, 1980). Because of the gendered gaps in income, women need the relationship in a way that men do not, which immediately places them in a weaker position within the power struggle inherent to the relationship. This economic imbalance is further accentuated in sugar dating.

However, a distinction should be made between heterosexual intercourse as a political practice and as a personal choice. Anne Koedt distinguished between “intercourse as an option and as an institutionalized practice defined as synonymous with ‘normal’ sex” (n.d, qtd. in Willis, 1984: 103), arguing that “the point of sex was pleasure, the point of institutionalized intercourse was male pleasure, and the point of challenging that construct was equal pleasure and orgasm for women” (ibid.). It can be inferred then that any heterosexual relationship affected by economic inequalities and where the pleasure of the woman is absent can be thought of as a reinforcement of hegemonic heterosexuality and male dominance.

The hegemony of this type of (hetero)sexuality is reproduced through a series of signifying mechanisms that act as pedagogic tools. One of the most efficient is pornography, which is widely watched by adolescents (Antevska & Gavey, 2015), adults (Dines, 2010), and children - research has shown that children as young as ten are regularly exposed to pornographic content (Wright, 2014). Rich argues that mainstream pornographic material works to maintain the subjection of women in two different ways. Firstly, it portrays women as sexual commodities readily available for men and devalued of any sort of desire of their own, which conforms to normative visions of heterosexuality. Secondly, it conveys the message that

[w]omen are natural sexual prey to men and love it, that sexuality and violence are congruent, and that for women sex is essentially masochistic, humiliation pleasurable, physical abuse erotic [...] Pornography does not simply create a climate in which sex and violence are interchangeable; *it widens the range of behavior considered acceptable from men in heterosexual intercourse.* (Rich, 1986: 40, emphasis original).

Although there are some authors who are critical of this view of pornography, they acknowledge that mainstream hardcore porn tends to display male sexual control over women (Antevska & Gavey, 2015), which may affect the behaviour of the viewer. Research has shown that men become more desensitized to violence against women after watching porn (Dines, 2010). Other studies have shown that men who watch porn do it with a sense of detachment that prevents them from empathising with the female actresses, even when watching pornographic material that openly depicts sexual violence against women (Antevska & Gavey, 2015). Pornography should therefore be treated as a site of production of meaning; and considering the vast size and profitability of the industry at a global scale, a critical one²⁴. The

²⁴ The Internet porn industry alone is estimated to be worth more than 97 billion USD (Keilty, 2018).

influence of pornography extends beyond the limits of the industry and has become “the dominating values of fashion and beauty advertising” (Jeffreys, 2005: 67). Porn aesthetics, for example, are employed by both Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com. Pornography may have also permeated the relationships themselves through requests that Sugar Daddies have made to the Sugar Babies interviewed in this study (see Chapter VII).

Other authors go beyond criticism of pornography and are critical of the idea of heterosexual sex per se. Second-wave feminist Andrea Dworkin argues that the idea of heterosexual sex has been constructed under patriarchy with the political target of fostering male dominance over women: “getting fucked and being owned are inseparably the same; together [...] they are sex for women under male dominance as a social system” (1987: 66). For Dworkin, sex and intercourse are not natural, pre-cultural ideas and practices, but rather they are made meaningful through society – for example, through regulatory technologies such as pornography. Since sexual intercourse is a social activity, the monetization of sexuality can never be a *solely* private matter between two persons, as sex cannot be stripped of its social meanings. This view clashes with a neoliberal understanding of the individual as isolated from social structures and therefore making rational decisions that respond to a particular context: if we follow Dworkin’s reasoning, any decision that involves the exercise of heterosexuality is not only affected by economic contexts - in this case, neoliberalism - but also by the social construction of heterosexual sex under conditions of male dominance. Sugar dating, therefore, can never be understood solely as a private matter, as an independent ‘arrangement’ isolated from the social context.

Although Dworkin’s insights are useful when analysing sugar dating, she leaves little room for women’s own agency when deciding to profit from their own erotic capital. Since for Dworkin sexual intercourse is made meaningful through a male-dominated society, this can lead to a difficulty in separating consensual sex from rape, as sex is itself affected by pervasive inequalities that go beyond the economic realm. Dworkin (1996) argues that women learn, through gender socialization, to eroticise powerlessness in a sexual context; therefore, the limits between consensual sex and rape are blurred precisely because heterosexual intercourse under male dominance is constructed as revolving around male pleasure and the subjection of women. Other authors who are not radical feminists, such as Bourdieu (2001), have explained this eroticised domination by stating that hegemonic sexuality is organized through a clear opposition between the passivity of women and the active role of men. Bourdieu (2001) has

argued that male desire is constructed around domination and possession, whereas women's desire is for male domination or for eroticised subordination. Although radical feminists and others offer a social, gendered context in order to explain how power relations work to maintain women's subjection, as well as how normative heterosexuality systematically places men's desires over women's, their analysis appears incomplete when trying to explain contemporary phenomena such as sugar dating where women do not appear passive but rather agentically exploit their own sexuality. Contemporaneous theoretical approaches to this new performance of sexuality, while absorbing some of the arguments developed by radical feminists, analyse this twist in female sexuality by coining the term 'postfeminist sexual entrepreneurship' or 'postfeminist sexuality'.

IV.III.III. The postfeminist sexual entrepreneur

Rosalind Gill (2007) argues that since the early 1990s, cultural representations of women's bodies and sexuality have shifted from passivity or victimisation to portrayals of women as empowered subjects who expect to obtain pleasure from their sexuality. Gill, alongside Ngaire Donaghue (2013), names this change 'the agency turn', and adds that postfeminist discourses also encourage women to *choose* to engage in self-monitoring practices and beauty-body management practices that have been previously thought of as gender-reaffirming or problematic in some other way. This notion of 'choosing' is intrinsically linked to neoliberal ideas of choice and agency within a constrained scenario. Stéphanie Genz has applied this analysis to female sexuality in order to describe a new subjectivity that contains this entanglement between past notions of female passivity and present ideas of agentic performance. She has coined the term 'the postfeminist sexual agent' who "uses her feminine body in a way that involves both active and passive forms of recognition and motivation" (2006: 339).

Sugar Babies can therefore be understood as postfeminist sexual agents who aim to capitalize their sexuality. This 'new' type of postfeminist sexuality requires the active participation of women, even in practices previously regarded as technologies of subjection such as dieting: "increasingly, young women are presented not as passive sex objects, but as active, desiring sexual subjects, who seem to participate enthusiastically in practices and forms of self-presentation that earlier generations regarded as connected to subordination" (Gill, 2007: 95). If 'previous generations' (arguably women belonging to previous generations may have been

more influenced by second-wave feminism) viewed some representations as “connected to subordination”, the postfeminist sexual subject may embrace these positions and need not necessarily view them in the same light. Postfeminism often renders previous feminist claims as *passé*.

The same logic applies to sex work and sexual labour. Young women have been exposed to postfeminist discourses that place them in a “status of active subjecthood so that they can ‘choose’ to become sex objects because this suits their liberated interests” (Gill, 2007: 99). The notion of choice is closely tied to neoliberal ideals of performing citizenship through ‘choosing’ to engage in consumer practices while structural inequalities are obliterated or rendered as personal failures. Sugar Babies need to be framed as postfeminist subjects who exercise their agency and choose to perform an active sexuality that may grant them some economic benefits in the context of economic distress. Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill (2011: 52) write about how the merging of neoliberal consumerism and contemporary postfeminist sexualities produces “the sexual entrepreneur”. They draw on Attwood’s notion of ‘sexualization of culture’ to explain the “growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses, and in which pornography has become increasingly influential and porous, transforming contemporary culture” (2006: 77). Again, like radical second-wave feminists, contemporary authors identify pornography as an influential cultural discourse.

The pornographic saturation of societies has transformed sexuality from a private realm to one where the subject can publicly exercise her will, working on it through personal transformation. Harvey and Gill (2011) draw on Hilary Radner’s concept of “technologies of sexiness” - which, in turn, derives from Foucault’s “technologies of the self” (1988: 18) - to illustrate the amount of labour that needs to be invested into this performance of ‘sexiness’. This labour is performed through a series of disciplinary techniques such as exercise, make-up, clothing, or plastic surgery, which effectively serves to entangle consumerism, heterosexuality, and femininity (Radner, 1999). The postfeminist subject is a profoundly neoliberal one, as she not only needs to learn how to perform sexuality, but also to have an ‘entrepreneurial’ attitude towards it:

A new mode of femininity, organized around sexual entrepreneurialism is emerging. This modern, postfeminist subject, we contend, is incited to be compulsorily sexy and always ‘up for it’, and is interpellated through discourses in which sex is work that requires constant labour and reskilling [...] Beauty, desirability and sexual performance(s) constitute her ongoing projects and

she is exhorted to lead a 'spiced up' sex life, whose limits - not least heterosexuality and monogamy - are tightly policed, even as they are effaced or disavowed through discourses of playfulness and experimentation. (Harvey & Gill, 2011: 56)

Therefore, for Harvey and Gill, the entrepreneurial sexuality of the postfeminist subject is not conceived as emancipatory, but rather develops within the framework of heterosexuality and arguably, to an extent, monogamy. In the case of sugar dating, the concept of sexual entrepreneurship is crucial to understand how Sugar Babies invest in their own erotic capital and engage in disciplinary techniques in order to acquire the relevant skills and obtain profit from their own sexuality. Again, this engagement with 'technologies of the self' may be a conscious choice, but it needs to be recalibrated in a particular postfeminist context that mobilizes the proliferation of narrowly defined notions of sexuality. Otherwise, as Gill (2007) argues, if postfeminism were a truly emancipatory project, we would have seen a proliferation of different 'performances' of sexuality. Rather, as Levy (2005: 29) claims in her definition of 'raunch culture'²⁵, postfeminist sexuality is clearly affected by heteronormative pornographic imagery: "It isn't about opening our minds to the possibilities and mysteries of sexuality. It's about endlessly reiterating one particular - and particularly saleable - shorthand for sexiness".

The exercise of this particular postfeminist sexuality occurs in the juncture between neoliberal ideologies and postfeminism: "Just as neoliberalism requires individuals to narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices so too does some contemporary writing depict young women as unconstrained and freely choosing" (Gill, 2008: 436). Binary visions of agency - whether the individual is able to act totally out of 'free will' or completely coerced - need to be left aside to embrace the more nuanced definition of agency as the "socioculturally-mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2010: 112). The sociocultural milieu in which agency is exercised is key to understanding its development. It is necessary to acknowledge that sexuality can be constrained through discourses that are embedded in a deeply unequal society in terms of gender, especially when that sexuality is constructed within the framework of heteronormative heterosexuality. Presenting postfeminist subjects as completely 'free choosing' without accounting for coercive situations obscures the context where the 'sexual entrepreneurship' occurs. However, negating women's ability to actively engage in a sexual

²⁵ Ariel Levy uses the notion of 'raunch culture' to explain how pornographic imagery permeates mainstream media. In this sense, it should be understood as a similar concept to Attwood's sexualization of culture (2005).

relationship - whether commodified or not - means infantilising them, as well as denying their own personal agency which, as Ahearn exemplifies, is socioculturally mediated but does still exist. The most sophisticated theoretical approach to this dichotomy is the concept of 'technologies of heterosexual coercion' proposed by Nicola Gavey (1992), by which she explains the often veiled coercion that can be involved in a heterosexual relationship and that it is necessary to account for when calibrating agency in a postfeminist and economic insecure context.

IV.IV. Technologies of heterosexual coercion

As I have argued above, radical feminism and postfeminism offer different nuances to the analysis of women's experiences of (hetero)sexuality: from subjection to sexual subjecthood. Radical feminism tends to focus on how social male dominance over women creates inherent power imbalances in heterosexual relationships that make sexual intercourse an asymmetric phenomenon in which women's ability to consent is severely constrained. Catharine MacKinnon argues that it is because of this power imbalance that even definitions of consent and rape are biased: "[t]hat consent rather than nonmutuality is the line between rape and intercourse further exposes the inequality in normal social expectations" (1982: 532). According to MacKinnon, sex is conceived as an activity that women 'consent to' but do not necessarily desire, which is far from the postfeminist view of women's sexuality as desiring and agentic.

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The concept of 'consent' is largely untheorized, which can be problematic since "the absence of sexual consent is most often the defining characteristic of sexual violence (sex without consent)" (Beres, 2007: 93). For the purpose of this research, a clear definition of sexual consent is needed. I align myself with the current of thought that defines consent as freely given (see Hickman and Muehlenhard, 1999; Beres, 2007; or Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013), as opposed to other authors that believe that consent may still be given under circumstances of coercion (see Dripps, 1992; or Panichas' concept of 'coerced consent', 2001). A comprehensive definition of consent is that offered by Hickman and Muehlenhard, who state that consent can be defined as the "freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness. This definition [...] takes context into account by requiring that consent be expressed freely" (1999, 259); and specifies that contextual circumstances that may affect a person's ability to freely give consent include "alcohol or drugs, threat of harm, economic

coercion, or compulsory heterosexuality” (ibid.). This definition aligns with others proposed by international entities such as the World Health Organization, which defines sexual violence as inherently coerced: “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances [...] against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person [...] in any setting” (2002: 149).

In a situation where a person is experiencing any type of coercion, a possible violation of sexual consent may happen, even if that person has not overtly rejected the sexual encounter or even if they have verbally consented. In fact, Rowland (1996) argues that it is common for women to have experienced coercive or unwanted sex within a romantic relationship because of the fashion in which most heterosexual relationships are constructed: prioritising men’s needs and desires over women’s. Nicola Gavey (1992) denominates this phenomenon as ‘technologies of heterosexual coercion’:

Dominant discourses on heterosexuality position women as relatively passive subjects who are encouraged to comply with sex with men, irrespective of their own sexual desire. Through the operation of disciplinary power, male dominance can be maintained in heterosexual practice often in the absence of direct force or violence. The discursive processes that maintain these sets of power relationships can be thought of as ‘technologies of heterosexual coercion’. (Gavey, 1992: 325)

These technologies of coercion function through mechanisms that are not openly violent but are effective in maintaining an unequal heterosexual relationship, meaning that women learn to perform relatively passive roles while being compliant with male demands. Furthermore, Gavey (1992) explains that coercive behaviour can not only be reduced to the most evident form - e.g. rape - but rather permeates heterosexual relationships through other, subtler means. She draws on Foucault’s conceptualisation of “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1979) to argue that dominant discourses of sexuality shape modes of thought and individual subjectivities, and therefore subjects are likely to absorb hegemonic positions that comply with normative ways of behaving and thinking about sex and intercourse. Gavey adds that Foucault’s docile bodies are profoundly gendered (a remark that Foucault himself failed to make): women’s constant self-surveillance when engaging in a heterosexual relationship effectively demonstrates Gavey’s understanding of docility:

Women involved in heterosexual encounters are also engaged in self-surveillance, and are encouraged to become self-policing subjects who comply with the normative heterosexual narrative scripts which demand our consent and participation irrespective of our sexual desire.

Thus, while women may not engage in conscious and deliberate submission, disciplinary power nevertheless produces what can be seen as a form of obedience. (1992: 328-329)

Gavey's technologies of gender, MacKinnon's eroticization of powerlessness and Bourdieu's symbolic violence all attempt to address women's apparent implication in maintaining the hegemony of heterosexuality. Gavey (1992) argues that part of the reason for this compliance is the illusory naturalness - and therefore, inevitability - of this hegemonic form of heterosexuality which is reproduced and enforced through a series of mechanisms that can be blatantly obvious, such as those in pornography, but also subtler, such as legislation on sexuality and sexual violence, representation of heterosexual relationships in films, advertisement, television shows, etc. She reaches the conclusion that it is commonplace for heterosexual women to engage in a series of practices that can be considered liminally consensual. This means that, owing to prescriptive notions of heterosexual sexuality, women often find themselves in situations where sex is somehow expected (for example, after going on a date with a man) and they do not feel that they have the option to say no. In the case of sugar dating, this situation may be aggravated by the prescriptive notion of the 'sugaring' discourse (see Chapter V: The Discursive Construction of the Sugar Baby), and the mutual understanding that sex is included in the agreements. In addition, because a 'sugar' engagement often mimics a non-transactional heterosexual relationship in which other factors such as emotional and affective aspects play a part (as Sugar Babies are often required to perform emotional labour) and yet there is still a transactional aspect to it, this creates a context that makes voicing of sexual consent difficult.

Because women who engage in heterosexual relationships have learned that sex is something that they consent to rather than desire, and owing to the transactional dimension of sugar dating, it may be that "women are thus sometimes not aware of consent and non-consent as distinct choices (given certain, acceptable, parameters of the relationship) [...] and given that women's sexual desire is often invisible, unspoken" (Gavey, 1992: 348). Gavey's specification that the blurring of the line between consent and non-consent needs to happen within certain parameters is key for understanding that a 'sugar' relationship may fit within these parameters: if sex is already included in the agreements, women's ability to consent may be constrained by the nature of the relationship, and because her pleasure is not relevant in this context, there may not be space for consent to be given or not as there is simply no consideration for it.

Within the context of hegemonic heterosexual relationships - and, again, it should be noted that sugar dating operates in the context of gendered economic inequalities - the notion of choice or consent can be severely compromised. We need to acknowledge that Sugar Babies enter sugar dating under the framework established by normative heterosexual sexuality, aggravated by an imbalance in access to economic capital and by an (often significant) age difference. Thus, their agency to be able to consent to intercourse is limited by several factors, including the fact that ultimately it is the Sugar Daddy who possesses the economic capital and there are no official mechanisms in place to force him to pay the Sugar Baby if he does not want to. Simultaneously, Sugar Babies are autonomous subjects who, however constrained by their circumstances, have chosen to enter a commodified relationship, and therefore they have agreed to the terms of the relationship. Gavey's notion of 'technologies of heterosexual coercion' shows that there is no clear line between consent and rape, but that women's ability to consent may be coerced even if a particular act is not considered by both partners to be a violation of sexual consent. Although it can be argued that Gavey's research is outdated as it was published before the postfeminist turn, contemporary research on women's ability to negotiate consent in heterosexual relationships shows women's agency is still compromised in heterosexual relationships.

IV.IV.I. Postfeminist agency in relation to sexual consent.

Melissa Burkett's and Karine Hamilton's research on women involved in heterosexual relationships can shed some light on how Gavey's 'technologies of coercion' operate within a postfeminist context. They argue that "sexual consent is deeply problematic in light of the contradictory ways in which women's empowerment is assumed within postfeminist discourses whilst masking ongoing gender imbalances" (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012: 815). According to their research, gendered imbalances in power during relationships still hinder women's agency to refuse sexual intercourse. After interviewing university students, they found that the young women often assumed contradictory positions regarding their own sexuality: although they verbalized their own sexual empowerment, they regularly consented to unwanted and unpleasant sex (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). This conflicting view may be a result of the fact that "their (hetero) sexual encounters [were] influenced by gendered discourses and norms, which generate implicit pressures that disrupt their negotiations of

consent” (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012: 817). These “gendered discourses and norms” may be understood as technologies of coercion, and it is likely that they also operate in other heterosexual contexts such as sugar dating. Participants in the research carried out by Burkett and Hamilton (2012) stated that it is the responsibility of the woman to verbalize that she does not consent to the act, otherwise a lack of refusal would be understood by the man as willingness to participate. Therefore,

[t]he participants’ adherence to ‘just say no’ discourses also translated into the view that sexual assault was a purely physical act: non-physical forms of pressure and coercion did not coincide with a violation of a woman’s sexual autonomy. Indeed, dominant assumptions regarding rape suggest that it involves physical violence and forceful penetration which leaves many women without a way of articulating other coercive forms of sex [...] Sex tends to be judged according to a binary system of consensual (‘normal’) versus non-consensual (‘rape’) which results in the silencing of women’s experiences that are more complex (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012: 820).

The ‘just say no’ approach to consent appears to be problematic when the intercourse occurs within what has been coined by Jozkowski and Peterson (2013: 521) as a “rape-supportive social environment”, where women are understood as gatekeepers and men as initiators, and where the responsibility to stop the intercourse if it is not consensual falls to the woman.

The contradictory views of Burkett’s and Hamilton’s participants on sexual intercourse (articulating that they are in charge of their sexuality while simultaneously engaging in undesired or unpleasant sex) means that it may be difficult for a woman to navigate ambiguous feelings regarding a certain act, which is also consistent with my own findings (see Chapters VI and VII). Although Burkett and Hamilton (2012) suggest that we need to move away from binary categories regarding sexual encounters (either fully consensual or a sexual assault) because they may not be nuanced enough to explain every situation, setting a bar that will differentiate consensual intercourse from a sexual assault is a difficult task, especially because definitions of sexual assault or rape tend to rely on previous definitions of sexual consent; for example, sexual assault is defined by Muehlenhard et al. as “sexual penetration or sexual touching done without the victim’s consent” (2016: 2). Thus it is necessary to evaluate how women expressed that consent, and if it was coerced or not.

The lack of proper vocabulary to define women’s experiences may act as a barrier to identifying coercive behaviour since heterosexual encounters are often shaped after heteronormative visions of sexuality in which a woman is encouraged to carry on with an encounter even if it is

unpleasant for her (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). In addition, different techniques are considered by different measurement tools as coercive: for example, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), carried out by the US government, included threats such as “threatening to end your relationship” or “wearing you down by repeatedly asking for sex, or showing they were unhappy” (Muehlenhard et al., 2016: 10) as types of coercion. Thus verbal threats may also play a role in coercing somebody into granting sexual consent, and not only the existence of a coercive context.

Much of the literature on sexual consent is based on research done in college campuses, which does not exactly apply to the context of sugar dating. Melanie Beres’ research on sexual consent, for example, reported findings similar to those discussed above regarding the primacy of men’s sexual pleasure over women’s, as did Jozkowski’s and Peterson’s (2013) investigation on college campuses. Terry Humphreys, however, conducted a study examining sexual consent in heterosexual couples, which produced slightly different results from studies of college campuses. To exemplify, Humphreys (2007) claims that consent is often assumed if the couple had previously engaged in a sexual relationship, and it is expected that this consent continues every time the couple engages in the same sexual activities. This is consistent with previous research on perceptions of sexual consent. Shotland’s and Godstein’s research found that “men and women are more likely to perceive a resisting woman as obligated to have sex if the couple has had sexual intercourse 10 times before versus once or never before the event” (Shotland & Goodstein, 1992, qtd. in Humphreys, 2007: 307). However, sexual consent may have differing levels of relevance for both men and women. Humphreys (2007: 314) states that the negotiation of sexual consent is more necessary for women than for men, and that “ambiguous situations lead women to be more cautious in their interpretations of consent and acceptability”. This means that an act can be perceived as more or less consensual depending on the ‘history’ of the couple.

In the case of sugar dating, the fact that this dynamic is placed in the juncture between a relationship and transactional sex makes the negotiation of consent even more difficult. If it is understood by both partners that sexual intercourse is included in the agreements, it may be difficult for the woman acting as Sugar Baby to actually have the opportunity to consent or refuse since there may not be even a space for that. In addition, if there has been already some type of sexual activity between the sugar partners, it may simply be expected from the partners

that they will engage in similar activities again, which may align with Humphrey's research. Similar observations have been made by Jozkowski and Peterson, who state that:

If a man goes ahead with a sexual encounter without affording his female partner the opportunity to provide an affirmative agreement or a refusal, does this fit a legal or perhaps ethical definition of sexual assault or rape? Such sexual activity seems to fall into a gray space between consensual and nonconsensual sex. (2013: 522)

This may often be the case in sugar dating. Therefore, we need to take every consideration into account when sexual consent and sexual assault are regarded in this work. It needs to be understood that sexual consent may be severely compromised if it was acquired during a coercive situation, or if it was just taken for granted and there was no space allowed for a woman to consent.

Chapter V: The Discursive Construction of the Sugar Baby: Seeking.com

The categories through which we appropriate 'the real' in thought are discursively constructed rather than given by the real.

Michèle Barrett

V.I. The discursive production of the 'sugar' subject

Prior to deciding to engage in a sugar relationship, a person must understand the concept of sugar dating and the roles of the self as an actor therein. Since the participants interviewed in this work self-identified as Sugar Babies and claimed to currently be a Sugar Baby or to have been one in the past, it is safe to conclude that they assumed, at least temporarily, the subject position of the Sugar Baby as their own. Subjectivities are formed through social spaces and practices; in other words, social life. The Internet, as an online social space, constitutes a key site where subjectivities emerge (Brickell, 2012). Media platforms that facilitate the emergence of their uses as social subjects - with the creation of an online profile, for example - are fundamental in the discursive creation of a subject inasmuch as they provide the vocabulary for the person to create this new subjectivity. Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com, as online spaces where the online profiles of the Sugar Babies and Daddies are created, perform a double function. Firstly, they constitute the matrix of production of the Sugar Baby and Sugar Daddy as subject positions²⁶. Websites exert power on their users by providing symbolic codes:

We construct ourselves – and others – using the language our culture has coded in specific, highly symbolic ways [...] In part, at least, we are constituted from below – ‘formed as objects’ – through the discourses that define us on and through these sites. (Brickell, 2012: 30)

Thus they are the locus where the discourse that creates the subject is generated through a series of discursive norms. They also perform a second function: self-identification as a Sugar Baby or a Sugar Daddy relies on being a self-for-others and achieves value only insofar as it approximates the subject position and discursive norms constructed by the website. The interactive aspect of the website generates the space for mutual intelligibility in what has been defined as symbolic interaction:

How people present themselves within particular ‘interaction orders’, that is, domains of social interchange governed by particular rules and conditions (Goffman, 1959; Hardey, 2002). The symbolic interactionist self is reflective and interactive, not static or overdetermined, and

²⁶ The majority of the participants here interviewed had used Seeking.com to sugar date.

subjectivity is actively negotiated in a range of spaces – including digital ones. (Brickell, 2012: 31)

Sugar Babies and Daddies need to negotiate their new subjectivity in the field of sugar dating, and Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com offer the discursive tools to do so. However, two clarifications are needed regarding the discursive production of these subject positions. Firstly, the fact that Sugar Babies and Daddies are discursively produced does not mean that this is the only (re)signification process that operates in the context of sugar dating. There is a material and economic reality that plays a key role in the constitution of the subjects. In this sense, I follow the idea that it is not possible to differentiate, even theoretically, between the social recognition of the subject according to cultural categories, and her material realities (Butler, 1997). According to Kaye Mitchell, “‘cultural norms’ are never ‘merely cultural’, because they are ‘indissociable’ from the ‘material effects’ they produce’ (2008: 415, emphasis original). Therefore, stating that discourse exerts a constitutive power over the subject is not a negation of their material reality, as they coexist.

Secondly, the process of discursively producing the subject positions of Sugar Daddy and Sugar Baby is not totalizing - there is space for resistance. However, the ability of the Sugar Baby to resist is compromised in a way that that of the Sugar Daddy is not. Firstly, in economic terms, as the Sugar Daddy can resist more effectively the Sugar Daddy position, since if he stops properly behaving as a Sugar Daddy, his material reality need not be affected as his income does not depend on the sugar relationship. Secondly, according to Seeking.com, there are circa 2,058,000 female Sugar Babies registered on the website in the United Kingdom, and only half a million Sugar Daddies (Seeking, 2021). The imbalance in supply and demand affords the Sugar Daddy more power to control how the relationship will develop. Theoretically, it should be easier for him than for the Sugar Baby to find another suitable partner. Therefore, there is enough evidence to assume that Sugar Babies are subjected and subjugated in a different way from Sugar Daddies, and that Sugar Daddies have more agency than Sugar Babies to resist the power of this discourse. These two factors advance the inherent imbalance of power between the two groups and acquire relevance when evaluating the discursive production of the subject, since the Sugar Baby already starts from a weaker position: the discourse is more likely to permeate her than her Daddy.

The discursive construction of Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com users as Sugar Babies or Sugar Daddies - the formation of the ‘sugar’ subject - will be discussed in the next section.

Attention is paid not only to what the discourse explicitly says but also to what is tacitly left aside and unsaid. The silences and absences in the discourses are treated as ideological.

V.II. Seeking.com as a dating site: the interpellation of the Sugar Subject

Althusser's notion of interpellation can be applied to the formation of the 'sugar' subject. Interpellation for Althusser works in a similar fashion to Foucault's discursive production of the subject: the individual needs to be 'interpellated' by an authority - discursive or not - and recognize themselves as the subject is interpellated. For Althusser, the interpellation occurs at a macro level through the State and its apparatuses, while for Butler "interpellation is something that happens in and through language" (Butler, 1997, qtd. in Lampert, 2015: 125). According to Butler, both Althusser and Foucault write about the same phenomenon, a submission to power: "Whether by interpellation, in Althusser's sense, or by discursive productivity in Foucault's, the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power" (Butler, 1997: 2). Therefore "Althusser's doctrine of interpellation clearly sets the stage for Foucault's later views on the 'discursive production of the subject'" and both theorists "agree that there is a founding subordination in the process of *assujétissement*" (Butler, 1997: 5). The implication is that subject formation or *assujétissement* becomes inseparable from subjection, and this subjection occurs through language - discourse.

In the case of the creation of the 'sugar' subject, there exists a prior subject - a 'who' - that will feel interpellated: mature, affluent men in the case of Sugar Daddies and young, financially disempowered women in the case of the Sugar Baby. For Butler, "[t]he potential of interpellation as the basis for a performative theory of subjectivity lies in its being a naming that *constitutes* the subject it so names" (1997, qtd. in Davis, 2012: 882, emphasis original). Here the interpellation shows its dynamic nature and calls an already existing subject affected by other categories - male, female, young, mature, student - that will engage in the "performative (re)materialization of its social environment" (Davis, 2012: 881).

Seeking.com's interpellation of its members using specific, easily recognizable names such as 'Sugar Daddy' and 'Sugar Babies' is not unique. Other non-transactional online dating websites use similar techniques. Match.com, one of the most widely used dating websites worldwide, denominates its Anglo-Saxon members 'Quality Singles' (Arvidsson, 2006). This

label comes with a series of recommended behaviours that highlight the commitment of its users to finding a stable relationship. Users are encouraged, for example, to upload pictures of themselves engaging in leisure activities in order to show their compatibility with another person who may have similar hobbies. Simultaneously, they are discouraged from uploading revealing pictures of their bodies, symbolically highlighting that they seek a serious relationship instead of casual sex.

Potential users of Seeking.com may feel interpellated by the names ‘Sugar Baby’ and ‘Sugar Daddy’, in the same way that other users may feel that the concept of ‘Quality Singles’ applies to them. It is also worth noting that although both subject positions (Sugar Baby and Sugar Daddy) are meticulously described by the site, the website did not invent the name. The etymology of the term Sugar Daddy is obscure, but it is believed that it was first coined in the early 20th century when Adolph Spreckels, the wealthy heir of the Spreckels sugar company, married a woman who was twenty years younger, who called him her ‘Sugar Daddy’. By 1926 the term was already considered slang and held the same meaning as it does today: a man who offers money and/or goods to a younger woman in exchange for sexual favours (Willard, 2013). At some point in history, the younger woman was baptised a ‘Sugar Baby’. Nevertheless, the term ‘Sugar Daddy’ is more popular and has always been so in the United Kingdom (Google Trends, 2020). Nowadays, the concept of ‘Sugar Daddy’ is recognizable in popular culture and a range of commodities invoke the name, from nail polish to t-shirts. Seeking.com is therefore capitalizing on a previously existing concept by recalibrating its meaning in the light of contemporary economic and social circumstances. The ‘naming’ of the dynamic, as well as the linguistic construction of the discourse surrounding it, are at the heart of Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com.

Since Letstalksugar.com is a subsidiary site of Seeking.com, it is likely that potential Sugar Daddies and Babies will access Seeking.com before Letstalksugar.com. Together with the Seeking.com YouTube Channel (called *SugarDaddyDating*) and Seeking.com’s and Letstalksugar.com’s Instagram pages (@seeking and @letstalksugar), they form the Seeking conglomerate. The founder and CEO of both sites is Brandon Wade, an affluent businessman who decided to create a new dating website after personally - and unsuccessfully - trying several existing sites in his early adulthood to date women (Fleming, 2018). Self-described as an MIT nerd (Edwards, 2014), Wade came up with the idea after several realizations. Firstly, in 2000 he noticed that people were using the popular American website Craigslist.com for

online dating, as well as for soliciting and advertising sex (Cordero, 2015). He thought the reason some people were turning to online dating was the rapid speed of life that left them without disposable time to connect with others, which suggested the possibility of creating a new dating site. However, according to Wade's own accounts, the downside of online meet-up spaces was that they constitute a good milieu for deception (Cordero, 2015). Thus he resolved that providing an online space for people to meet up while being honest about their needs and desires could be a successful business idea, hindering the possibilities for deception (Cordero, 2015). Currently, Wade is the CEO of a multimillion-dollar business that includes not only Seeking.com but also similar websites such as SeekingMillionaire.com and MissTravel.com, all of which aim to connect wealthier men with poorer young women (Fleming, 2018).

Although Wade has been accused by the media on several occasions of promoting prostitution or being an e-pimp (Edwards, 2014; Fleming, 2018), Seeking.com has carefully curated its discourse in order to distance itself from negative connotations that the Sugar Daddy concept may carry. According to Fleming (2018), who analyses websites owned by Brandon Wade such as the aforementioned WhatsYourPrice.com, SeekingMillionaire.com, and MissTravel.com, these sites use the language of dating to obscure the fact that they promote the exchange of sexual services for economic compensation.

V.III. The function of Seeking.com

Seeking.com resembles non-transactional dating sites. However, when a person opens the homepage, a message targets the potential user encouraging them to "Upgrade [their] Relationships™. Where beautiful, successful people fuel mutually beneficial relationships" (Seeking, 2021b). The homepage already discursively presents Seeking.com as a site where relationships are 'upgraded', implying that they are better than 'non-mutually beneficial relationships'. There is however a lack of clarity in the message regarding how the relationships formed through the site are 'mutually beneficial'.

A joining user will first be asked if they are a woman or a man. If the chosen option is 'man', he will be asked if he is interested in men, women, or both. After that, the person needs to state whether he wants to meet someone who has either 'Looks & Charm' or 'Success & Wealth'. Both features cannot be selected at once, which implies an obvious reductionism and a clear association of the Sugar Baby with being physically attractive and the Sugar Daddy with being

affluent. By providing only two options (either 'looks' or 'wealth'), both the website and the potential user tacitly assume that although the website may resemble a dating website, it is not, in fact, a *normal* dating site - i.e. one whose aim would be to pair compatible people who want to find a romantic partner - but one where a transaction - i.e. beauty for wealth - occurs.

After selecting either option, the site asks for an email account and date of birth. The process is identical if one wishes to register as a woman, with two exceptions. Firstly, when the potential Sugar Baby is asked for her email account, the site announces that using a .edu email will grant her a free upgrade, therefore assuming that at least a proportion of the potential Sugar Babies are university students²⁷. Secondly, when a woman arrives at the screen where she needs to select if she is interested in either 'Looks & Charm' or 'Success & Wealth', the order is inverted and the option 'Success & Wealth' appears before 'Looks & Charm', indirectly pushing the female user towards clicking that first option and therefore becoming a female Sugar Baby. This stage in the joining process can be considered the first exertion of 'constitut[ing] power' (Brickell, 2012), as the platform overtly facilitates the process of subjectivation.

V.II.II. Registering as a Sugar Daddy

If one joins Seeking.com as a Sugar Daddy, after accepting the site's terms of use, one is invited to choose a username and upload a picture (this last step can be skipped). After that, the now member of Seeking.com can state his location, height, body type (choosing from a range of options that range from slim to athletic, curvy, or full/overweight), and ethnicity (Asian/Black/Hispanic/White, Mixed, etc.). Later, the user may state his level of education and his relationship status, where he has the option of choosing single, divorced, separated, married but looking, open relationship, or widowed. He is also asked if he has children (a 'prefer not to say' option is available), and if he drinks or smokes, and to what extent. The fact that a potential Sugar Daddy can choose 'married but looking' as a relationship status also distinguishes Seeking.com from other dating websites such as Match.com or eHarmony.com, and places it in the ethically grey area of 'cheating websites' such as AshleyMadison.com. Although this could also be interpreted as an exercise in honesty, as Wade envisioned, it also hints that some

²⁷ The possibility of joining with an email account provided by a university is never offered to prospective Sugar Daddies, implying that the company believes Sugar Daddies will be older than college students.

members may use the site to engage in extramarital affairs or commercial sex and that this behaviour is not disapproved of by the website.

Another feature that distinguishes Seeking.com from other dating sites and highlights the transactional nature of the website is its emphasis on knowing the financial status of its (male) users. To complete the profile, the potential Sugar Daddy needs to state his net income choosing from a list where the lowest amount is £60,000, and the highest is more than £60 million. This information needs to be provided in order to be able to browse the site. The annual income of the male member is also requested. The penultimate screen forces the person to choose at least one tag that would define what they are looking for in a relationship. Several options are provided, such as discretion, attentive, flexible schedule, fine dining, travel to you, etc. In the last screen, members are required to write a heading for their profile, as well as to complete an 'About me' text box. Again, terminology that is uncommon on non-transactional dating sites, such as 'travel to you' or 'discretion', signals that the website uses coded language to promote transactional sex and/or unfaithful behaviour.

After completing the profile, the potential Sugar Daddy arrives at the main dating interface where he is shown pictures of women, men, or both, depending on what he has chosen. Although he is offered a selection of pictures categorized under labels such as 'new members' and 'college members', the Sugar Daddy can also go to a search tab and select his preferred features, including location or distance, and options such as photos, premium, college, favoured, etc. The person can also select or deselect the options that were available when creating the profile such as relationship status, children, age, body type, etc.

V.II.III. Registering as a Sugar Baby

The process of registering as a Sugar Baby is slightly different. The Sugar Baby is also asked to complete her profile and needs to go through the same screens as the Sugar Daddy, except those requesting information about finances. However, once she arrives at the main dating interface where pictures of Sugar Daddies are shown, some actions are restricted that are not restricted for the Sugar Daddy. A potential Sugar Baby cannot choose search options such as Premium (for the site to show only Sugar Daddies who have a Premium account), body type, ethnicity, relationship status, income, net worth, or profile text (an option that allows the user to look for specific words in the profile of Sugar Daddies, for example 'hiking' or 'shopping').

If she wants to unblock these options, the Sugar Baby needs to acquire a premium account. In order to do so, firstly it is required that she completes her profile and verifies her email address.

One of the requirements of the profile is to upload a picture, which can be either public (every user has access to it), or private (the person needs to give others access). Although the site politely requests users not to upload 'nudity or revealing photos', Seeking.com maintains a loose attitude regarding the enforcement of their own recommendations. Plenty of pictures that fall into these two categories can be found on the site even though pictures need to be approved by the site before they appear on the user's profile. The online exchange or posting of sexually explicit pictures in social media or in 'hook up' apps has been identified as a new, yet common, sexual act: according to Race, "[t]he selfie of self-pornography [has become] part of the grammar of sexual arrangements" (2018, 1328). The fact that this sexual act is based on representation does not mean that the meaning of the act is merely to offer gratification to the receiver of the picture. Race argues that these pictures act as "*gestural acts* that seek to *do things* beyond the scope of referentiality and representation; they clarify intentions, specify interest, generate particular terms of exchange while setting out the social implications of subsequent connection" (ibid., emphasis original).

Seeking.com advertises its relationships as 'mutually beneficial' without ever mentioning that sex for potential economic gain is at the core of this transaction, yet it allows the uploading of images that can be considered soft porn and that imply the willingness of the user to engage in sexual acts. The website plays with this fluidity and operates within two different sets of meanings: while sex is not officially included in their advertised 'upgraded relationships', it is implicitly accepted - and even encouraged, due to the loose enforcement of the company's policies - that some kind of sexual activity will occur. The site does not merely act as a passive intermediary but rather plays an active role in the creation of a subtext that will favour commercial sex.

The Sugar Baby is encouraged to get 'verifications' by connecting her Seeking.com profile with other social media accounts that she may own. After Seeking.com check that they belong to the same person, she will earn a 'Verified' badge that will appear in her profile and on her uploaded pictures. While the Sugar Baby needs to build up her credibility capital by proving that she actually is who she says she is, Sugar Daddies do not need to do so. This can be interpreted as a gendered assumption of credibility - that women may lie about who they are

and therefore their backgrounds need to be checked - or as a dehumanizing approach to Sugar Babies by applying market strategies of product valorisation, in which 'verification' will act as 'proof of quality' for the Sugar Baby. Market metaphors and concepts populate dating websites and "encourage an attitude in which both oneself, and others, are commodified as products to be sold, assessed, purchased, or discarded" (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010: 443). In the case of Seeking.com, Sugar Babies appear to be more subjected to commodification than Sugar Daddies are: while Sugar Daddies need to provide their net worth and annual income, the site does not request that this information is verified.

Once the Sugar Baby has completed her profile, including uploading a public picture, and verified her email account, she can access the option of becoming a premium member²⁸ if she pays either £14.95 per month, or £11.95 per month if she acquires a three-month subscription. The main difference between the registration processes for Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies is that Sugar Daddies have access to all the search filters without the necessity of acquiring a premium account, and they can also navigate the site without uploading a picture of themselves, which effectively protects their identity. Conversely, Sugar Babies can only access all the search options once they have uploaded their picture and verified their email accounts. After that, they need to pay if they want to access all the filter options. Sugar Daddies, inasmuch as they are offered more comprehensive use of the site without paying for it, are considered more valuable, and are thus more privileged, members than Sugar Babies.

However, if a Sugar Baby comes through the British version of the Sugar Baby University Program™ site, the interface she is presented with is slightly different (see Figure II). Although the registration process is identical, the site advertises that if she joins with an .edu email²⁹ she will get a 'free upgrade'. The website does not specify what a free upgrade means, for example whether she will get a premium account.

²⁸ A premium account offers several advantages such as more privacy, as it gives the user the possibility of hiding their online status, join date, and last login country, which is not possible if they have a regular account. It also unblocks some features of the website, such as the previously mentioned search filters; it allows access to an inbox where the Sugar Baby can filter which messages from which Sugar Daddies come through; a virtual pad where she can keep notes on her Saved Members; a tool that allows her to check if the potential Sugar Daddy has read her message (similar to the 'double check' on the instant messaging app WhatsApp); and the possibility of navigating the site without seeing advertisements.

²⁹ However, .edu emails are only available for those enrolled in higher education in the United States. Since the email accounts provided by higher education institutions in the UK do not use that ending - they use ac.uk - a British student will not have access to the free upgrade.



Join the more than 500,000 students in the United Kingdom who have chosen to elevate their university experience by joining SeekingArrangement and dating successful benefactors who help them avoid student debt and secure a better future.

Figure I. Seeking (2021) Sugar Baby University UK [online] *SeekingArrangement*. Accessed 26th January 2021. <https://www.seeking.com/p/sugar-baby-university-2020/uk/#gref>

The registration process for Seeking.com does not differ greatly from that of other non-transactional websites such as Match.com or eHarmony. Although Seeking.com places more importance on the financial status of their male members, the rest of the process resembles a non-transactional dating website with some differences, such as Sugar Daddies having the possibility of describing their status as ‘married, but looking’; or being able to look for someone seeking a relationship defined with labels such as ‘discretion’, or ‘investor’; and the fact that soft porn images are allowed to be uploaded onto the site.

Although the site acts as a virtual meet-up place, it is entirely up to the potential Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies to interact with each other and agree on what the site calls ‘an arrangement’. Seeking.com holds no responsibility whatsoever over these arrangements and/or the conduct, online or offline, of the users, as they clearly state on their terms and conditions (Seeking, 2021e). Nor do they screen the background of users, although when potential members accept the terms and conditions of the website, they are asked to claim that they are not sex offenders and attest that they have never been convicted of a felony (ibid.). The site also clearly prohibits prostitution, escorting and human trafficking, and reiterates that escorts or prostitutes are not allowed to use it, nor are members allowed to solicit. In addition, Seeking.com states that people under eighteen must not use the site, and asks its members to report any minors that they encounter (Seeking, 2021e).

The official description of Seeking.com as purely a dating site differs from that provided by some of the women interviewed in this work, who saw sugar dating as a 'business transaction'. This creates a dissonance between the relationship expectations of the Sugar Daddies and those of the Sugar Babies. We need to start from the supposition that there are two underlying, and at times contradictory, descriptions of sugar dating throughout the site that are entangled with the two sets of meanings I have previously explained: one that targets Sugar Daddies (sugar dating as a 'mutually beneficial' dating dynamic) and another aimed at Sugar Babies (sugar dating as a way of coping with tuition fees and daily costs of living).

V.III. Seeking.com's Homepage: Benefits for the Sugar Daddy and the Sugar Baby

Seeking.com presents an aesthetic similar to that of other, albeit non-transactional, dating websites. The UK version of the site displays on its homepage a white, normatively beautiful, heterosexual couple (see Figure II), where the woman appears to be significantly younger than the man. While the man is wearing a suit and a tie, and the position of the arm shows a (presumably) expensive watch, the young woman wears an elegant red dress. Since the homepage offers the first impression that a potential user will have of the site, Seeking.com is using a dress code that targets middle and upper-middle-class potential customers³⁰, in accordance to the likeliness that the prospective online dater belongs to this social class (Arvidsson, 2006).

³⁰ As "being middle class [in the UK] is about being, well, a bit classy" (Jones, 2012: IX).

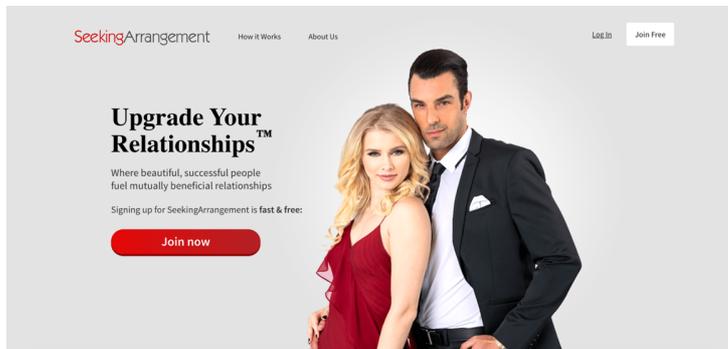


Figure II. Seeking. (2020). Upgrade your relationships. [online] *SeekingArrangement*. Accessed 10th April 2020. <https://www.seeking.com/>

Next to the portrait, a text box reads: “Upgrade Your Relationships™: Where beautiful, successful people fuel mutually beneficial relationships” (Seeking, 2021b). The definition of the members of a sugar relationship appears to be gender neutral: the term *people* is used. However, when one scrolls down, the terms Sugar Daddy and Sugar Baby appear, alongside the benefits of being either a Sugar Daddy or a Sugar Baby. The described benefits of the Sugar Daddy are the following: firstly, “4 Sugar Babies per Sugar Daddy: the odds are in your favour with thousands of attractive local women looking to meet now”; “No Strings Attached: Redefine the expectations of a perfect relationship”; and “Ideal Relationships: Upfront and honest arrangements with someone who will cater to your needs”. The benefits for the Sugar Baby, on the other hand, are: “Find a Mentor: Established Sugar Daddies offer valuable guidance for long-term stability”, “Date Experienced Men: Date real gentlemen who don’t play games”, and “Be Pampered: Indulge in shopping sprees, expensive dinners, and exotic travel vacations” (Seeking, 2021b).

Seeking.com quickly abandons the gender-neutral language and defines Sugar Babies as female, a choice that seems to match the reality as, according to the numbers provided by the site, the number of male Sugar Babies is only 150,300 - circa 6.64% of the total number of Sugar Babies registered on Seeking.com. If we look at the numbers provided by Seeking.com, it can be seen that sugar dating accommodates a profoundly gendered dynamic. The definitions of the benefits for both Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies provided by the website reproduce a vision of heterosexuality in which women are encouraged to comply with men’s desires; the second benefit for the Sugar Daddy involves dating someone who will cater to his needs.

Opportunity and entitlement, equivalent to those which the site grants the Sugar Daddy, are not offered to the Sugar Baby.

At the end of the homepage, the website states that it has been featured in several media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Business Insider*. The fact that these media outlets are internationally renowned, together with the ‘classy’ aesthetics that the website chooses to display, contribute to its branding, similarly to other dating websites such as Match.com, which carefully curate their image in order to promote ‘seriousness’ (Farrer & Gavin, 2009). By associating itself with brand names such as *Forbes* or *The Wall Street Journal*, Seeking.com projects the image of a respectable business, which works to shield itself against the criticism that it is involved in illegal businesses or promote prostitution. Numerous articles in the press openly establish a relationship between sugar dating and escorting or prostitution (see Rosman, 2018; or Jackson, 2018), hence the interest of the website in providing its own definition of its own terms and distancing itself from illegal activities.

V.III.I. Browse Sugar Babies

After the aforementioned benefits for the Sugar Daddy, the words ‘Browse Sugar Babies’ appear on the site, containing a hyperlink where the definition of a Sugar Baby, with several identifying characteristics, is provided. Seeking.com describes a Sugar Baby as an “empowered individual with exquisite taste and an appetite for a relationship filled with new experiences and a taste of the good life”, and states that “[s]he’s not constrained by traditional definitions of relationships and is *Seeking* to create a *Relationship on Her Terms* that perfectly fits her expanding horizons, desires, and goals” (Seeking, 2021, emphasis original). In this sense, Seeking.com presents the ideal Sugar Baby as an idiosyncratically postfeminist subject, someone who is modern, empowered, and goal-driven. The new postfeminist femininity diverges from former representations of women as passive subjects and presents them as ‘empowered’ (Harvey & Gill, 2011), but this empowerment is tightly tied to their ability to engage in consumption activities, hence Seeking.com’s emphasis on the Sugar Baby’s potential taste for a vaguely defined ‘good life’. The website describes Sugar Babies as either “college educated or college-bound” (Seeking, 2021) and argues that

[i]t’s no secret that college-educated individuals and college students make up a significant portion of *Seeking.com*’s user base. Whether a relationship with a *Seeking.com* Sugar Daddy will

help our Attractive members worry a little less about her tuition bills, or help her to build a professional network of contacts, one thing is for sure – *Seeking.com* is the #1 website for *Finding a Relationship on Your Terms* (ibid., emphasis original).

The site openly states that female students may find relief in the figure of a Sugar Daddy, which effectively contradicts its definition of the Sugar Baby as a woman who has a taste for ‘the good life’. It is hard to reconcile the idea of a student struggling to pay tuition fees with that of an “empowered individual with exquisite taste” (Seeking, 2021). The social aspiration for a ‘good life’ – with the promise of a better and happier future – has been defined by Lauren Berlant (2011) as ‘cruel optimism’ in the light of a world economy characterized by precarity and instability. The figure of the Sugar Baby is constructed around the fantasy of acquiring a ‘good life’ – or at least, a better one – by virtue of dating a Sugar Daddy, effectively encouraging them to engage in aspirational labour; that is, activities that “hold the promise of social and economic capital” (Duffy, 2016: 441), but without any type of guarantee or security.

Seeking.com clearly targets female students, which can be deduced from the use of female pronouns throughout the website (‘her tuition bills’; ‘help her to build a professional network’). The ideal Sugar Baby as described by the site is not ‘constrained by traditional definitions of relationships’, which means that she is a ‘modern’ woman – as opposed to those who would follow ‘traditional’ rules, one may assume. Yet a ‘sugar’ dynamic supports patriarchal gender roles and traditions that are far from modern, if we understand modern as that which involves a break from the past. While women who engage in what can be considered ‘traditional’ types of relationships – i.e. committed, monogamous, and ‘non-sugar’, with a man who acts as the economic provider – can expect some kind of economic security, usually acquired through the legal protection marriage offers, Sugar Babies are not awarded this protection. They are being offered a relationship that reproduces gender roles, without the advantages, repackaged as ‘modern’ to appeal to younger generations.

Different discourses intersect on the site: while a discourse of normative heterosexuality that describes women as ‘pleasers’ of men (Gavey, 1992) is reproduced, with the Sugar Baby being described as someone who would cater to the needs of the Sugar Daddy, a postfeminist rhetoric of empowerment and agency is simultaneously employed. Sugar Babies are discursively constructed as agentic, empowered individuals: “The Seeking.com Sugar Baby is empowered, because she is unafraid of setting a higher standard of whom they want in a romantic relationship hypergamy [*sic*], and doing what is necessary to find that – even if society frowns

on their approach” (Seeking, 2021, emphasis original). The word ‘hypergamy’ contains a hyperlink that leads the reader to a new page where a definition of the term is provided, as well as a moral justification:

Hypergamy is the term social scientists use to refer to the phenomenon of women prioritizing wealth or social status in mate selection [...] The most common gripe levied against hypergamy is that it is equivalent to "gold digging." Gold digging is when a person forms a relationship purely to extract money from their partner. However, if the evidence that suggests that women value men of higher economic or social class is correct, there is a clear divide between conventional hypergamy and gold digging. [...] from the hypergamic female's perspective, trading up is an expression of preference [...] When a woman trades up, they do so because of a genuine attraction that happens to be due to economic or social status. (Seeking, 2021c)

Being involved in a hypergamic relationship is presented as a rebellious activity for the Sugar Baby: ‘even if society frowns on their approach’, one can assume that the Sugar Baby is engaging in a new, modern dynamic that is at odds with traditional views on female behaviour, especially in terms of acquiring economic compensation for dating and/or sexual intercourse. Postfeminist discourses are not oblivious to the historical claims of the feminist movement(s); rather, they present feminism as “being historicised and generationalised and thus easily rendered out of date” (McRobbie, 2004: 258). The introduction of the Sugar Baby as a ‘modern’ individual, in opposition to a traditional one, serves to resignify sugar dating as something cool, modern, fashionable, opposed to the feminist views which may argue against its inherent commodification of intimacy and the possible sexual exploitation of women.

Seeking.com assumes that a ‘hypergamic’ relationship would involve a woman marrying a man of a superior ‘wealth or social status’, and not the other way around, conveying the idea that the man who acts as a Sugar Daddy is the party that holds the role of the economic provider and abandoning any attempt at presenting sugar dating as a dynamic not affected by gender and economic power. Indeed, a picture included on the site portrays the same man that appears on the homepage holding a considerably younger woman by the chin in an attitude of flirting and control (see Figure III).

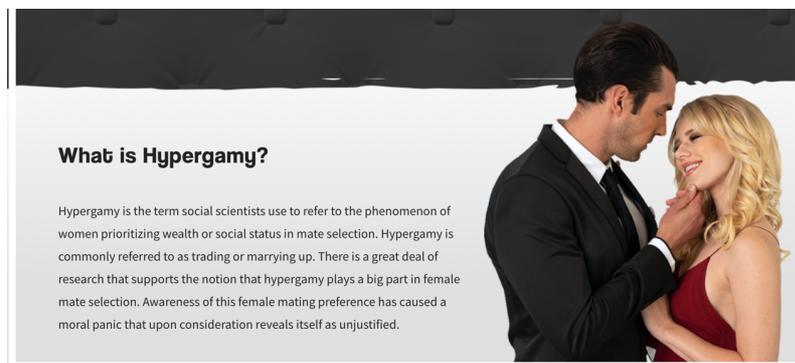


Figure III. Seeking. (2020). Hypergamy [online] *SeekingArrangement*. Accessed 10th April 2020. <https://www.seeking.com/hypergamy>

The website also includes a video from the Seeking.com YouTube channel in which Brandon Wade iterates the definition of the word 'hypergamy': "the act of a female marrying a man of a superior class or cast". Wade also offers two pseudoscientific explanations to support his claim: evolutionary psychology and social learning theory. According to his own accounts, while the former explains that women are naturally 'biologically programmed' to be attracted to men who can provide for them and their offspring, the latter asserts that this behaviour is learned in a social context, since women are economically disadvantaged when compared to men in current societies, and therefore pairing with a person who enjoys financial stability constitutes a sensible economic decision (Seeking, 2021c). Wade's use of scientific jargon and pseudoscientific discourse is a legitimating strategy to justify the aim of the site to match younger women with older men. Wade tries to convey the message that a hypergamic relationship is either natural - i.e., not determined by society - by explaining that this behaviour repeats itself through history, or is socially constructed as a result of women's inferior economic capital. In any case, the behaviour appears not only justified but almost inevitable. To Wade, women, for either biological or social reasons, are inclined to match with older men who can economically provide for them. One may ask why this message is insistently iterated throughout the website if it is assumed that women are naturally inclined to engage in transactional relationships.

Wade's marked emphasis on the fact that this 'hypergamic' behaviour repeats itself throughout history contradicts the idea that the site targets women who are not constrained by "traditional definitions of relationships" (Seeking, 2021), or that the Sugar Daddy is a "modern gentleman" (Seeking, 2021d). If a hypergamic relationship is somehow inevitable, that makes a 'sugar'

relationship contrary to 'modern'. This apparent contradiction is inherent to postfeminist discourses and has been defined by McRobbie (2004: 255) as a 'double entanglement' that "comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life [...] with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations". What Seeking.com is trying to do can be analysed in the light of the 'double entanglement': the site presents a traditional, heterosexual relationship where the man is the economic provider as something revolutionary that Sugar Babies can choose to enter into. The site does not define how precisely the woman 'trades up' in the relationship but rather leaves it open for interpretation.

V.III.II. Sugar Babies vs 'gold diggers'

Economic vocabulary permeates the discourse employed by Seeking.com to define their relationships, but this is not unique to the sugar dating dynamic. Based on her vast research about contemporary romantic relationships, Eva Illouz argues that "the capitalist cultural grammar has massively penetrated the realm of heterosexual romantic relationships" (2012: 9). Illouz argues that far from constituting a recent anomaly, "one of the key cultural transformations accompanying modernity was thus the co-mingling of love with economic strategies of social mobility" (2012: 10). However, the merging of romantic relationships with strategies of social mobility has not led to the elimination of stigmatizing stereotypes such as that of the gold-digger. Seeking.com takes precautions to prevent their male members from feeling taken advantage of, yet it does not offer any advice to Sugar Babies for navigating the stigma that they may potentially suffer if they join the website. In this case, it is clear that the feelings of the Sugar Daddies are prioritized over those of the Sugar Baby; although the website announces itself as a coping mechanism for female students, a pragmatic approach to the economic nature of the relationship is not encouraged in order to protect the feelings of the Sugar Daddies. This reproduces a hierarchy of value as the emotions of the Sugar Daddy are treated as in need of protection.

The concept of the gold-digger is permeated by class. Seeking.com places special emphasis on the idea that a Sugar Baby is qualitatively different from a gold-digger: Following the list of features that describe a Sugar Baby, a second list explains what Sugar Babies are *not*. Four headlines, each followed by a small paragraph, state that Sugar Babies are not "Gold Digger[s]": *The Seeking.com* Sugar Baby is attracted to success and generosity because she is a

sapiosexual, not because she is a gold digger” (Seeking, 2021). A differentiation is made between those women who are genuinely attracted to successful and wealthy people and those whose interest is the financial status of the Sugar Daddies (ibid.). In addition, a Sugar Baby is defined as non-transactional:

Our version of a “sugar baby” is not the same as what you find on other dating websites. The *Seeking.com Sugar Baby* is NOT looking for pay-per-meet situations or transactional relationships. Instead, our *Attractive members* are looking for a hypergamous relationship with financially supportive partners, or providers, who have the means to help them with the cost of living or education, or those who can afford the lifestyle they desire. (Seeking, 2021)

Along the same lines, the site states that the term “Sugar Baby” should be understood as synonymous with “girlfriend” or “boyfriend”, because sugar dating is not a job or occupation. Potential Sugar Babies are advised not to enter the site if their goal is to earn money (Seeking, 2021). The last undesirable feature is “Entitled”, which states that members are expected to be polite with each other and to have “little ego, and choose instead to be humble and classy” (Seeking, 2021), which again works to distance the Sugar Baby from a working-class realm. Following this description, the site includes a note stating that members should report to the website those members who do not meet the set standards.

The discursive production of the Sugar Baby seeks to elevate the Sugar Baby to the category of ‘girlfriend’ and separate it from other, less ‘tasteful’ categories such as gold-diggers and sex workers, as the site clearly states that sugar dating is not a job or an occupation. Sugar Babies are encouraged to enter a commodified relationship to obtain help with either ‘the cost of living or education’ or to experience a finer lifestyle. In this sense, the transaction of company for economic capital in the form of money is deemed tasteless. The money that the Sugar Baby receives needs to be converted into cultural capital - i.e. education - in order to be regarded as acceptable, otherwise the Sugar Baby could be considered a ‘gold-digger’. These disjunctive differentiations between obtaining cash and investing money in education work in two different ways. Firstly, they reproduce a notion of taste that is tied to obtaining cultural capital and not to other types of basic commodities such as food or housing. This creates the idea that the Sugar Baby is not actually in need of this money but rather would use it for other things that are not basic necessities. While education is arguably less superfluous than a luxurious lifestyle, it is qualitatively different from food or housing. The Sugar Baby, by spending the money on education or on a loosely-defined notion of a ‘better lifestyle’, is engaging in a choice of habitus that denotes that she has risen above basic needs:

the inability to 'spend more', or differently, that is, to rise to the system of needs implied in a higher level of resources, is the best illustration of the impossibility of reducing (theoretically) the propensity to consume to the capacity to appropriate or of reducing the habitus to the economic conditions prevailing at a given moment (as represented, for example, by a given level of income). (Bourdieu, 1984: 375)

The website acknowledges that the Sugar Baby will receive economic compensation, yet it dictates how she must spend that money in order to be 'tasteful'. Secondly, the idea that the Sugar Baby is not in need of the money also protects the feelings of the Sugar Daddy, as the Sugar Baby would theoretically be entering the relationship of her free will and is not coerced because of a lack of economic means. In this sense, the site seeks to separate sugar dating from other dynamics, such as prostitution, that can be deemed exploitative and vulgar. It also separates the figure of the Sugar Daddy from that of the 'john' or 'punter', i.e. a consumer of prostitution.

A contradictory definition of sugar dating is offered to the Sugar Baby: she should see Seeking.com as a method to cope with the costs of daily life and/or tuition fees while at the same time she is advised not to join the site if her goal is to earn money, especially if it is money she needs to cover basic expenses. Simultaneously, the site prohibits transactional relationships and pay-per-meet encounters but encourages women to 'trade up' in exchange for economic support. The interest of the Sugar Baby in her Sugar Daddy must appear genuine and not economically motivated. This apparent contradiction in the requisites that a Sugar Baby must meet acquires more relevance when compared with the description that the site provides for a Sugar Daddy.

V.III.III. Browse Sugar Daddies

Sugar Babies are offered the option to 'Browse for a Sugar Daddy' through a hyperlink that leads the potential user to a website where Sugar Daddies are described in the same fashion as Sugar Babies:

A Seeking.com™ Sugar Daddy, what we call a Successful Member, is a modern gentleman with refined taste, exceptional experiences and abundant resources who is looking for someone to share in his extraordinary life and lifestyle and create a meaningful relationship and experiences. (Seeking, 2021d)

Again, the same insistence on the 'tasteful' condition of the Sugar Daddy, expressed through several channels such as experiences and resources, is iterated on the website. Several defining

features that characterize Seeking.com Sugar Daddies are provided under four headlines. 'Finding Balance' explains that "A *Seeking.com*TM *Sugar Daddy* comes with varied experiences and responsibilities including family, work, travel as well as his own hobbies/interests" (Seeking, 2021d). According to an interview that Wade gave in 2012, around 40% of the members of Seeking.com at that time were married men (Stern, 2012). According to Wade, having an affair may be beneficial for the Sugar Daddies' marriages:

Some married men need to stay with a family because of their kids, but they're in a loveless relationship [...] and, as a guy, you need to get your outlet somewhere else. You have your sexual needs and wants, and the website provides a service to keep the family together. In a roundabout way, as morally wrong as that is, it's providing a service that keeps the family unit together. (Stern, 2012)

The advertisement of Seeking.com as an online meet-up place where men can find women to have extramarital relationships with does not fit into the classic description of an online dating site. Rather, Wade seems to be describing Seeking.com as a place where men can turn in order to engage in extramarital relationships, much closer to AshleyMadison.com than to Match.com. The site reproduces a Victorian vision of sexuality wherein sex outside of marriage is morally wrong yet inevitable (for men) and therefore an economic profit can be extracted from it. In the words of Foucault:

If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. (Foucault, 1978: 4)

Sugar Mommas are virtually absent from the site, which reinforces the idea that Seeking.com mainly targets men to act as Sugar Daddies and young women to act as Sugar Babies. Wade's strategy of focusing on recruiting Sugar Daddies is logical as men have a more positive attitude towards affairs than women do, and they tend to engage in this behaviour more than women do, often "for the sake of sexual variety" (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004: 104). Women are also more harshly judged by society and more stigmatized than men if they engage in extramarital relationships (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004).

The second defining feature of a Sugar Daddy is explained under the title 'Make time for each other': Sugar Daddies are described as busy men with tight schedules. Thirdly, Sugar Daddies represent the "new modern gentleman": "Whether it's his busy work schedule, his extensive knowledge of wine and craft beers, or his love of travel, The *Seeking.com*TM *Sugar Daddy* redefines what it means to be a modern Gentleman [*sic*]" (ibid.). The fourth aspect,

highlighted by the site under the heading 'Work hard, play harder', is the likelihood that a Sugar Daddy has a busy schedule and therefore a Sugar Baby should not "be put off if he's a bit delayed responding to texts, he's taking care of business so that he can take the relationship" (Seeking, 2021d). Similarly to the discursive construction of Sugar Babies, the site also explains what Sugar Daddies are not. They are described as not being "salty" - a 'Salty Daddy' is a greedy one - nor transactional: "While they certainly have the means to afford a high-end lifestyle, our successful members are expected not to be searching for pay-per-meet situations or transactional relationships" (Seeking, 2021d), or to be "egotistical or demanding [...] Our ideal Successful members choose to be humble and classy" (ibid.).

The description of a Sugar Daddy is significantly different from that of Sugar Babies. A Sugar Daddy is firstly described as a person who is looking for someone "to share his extraordinary life and lifestyle and create a meaningful relationship and experiences" (Seeking, 2021d), which does not necessarily correspond with what a Sugar Baby may be looking for if she plans on finding someone who will economically support her life *on her own terms*. The website presumes some agency on the part of Sugar Babies as they are supposed to set the terms of the relationship in a way that is convenient for them. However, Seeking.com describes Sugar Daddies as busy businessmen who may prioritise other activities or other people over the Sugar Baby; for example, Sugar Daddies may come with responsibilities such as family or work, and Sugar Babies are encouraged to be understanding and not be "put off if he's a bit delayed responding to texts" (Seeking, 2021d). One may wonder how a relationship can be set on the terms of the Sugar Babies if they are expected to comply with behaviours such as being ignored or neglected by their Sugar Daddies while simultaneously acting in an understanding and caring way. This request can be understood as an exchange of emotional labour, as emotional labour entails "affect-management undertaken in exchange for wages" (Hughes, 2003: 6). Emotional labour comes with some 'human costs', including the possibility of becoming alienated from one's self, high levels of stress, loss of personal identity, etc. (Hochschild, 1983). Moreover, authors such as Cullinane and Pye suggest that emotional labour is "an extension of the exploitation, alienation and valorisation processes characteristic of advanced capitalist workplaces since employees are required to render certain emotional displays in order to achieve the productivity aims of the corporation" (2001, qtd. in Hughes, 2003: 9). However, Sugar Babies do not work for any corporation, nor for Seeking.com, so the exchange of emotional labour may not be economically compensated as the website is not liable for any of the relationships formed through it.

The strategic ambiguity of sugar relationships' transactional status imposes an economy of inequitable gendered differences where women are likely to invest more in the relationships with the hope of obtaining economic revenue that may or may not be received, an idea which will be further analysed in Chapter VI. Yet it can be advanced that the site not only capitalizes on the dire economic situation that some young women may be experiencing but also on an unequal power dynamic that favours the exploitation of emotional labour. This is further accentuated by several circumstances such as the age gap in the relationship, which places the Sugar Baby in a weak power position. One example of the ways in which the website favours the age gap in sugar dating is through targeting female students to join Seeking.com through their Sugar Baby University Program™ website.

V.III.IV. Sugar Baby University Program™

The Sugar Baby University Program™ website is part of the Seeking.com site and establishes a direct correlation between the rise in tuition fees and the increase in the number of women using the website. Here, Seeking.com eliminates the façade that it employs in the main website to describe Seeking.com as a strictly non-transactional e-meet place and uses a contradictory narrative. If Sugar Babies “get help covering college-related costs when they find a Sugar Daddy” (Seeking, 2021), then their relationships with the Sugar Daddies need to be considered as inherently transactional. Although the site hints in the homepage description of a Sugar Baby that there may be students who struggle with their finances, it is on the Sugar Baby University Program™ website where the connection is clarified.

The Sugar Baby University Program™ directly interpellates female students and capitalizes on the fact that the United Kingdom, and most countries in the Western world, are experiencing a period of ‘diploma inflation’, the effects of which are far from democratic:

In a period of ‘diploma inflation’ the disparity between the aspirations that the educational system produces and the opportunities it really offers is a structural reality which affects all members of a school generation, but to a varying extent depending on the rarity of their qualifications and on their social origins. (Bourdieu, 1984: 144)

This collective disillusionment may impact more strongly on women since it is still more difficult for them to access full-time, well-paid positions despite their higher academic success. The Sugar Baby University Program™ uses a strategy similar to current academic titles: the

person engages in aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016), in this case by joining a ‘program’ that promises, without guarantees, economic compensation for dating an older man. Seeking.com acknowledges that obtaining an academic title no longer ensures a secure job, or at least one that lasts long enough and provides enough to support oneself and pay for the acquired student loans. In this light, social capital is more important than ever in order to gain a decently paid position:

[T]he sons and daughters of the [...] bourgeoisie, rather than directly entering a well-defined and lifelong profession (e.g. teaching) are more likely to enter and to succeed in positions, half-way between studenthood and professions, that are offered by the big cultural bureaucracies, occupations for which the specific qualifications [...] are a genuine ticket of entry only for those who are able to supplement the official qualifications with the real - social - qualifications. (Bourdieu, 1984: 151-152)

The British website for the Sugar Baby University Program™ offers the following connections to prospective Sugar Babies:

[M]any college students who have decided to upgrade their dating life by registering on SeekingArrangement get help covering college-related costs when they find a Sugar Daddy. Meeting the right Sugar Daddy offers collegiate Sugar Babies access to expanded networking opportunities, mentorship and financial benefits that come with building a relationship with someone established and successful. (Seeking, 2021)

The fact that engaging in a transactional relationship is repackaged as attending the Sugar Baby University Program™ also works to legitimate the activity by describing it as a dynamic that is not related to sex work or prostitution, but rather as part of the student lifestyle which includes attending university and making connections. In order to make sure that women comply with the requirements to be a Sugar Baby, Seeking.com created Letstalksugar.com, an ‘educational’ website whose aim is to instruct women on how to become a Sugar Baby by peer-teaching through a series of blog posts (Let’s Talk Sugar, 2020). The Seeking.com YouTube Channel plays the same role. It is beneficial for the website that women learn how to properly ‘be’ Sugar Babies, as this is what they are offering to Sugar Daddies: a pool of educated young women to choose from. The analysis of Letstalksugar.com can shed some light on how the website ‘educates’ the Sugar Babies.

V.IV. Let’s Talk Sugar

Letstalksugar.com was specifically designed to help Sugar Babies understand what is expected from them. Relevant content is periodically uploaded to the site - on average, five posts per

month³¹ - and categorized under one of the following eight labels: Sugar 101™, News, Relationships, Advice, Fashion, Sex, Confessions, and Money (Let's Talk Sugar, 2020). Alongside Let's Talk Sugar, Seeking.com also offers to its members a blog³² where part of the content available in Let's Talk Sugar can be found. The content uploaded to each of the tabs can be understood as the educational curricula that the Sugar Baby University Program™ offers to potential Sugar Babies and reinforces the idea that the subject position of the Sugar Baby is discursively produced through authorities and knowledge-power relations.

The homepage of LetsTalkSugar.com is strikingly different from Seeking.com's. If Seeking.com resembles other dating sites that also portray heterosexual couples on their homepages, such as Match.com, LetsTalkSugar.com adopts the aesthetics of lifestyle blogs and/or magazines whose target audiences are teenage and young women such as *Cosmopolitan* (see Figures V and VI).

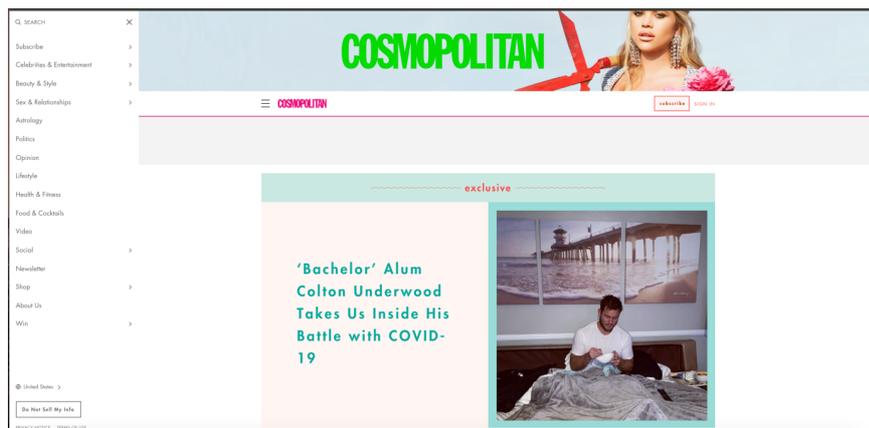


Figure IV. Cosmopolitan. (2020). Homepage. [online] *Cosmopolitan*. Accessed 10th April 2020. <http://www.cosmopolitan.com>

³¹ Nevertheless, since 3rd July 2019, when the last post was updated, there seems to have been a decrease in the activity on the website.

³² Available at: <https://blog.seeking.com/#gref>. As of July 2019, the blog continues to be updated but no new content has been uploaded to Let's Talk Sugar, and the posts that were available in Let's Talk Sugar have been moved to the blog while leaving Let's Talk Sugar intact. Despite some differences in format, the content available in LetsTalkSugar.com overlaps with the content of the Seeking.com blog, and therefore they will be analysed as the same unit since the function of the site appears to be identical: to provide information to Sugar Babies on how to properly 'sugar date'.

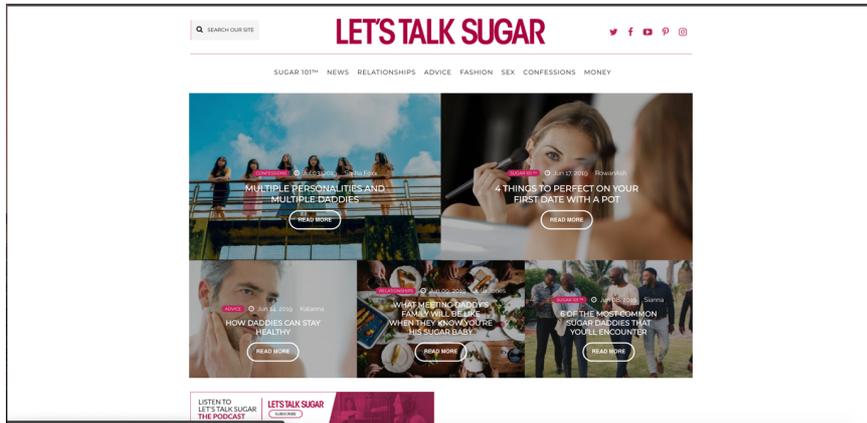


Figure V. Let's Talk Sugar. (2020). Homepage. [online] *Let's Talk Sugar*. Accessed 10th April 2020. <http://www.letstalksugar.com>

Both sites use similar typography and similar colours associated with femininity - pink and white. Information available on the *Cosmopolitan* website is categorized under several tabs which are in some cases identical to those that can be found on *Letstalksugar.com*, such as Relationships and Sex. *Cosmopolitan*, as a lifestyle magazine, sells

more than just something to read – it provides a set of values related to power, independence and entertainment targeted at women in their twenties. In addition to the magazine, these values are expressed and circulated also via television, cosmetics, books, and fashion. (Nikunen, 2007: 73)

Caution is needed when evaluating the impact that lifestyle magazines or websites will have on the reader as it has already been proven that it is not straightforward, and it may vary by age (Gauntlett, 2002). Nevertheless, *Let's Talk Sugar* constructs the Sugar Baby using the same techniques as women's magazines: by describing sugar dating as a lifestyle regulated by a series of values. The message is spread through several channels, such as the *Seeking.com* YouTube channel, the *Let's Talk Sugar* Instagram account, and *Seeking.com*, or Brandon Wade's book on sugar dating, *Seeking Arrangement: The Definitive Guide to Sugar Daddy and Mutually Beneficial Relationships*, published in 2013.

The target audience of *Let's Talk Sugar* differs from that of *Seeking.com*: while the latter equally targets potential Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies (albeit with different rationales for joining), *Letstalksugar.com* assumes that its readers are potential female Sugar Babies. *Let's Talk Sugar* takes inspiration from women's magazines by using techniques advanced by the

former Editor-in-Chief of *Cosmopolitan* and later copied by other lifestyle magazines, such as “self-improvement and discipline, the use of first-person narratives and personal anecdotes, and the idea of a hard won, commercial femininity dependent on perfectly applied make-up and appropriately styled clothing” (Genz, 2009: 142). The website contains posts fully dedicated to constructing the definition of ‘Sugar Baby’, such as *What Type of Sugar Baby Are You* (Brielle, 2019) or *The Personality of a Successful Sugar Baby* (BikiniBody, 2019). Other posts contain related content such as *Helping Daddy with Stress* (Jones, 2019) or *6 Beauty Regimes That Must Be Maintained* (Rae, 2019), which offer a code of conduct in terms of behaviour towards the Sugar Daddy, and/or disciplinary, self-improvement techniques. This type of content treats gender inequality as a given: Sugar Babies must help Sugar Daddies with stress but should not expect to be helped. It is “based on an acceptance that it is a man’s world and that men behave differently than women” (Genz, 2009: 142), hence the content that specifically aims to influence the behaviour of Sugar Babies.

The site establishes a relation between a series of symbolic practices such as engaging in beautification rituals and being a Sugar Baby, effectively constructing the *habitus* of the Sugar Baby and providing a ‘style of life’, i.e. “practices which cohere symbolically to form a whole” (Weininger, 2005: 122). In this case, we can consider the lifestyle encouraged by Let’s Talk Sugar to be the ‘sugar’ lifestyle. This stylization of life offered by the site serves to construct a social collective, or a “status group” (Weininger, 2005: 122) of Sugar Babies, by “establishing symbolic boundaries between individuals occupying different locations in the class structure” (Weininger, 2005: 122). Since the website wants to highlight that Sugar Babies are inherently middle class (hence its emphasis on college-educated women), it ensures that its posts encourage the accumulation of different types of capital, including cultural and erotic capital. The iteration of a series of physical and intellectual qualities that define a Sugar Baby works to discursively construct a subject position that reveals itself to be profoundly postfeminist.

V.V. (De)Constructing the Sugar Baby

Two different underlying discourses have been found in the discursive construction of the Sugar Baby: a patriarchal ideology that further oppresses women as a group, as detected by radical feminism; and a postfeminist rhetoric which assumes that Sugar Babies are agentic individuals who brand and market themselves, and which encourages them to engage in self-

monitoring practices (McRobbie, 2004) in order to maximize the possible benefits of their own commodification. These two discourses operate against the background of neoliberalism, not only economic but also affective. Several recurring themes have been detected in LetstalkSugar.com as key defining characteristics of a proper Sugar Baby and are analysed below.

V.V.I. Sugar Babies as infantilised women

Sugar Babies are, according to the discourse employed by LetsTalkSugar.com, young. Women who want to be Sugar Babies need to be at least eighteen to join the site, and although there is no upper age limit, almost all the images found on the site portray women who appear to be in their early twenties or younger. Sugar Daddies, on the other hand, are ordinarily middle-aged men, often with white or salt-and-pepper hair (Figure VII)³³. LetsTalkSugar.com continues a well-established tradition of cultural products portraying older men as romantically (and sexually) involved with younger women as something desirable and unproblematic. The opposite (older women dating younger men) still constitutes an anomaly and/or is often portrayed as a humorous situation in which the woman is labelled as 'cougar' (Vares, 2009). Although a small age-gap is ordinary in heterosexual relationships (the average in Western countries is three years (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2010)), Sugar Daddies in LTS appear to be significantly older (by several decades) than the Sugar Babies.

The eroticization of an unequal relationship in terms of age, status, and financial power in 'sugar' relationships starts with the naming of the dynamic. The fact that the man is called 'Daddy' and the woman is called 'Baby' is far from incidental: the authority held by the word 'Daddy' automatically places the man in a position of control and dominance, and relegates the 'Baby' to a submissive role. This power imbalance is trivialised by the use of affective words - 'Daddy' and 'Baby'; more so since Sugar Daddies are defined on Seeking.com as potential 'mentors', which implies that the Sugar Daddy is more knowledgeable than the Sugar Baby and will provide guidance. The choice of the name 'Daddy' to refer to the 'provider' in a sugar relationship can also be interpreted as either incestuous, as daddies and their offspring

³³ Sometimes the website will show young Sugar Daddies. However, they are treated as exceptional, and the site even gives advice to Sugar Babies about how to behave if their Sugar Daddy is younger than forty (see the post *Younger Sugar Daddies* (Jasmin, 2017)), effectively identifying them as an anomaly.

are related, or even paedophilic, since people over eighteen, and indeed over the age of three or four, are rarely referred to as ‘babies’ outside the environment of Let’s Talk Sugar.



Figure VI. Let's Talk Sugar. (2018). So you want to be my sugar daddy? [online] *Let's talk sugar*. Accessed 14th April 2020. <https://www.letstalksugar.com/confessions/so-you-want-to-be-my-sugar-daddy/>

The infantilisation of adult women on LetsTalkSugar.com can be interpreted in three different ways: firstly, as a characteristic of oppressed populations; secondly, as a strategy to sugar-coat what can be potentially considered as an exploitative practice; and thirdly, as part of the postfeminist culture of youth and beauty. Sandra L. Bartky argues that the infantilisation of a specific social group is commonly suffered by oppressed communities. In *Femininity and Domination*, Bartky develops the argument that white women, alongside racialised people, ‘have been regarded as childlike, happiest when they are occupying their “place”’ (1990: 23, emphasis original). She adds that white women specifically are socially encouraged to always remain in this state of dependence on another, more capable, male adult:

We [white women] cannot be autonomous, as men are thought to be autonomous, without in some sense ceasing to be women [...] White women, at least, are psychologically conditioned not to pursue the kind of autonomous development that is held by the culture to be a constitutive feature of masculinity. (Bartky, 1990: 24-25)

Bartky’s remarks acquire a deeper meaning if we merge them with the inherent imbalance in the possession of economic capital in a ‘sugar’ type of relationship. A Sugar Baby who

economically relies in a Sugar Daddy is, by definition, not autonomous; at least, not financially. Describing adult women as babies who need to rely on their daddies encourages them to be submissive and compliant to an authority figure, albeit also sexually assertive. However, this submission can provide white Sugar Babies with substantial power by conforming to the disciplinary regimes of whiteness and heterosexuality - power that may not be readily available to heterosexual women from other ethnic and 'racial' backgrounds - and therefore they may feel compelled to submit to this kind of authority figure. Audre Lorde calls this the 'patriarchal invitation to power':

White women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power... For white women, there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools [...] it is easier once again for white women to believe the dangerous fantasy that if you are good enough, pretty enough, sweet enough, quiet enough, teach the children to behave, hate the right people, and marry the right men, then you will be allowed to co-exist with patriarchy in relative peace. (1984: 118-119)

This does not mean that the lives of white women are not permeated by gender inequality. Nevertheless, white heterosexuality may produce pleasure for white women because it might position them closer to social power by virtue of dating a heterosexual, affluent man (Carrillo Rowe, 2008).

The infantilisation of women in media outlets is not unique to LetstalkSugar.com. Gail Dines argues that we live in a culture that eroticises "childified women" and sexualizes "adultified children" (2010: 177). Posts uploaded to LetsTalkSugar.com, such as *Considerations for the barely legal Sugar Baby* (Malia, 2017), prove that porn vocabulary and categories³⁴ permeate the site. The infantilisation of women by LTS and Seeking.com does not operate in a social vacuum but rather in a context where women are effectively childified by being named 'Babies' and thus being eroticised precisely because of their youth and their lack of economic autonomy.

Thigh highs 101, a post uploaded to Let's Talk Sugar in 2019, infantilises adult women and eroticises schoolgirls by encouraging Sugar Babies to buy over-the-knee socks which evoke those worn by teenage girls in school uniforms:

Consider the color, design, and material you are going for and think about the outfit you'll be pairing with your future purchase. So, save the chic, black schoolgirl thigh highs for when

³⁴ 'Barely legal' is a category for pornographic material that portrays women who have just turned eighteen and/or may still look like minors.

you've already bought a matching cute tennis skirt for it [...] Most of all, enjoy the outfit as much as your Daddy does. You have come and worked this hard to take a minute to appreciate how good you look or how sexy the snug (but not too tight) fabric feels on your thighs. (Harana, 2019)

It is worth noticing that knee-high school socks are worn by girls who are minors: women who are over eighteen do not wear school uniforms anymore. Gail Dines establishes a relation between porn that depicts very young women engaging in sexual intercourse with men - known as 'teen porn' - and paedophilic scripts. In teen porn, young women are usually in economic distress:

Many of these sites [teen porn websites] pair the teen with much more older men [...] Not content with just eroticizing the age imbalance between the girl and the man, the pornographers throw in the economic inequality that exists between young and older people as a way to provide the male with even more power over her [...] scenario after scenario depicts teens offering to do odd jobs for extra cash, only to be seduced into prostituting themselves by the promise of real money. (Dines, 2010: 190)

Often the man the teen seduces is supposed to be her father. Dines bases her research on the now-disappeared website *DaddysWhores.com*, but a quick search on the platform *PornHub.com* shows that plenty of the previous website's videos are available there. In these incestuous stories, "the girls are generally only too happy to be obliged" (Dines, 2010: 192). *LetsTalkSugar.com* reproduces a similar script that eroticises young women in economic distress. The website does not hide the intrinsically incestuous nature of a relationship with a 'Daddy', but rather offers the figure of the father as a protective one. In a post called *Younger Sugar Daddies*, the author writes that:

The connotation of the word 'daddy' can stem from a real dad. It can also derive from someone that is our protector. It can be someone who we go to when we're in a difficult situation. Because of this, we instantly match this with an older man. Most of the time, a man that is old enough to be our actual daddy. (Jasmin, 2017)

The eroticization of childfied women or adultified children is widely embedded in popular media. Valerie Walkerdine (1998) has reported the pervasiveness of images of very young girls as seductive in mainstream media such as broadsheet newspapers, women's magazines, or television commercials. Nevertheless, rather than openly portraying paedophilic or incestuous scripts, contemporary media presents young women as sexually agentic. Sue Jackson, Tiina Vares, and Rosalind Gill have identified a phenomenon in which teenage and pre-teen girls negotiate a postfeminist ideology coming from the fashion industry that encourages young women to engage in "a postfeminist aesthetic of the 'sexy', desirable young woman" (2012: 143). Although *Seeking.com* makes it clear to its members that they are not allowed to use the

website if they are under eighteen (which means that Sugar Babies are supposed to legally be adults), women in Letstalksugar.com are only referred to as ‘girls’. The ‘girling’ of adult women is also a defining characteristic of postfeminist discourses that present youth as a desirable trait and pathologize aging (Wearing, 2007). In this case, it is also part of the discursive production of the Sugar Baby: she is never a woman, she is always a girl, and a girl willing to engage in a transactional relationship with a ‘Daddy’. ‘Transactional’ becomes a key word in LTS’s discourse, since relationships between Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies in Letstalksugar.com are openly described as such. A Sugar Baby is, therefore, a young woman who engages in an inherently transactional relationship with an older man.

V.V.II. Transactional relationships in LTS

While Seeking.com describes sugar dating as a more upfront and honest way of dating, Letstalksugar.com abandons that idea and defines a relationship between a Sugar Baby and a Sugar Daddy as an arrangement that involves some kind of payment made by the Sugar Daddy. In *So you want to be my Sugar Daddy?*, a post uploaded to the site in 2018, the author directly interpellates the Sugar Daddy³⁵ instead of the Sugar Baby and encourages him not to lie about the amount of money that he is going to pay:

Being honest about your financials and just in general will also secure the position of a young sugarbaby’s heart. Lying and saying you make more than you make or will pay more is not a sure-fire way to be a sugar daddy. Keep in mind that a lot of sugar babies are under a great deal of financial stress, and are really depending on their allowance to help with bills and school. By making false promises or lying about what you can do it creates a big problem that can end in a bad argument, and a void of agreed terms of conditions. (Stackz, 2018)

However, in the majority of the posts uploaded in Let’s Talk Sugar, the responsibility for setting up and receiving some kind of economic compensation lies on the shoulders of the Sugar Baby. In a post uploaded in April 2020 named *Let’s talk allowance*, it is clearly stated that:

[A] set allowance is the most common type of allowance [...] This is for anyone who is in a long-term arrangement or those who are looking to get involved in one. While Pay Per Meet is a great way to get to know each other, it can get old and it can get expensive if you two are seeing each other often; so a lump sum every month can not only be more functional for both of you but it can also be a sense of security for both the sugar baby and the sugar daddy involved. (Jones, 2020)

³⁵ Although it is rare, a few posts can be found whose target audience is the Sugar Daddy.

In this account, pay per meet - paying someone a certain amount after an encounter, which may or may not have included sexual activity - is neither forbidden nor discouraged. However, this message is in conflict with the terms of Seeking.com. Seeking.com states in its blog, in a post published in 2018, that ““Pay-Per-Meet” is considered escort terminology and will result in the suspension of your account if you are found using this terminology” (Ashley_SA, 2018). These contradictory messages can be explained by Seeking’s double presentation of sugar dating. For Sugar Daddies, the site defines sugar dating as a dating dynamic, hence the fact that pay-per-meet is stated to be specifically prohibited. For Sugar Babies, sugar dating is introduced as a mechanism for economic relief. This message is conveyed in Letstalksugar.com since this site is targeted towards Sugar Babies but not towards Sugar Daddies. This double definition effectively works to protect the feelings of the Sugar Daddies, as well as to disempower the Sugar Baby. If she believes that she is establishing a transactional relationship with a ‘Daddy’, but he refuses to pay, there is no mechanism in place for her to claim any kind of financial compensation. Moreover, she cannot even report the incident to the website since Seeking.com expressly forbids transactional dating. The result is that Sugar Babies are effectively unprotected and misled by the site.

Sugar Babies are also the ones responsible for receiving their payment, in what can be interpreted as encouragement from the website to the Sugar Baby to exercise her neoliberal entrepreneurship. In a blog post uploaded to Letstalksugar.com in June 2019 called *4 steps to getting your Sugar Baby allowance* (Knox, 2019), the author gives advice to Sugar Babies on how to negotiate a sum. Sugar Babies are invited to first decide what amount of money they need, and later to discuss the details with their Sugar Daddies (Knox, 2019). The transactional nature of the relationship is treated as a given. Sugar Babies are advised to detect ‘red flags’ in the relationship: for example, the Sugar Daddy refusing to discuss any type of payment (Knox, 2019). Nevertheless, there is no advice given for a situation where a Sugar Daddy refuses to pay other than walking away from that particular arrangement.

Sugar Babies must carefully balance their need for financial help with the utmost care for the feelings of the Sugar Daddy. In a post published in Letstalksugar.com, the two contradictory definitions of sugar dating are more bluntly exposed:

Tip Two: It’s important to not make money the focus (even if it is!). It has to be merely a feature of the arrangement. Don’t prioritize money or it will put off a POT [Potential Sugar Daddy]. This has happened several times to me. Talk about money as little as possible and your sugar daddy/

mommy won't feel exploited and this may in turn lead to them being more generous and trustworthy of your intentions so it is a win win. (Avianna, 2017)

The site is suggesting not only that the acquisition of economic capital is not 'tasteful' enough, but also that Sugar Babies should employ a significant amount of emotional labour when trying to talk about the financial aspect of their arrangement with their Sugar Daddies. In another post, Sugar Babies are advised to keep their interests "non-transactional" in order not to hurt the feelings of the Sugar Daddies; to appreciate "the daddies who spoil in other ways"; and to keep in mind that "if you're fortunate enough to find a Daddy who wants to show you that he cares, be a good Baby in return. Keep your promises, appreciate the generosity of his time, and spoil him back!" (BelleC, 2017). Emotions are entangled with capitalist processes of acquisition of capital, and with contemporary gendered regimes of affect. The research of Gill and Kanai shows

the distinctiveness of the current moment, in which traditional gendered expectations remain while women must become ever more adept at fielding new affective obligations to act as though such obligations do not exist. One must be "relatable" but "confident" in the appropriate proportions. With intensified calls for "authenticity" (Banet-Weiser, 2012) as well as entrepreneurial adaptability, it appears that women are being caught between the "heel and toe" [...] of affective neoliberalism". (2018: 323)

An empathetic approach to the feelings of the Sugar Daddy is required from the Sugar Baby even at the expense of not securing an allowance: if the transactional nature of the relationship cannot be debated upfront, the so-called honesty that differentiates Sugar Babies cannot be exercised. Emotions serve to blur the lines of the relationship and hide its transactional nature.

Securing an allowance seems to be an important aspect of the discursive construction of the Sugar Baby, as a total of eighteen posts can be found on the site where this topic is discussed. The message tends to be similar across them all: Sugar Babies need to bring up the topic with care and taste, and it is their responsibility to learn sufficient negotiation skills for the transaction to go smoothly. Otherwise, if they are 'overdemanding', they can end up with nothing:

In the finance world there is an old adage. "Pigs get fed, Hogs get slaughtered." That analogy can be used in many aspects of life, in other words do not be over demanding or you will find yourself without a Sugar Daddy. On the flip side do not be so complacent that you do not get fed. To win at the Sugar Bowl you need a good game plan, confidence and poise. (SouthernSD, 2016)

The quote above clearly fits into the phenomenon identified by Gill and Kanai: women need to act as if the transactional aspect of the relationship is not important even though it may be

their primary reason for engaging in the relationship. It can be concluded that Letstalksugar.com's figure of a Sugar Baby is inherently a transactional one who, at least discursively, receives some kind of payment from her Sugar Daddy. However, this payment is not guaranteed, and it is entirely the responsibility of the Sugar Baby to skilfully manage the feelings of her Sugar Daddy to ensure that she receives the agreed amount. The website argues that an overdemanding Sugar Baby can make her Sugar Daddy leave, whereas an unconfident one may not obtain the agreed payment. The site effectively places the responsibility for obtaining payment on the Sugar Baby, while exempting or even justifying the Sugar Daddy's potential evasion of payment if the attitude of the Sugar Baby is not the correct one. The discourse of the website reinforces an imbalance of power in the relationship where Sugar Babies occupy a weaker position and can be subjected to affective exploitation.

V.V.III. The self-branding of the Sugar Baby

When Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com try to express what a Sugar Baby may bring to a sugar relationship, they incur several contradictions. A blog post on Seeking.com published in 2018, titled *8 questions to ask yourself before entering the sugar bowl*³⁶, advises Sugar Babies not to use Seeking.com if they are looking for money, and notes: "Are you entering the Sugar Bowl for money? If the answer is yes, then you are not ready for the Sugar Bowl, you are ready for a job. Sugaring isn't about giving and receiving money, it's about finding mutually beneficial relationships" (Ashley_SA, 2018b). In this post, members are also encouraged to think about what 'mutually beneficial relationships' means for them, yet the website does not offer any guidance other than a link to the Sugar Lifestyle Forum available on reddit.com³⁷.

A similar post on Letstalksugar.com, called *Sugar bowl newbie tips*, provides new Sugar Babies with some advice. Here the vocabulary changes, and entering into the 'sugar bowl' for money is deemed acceptable: "Are you wanting a casual arrangement or a long-term serious sugar relationship? Are you looking for someone to help you with your bills or maybe more than that? Does the idea of an allowance intrigue you?" (Brielle, 2019b). The contradictory messages follow the pattern that has been highlighted before. However, in this blog post, Sugar

³⁶ 'Sugar bowl' is the name the website uses for its pool of members; when someone decides to try dating on Seeking.com, they are diving into the 'sugar bowl'.

³⁷ Available at: <https://www.reddit.com/r/sugarlifestyleforum/>.

Babies are not only encouraged to think about what the ideal terms of the relationship would be for them, but they are also advised to market themselves in order to attract Sugar Daddies. The idea of self-marketing can shed some light on what exactly the Sugar Babies are trading in a sugar arrangement. The post continues with the argument: “The fact is that most daddies want a baby who is trying to better their lives and enrich others. If you are a college student, be sure to play that up [...] These things make you marketable which can lead to a bigger allowance” (Brielle, 2019b).

Showing that the Sugar Baby has acquired a certain intellectual capital by attending a higher education institution creates value in the ‘sugar’ market. Throughout Letstalksugar.com, the general assumption is that Sugar Babies are entering the ‘sugar bowl’ to acquire economic compensation. In order to do so, they need to market themselves to charm Sugar Daddies by emphasizing attractive features, including their status as a university student. In addition, they are encouraged to “keep good photos of [themselves] that emphasize [their] best points on [their] profile”: “Be sure that when taking the photo you look your best. Play up your positives and downplay your negatives. For instance, if you have a great smile or nice legs, show pictures that display that” (Brielle, 2019b). They are therefore encouraged to engage in aesthetic labour (Harvey, Vachhani, & Williams, 2014) in order to maximize their body and erotic capital. Under the *Fashion* tab, eighty-six posts can be found that give Sugar Babies advice regarding their looks, dressing style, body modifications, or plastic surgery. Posts such as *6 beauty regimes that must be maintained* (Rae, 2019) offer the reader a comprehensive list of beauty treatments that a Sugar Baby must maintain to keep a polished look, including taking care of her skin and hair, waxing body hair, maintaining a pedicure and a manicure, and acquiring lash extensions. These messages are wrapped in a postfeminist ideology that presents them as ‘empowering’ and self-choosing subjects; for example, a post titled *Beauty investments to make in your 2018* asserts that “[i]nvesting in yourself has always proved to be one of the most valuable ways to spend your time. It is important to note that every issue does not have a fast fix. A year from now your future self will be thankful you put the time in” (Rose, 2018). Engaging in beautifying routines implies an investment of time and money, and there is therefore an assumption that Sugar Babies have the spare time, alongside the economic means, to actually invest in themselves. Thus Sugar Babies are expected to be middle or upper-middle class, as it is understood that “individuals have unequal opportunities for acquiring the physical capital most valued in society, as its initial accumulation requires an investment of spare time and economic capital” (Shilling, 1991: 654).

In another post, called *Subtle cosmetic procedures to ask daddy for*, the author adds that:

Every Daddy wants a happy Baby. What would make you happiest? For some that may be a new wardrobe, financial security or material goods. Others may want a dramatic pout, a straighter smile or a flatter tummy. Whatever you're looking for, he should be excited to help turn you into his personal Barbie doll! (Rose, 2018b)

Three procedures are suggested: wearing dental braces, acquiring lip fillers, and undergoing liposuction (Rose, 2018b). It is notable that the website considers acquiring a new wardrobe and enjoying financial security as equally valid reasons to 'be' happy - or happiest - while the consequences of not having a new wardrobe and the consequences of not enjoying financial security are manifestly different in quality, as young women are able to discern. Sugar Babies are constantly patronized by the website through these types of messages, which treat them as shallow and financially illiterate.

Sugar Babies also need to adhere to certain beauty standards regarding their body weight. Posts such as *5 essential beauty products to have in your gym bag* (Smith, 2018) or *How to start losing weight*, encourage them to exercise (Ariyana, 2018). Others such as *How to prevent and delay necklines and neck wrinkles* (Kateliya, 2018) invite them to pay attention to their skin in order to prevent visible aging. All of these posts include pictures of young women engaging in exercise and beauty routines, targeting Sugar Babies with their message. These types of posts constantly remind the reader that she is navigating a website that resembles women's lifestyle magazines, and therefore describe sugar dating as a commodified lifestyle. The content is presented as if written by peer Sugar Babies, rather than by experts. These authors might be fictitious - there is no mechanism in place to know who the person behind the pseudonym is - but may also feel more approachable to the reader as their writing is more informal. The discourse is less complex, almost patronizing and childish - "Every Daddy wants a happy Baby" - as words typically used with kids, such as "tummy", are employed.

The recommendations made by the website for Sugar Babies to better themselves can be interpreted in two different ways: in the context of male domination, and against a postfeminist cultural background heavily focused on consumption and neoliberal ideas of self-improvement. Firstly, under conditions of male supremacy and domination, the imposition of femininity necessarily requires women to be plastic figures who adapt to the desires of men:

The truly "feminine" woman, then, will have "appropriate" sexual desires for men, but she will wish to shape herself, physically and in other ways, into a woman men will desire. Thus, she

will aspire to a life-plan proper for a member of her sex, to a certain configuration of the body and to an appropriate style of self-presentation. (Bartky, 1990; 50)

The Sugar Baby is a hyperfeminized figure: she must be young, lean, and beautiful. Either to obtain or maintain this shape, she is encouraged to engage in exercise routines to properly shape her body or ask her Sugar Daddy's support for plastic surgery. She needs to be physically desirable for her potential Daddy, and to take flattering pictures of herself to maximize the opportunities of acquiring a Daddy, effectively engaging in self-objectification practices. In this sense, she is not beautiful or lean for herself, but for the gaze of another person of the opposite sex. The Sugar Baby presented in Letstalksugar.com is not only a metaphoric plastic figure in the sense that she must show a plasticity to adapt to the necessities of the Daddy, but her own body is thought of as plastic, mouldable to the taste of the Sugar Daddy: 'he should be excited to help turn you into his personal Barbie doll!'

Authors such as Susan Faludi (1991) have argued that messages that target women to conform to extremely narrow beauty standards, such as having the minimum possible percentage of fat - the demonized bodily substance par excellence (Orbach, 1985) - or 'pouty' lips, need to be understood as a backlash against women, especially in the light of women acquiring more and more power in the private sector. Faludi argues that the beauty industry does not have any explicit political agenda against women, but rather it exploits "women's low self-esteem and high anxiety about a 'feminine' appearance" (1991: 239). This anxiety may be heightened if the Sugar Baby economically relies on her Sugar Daddy.

Naomi Wolf (1991) conveys a similar idea under the name 'the beauty myth'. The 'myth' promises success and wellbeing to women if they are young enough, fit enough, and pretty enough. She establishes a connection between women's access to higher positions in the labour market and the prevalence of the 'beauty myth': "As women demanded access to power, the power structure used the beauty myth materially to undermine women's advancement" (Wolf, 1991: 20). In the case of sugar dating, the beauty myth promises women more success when looking to acquire a Sugar Daddy if they adhere to a highly stylised beautifying routine. The fact that women will monitor their own bodies to look for 'fixable issues' needs to be understood in the light of a disciplinary society that relies on self-surveillance techniques to create subjects that will watch themselves without an external source. This is a key part of the contemporary process of subjection, as the subject needs to interiorize a disciplinary gaze in order for the disciplinary process to occur and be maintained without external power:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his [*sic*] own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself [*sic*]. (Foucault, 1979: 27)

Foucault has been extensively criticised for his myopic vision regarding the ‘inspecting gaze’: this gaze is more efficiently internalised by women (Gavey, 1992), who tend to become more ‘docile bodies’ than men, especially with regard to beauty and exercise routines. Although physically conforming to patriarchal ideas of beauty may give women some advantages in male-dominated societies (which is the message conveyed by Let’s Talk Sugar), the inspecting gaze does not fully explain why some women actually enjoy and would willingly direct this surveillance against themselves, over and over, without immediate reward. In *6 beauty regimes that must be maintained*, the author comments: “I enjoy going to these treatments as I find it very relaxing. Even though your Sugar Daddy may not compliment you on these treatments, he will definitely take notice!” (Rae, 2019). Sugar Babies may engage in these practices without acquiring any benefit from their Sugar Daddy. By encouraging women to actually enjoy these self-disciplinary practices, a postfeminist ideology of femininity - what Michelle Lazar (2009) calls ‘entitled femininity’ - is reproduced. Entitled femininity is discursively formed by three main ideas that are constantly iterated in media products, including Letstalksugar.com:

1) ‘It’s about me!’ focuses on pampering and pleasuring the self; 2) ‘Celebrating femininity’ reclaims and rejoices in feminine stereotypes; and 3) ‘Girling women’ encourages youthful disposition in women of all ages [...] entitled femininity occupies an ambivalent discursive space, which celebrates as well as repudiates feminism, and re-installs normative gendered stereotypes. (Lazar, 2009: 371)

Authors such as Cressida Heyes (2006) have tried to reconcile the surveillance described by Foucault and some women’s pleasure in engaging with it. Heyes (2006) argues that self-monitoring practices may not be solely explained by notions of patriarchal control and domination because this leaves out the agency of the individual and assumes an uncritical position on her part. Heyes (2006) clarifies that Foucault’s concept of power is not only repressive but also enabling, therefore for some women who engage in beauty routines and exercise regimes, this may facilitate learning new skills and feeling empowered by being in charge of their bodies. In addition, Heyes adds that these disciplinary discourses may feel more

palatable for women, even those who have a feminist consciousness³⁸, since they are “cleverly deploy[ing] the discourse of self-care feminists have long encouraged” (2006: 126). Heyes opens space for considering Sugar Babies as agentic individuals who may acquire pleasure from, or feel empowered by, engaging in beauty or exercise regimes. However, other authors have expanded this argument to explain that neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies both have an ‘affective’ component where emotions are regulated by a series of rules that are tied to neoliberal logics of self-making:

Obtaining pleasure from aesthetic labour can be interpreted as part of the ““psychic and affective life” of postfeminism [...] highlighting the importance of positive affects in women and girl-centred media and cultural forms [...] what may be observed in the current conjuncture is a set of broad cultural conditions that visibly connect mediated feminism to “upbeat” and “confident” modes of subjectivity well-suited to navigating neoliberal structures, dynamics, and “feeling rules”. Such “feeling rules” dovetail with the broader logics of self-belief, positive thinking, and the pursuit of happiness noted as pervasive in recent neoliberal and meritocratic cultural discourses of self-making. (Dobson & Kanai, 2019: 772)

The ‘feeling rules’ encourage women to have an optimistic attitude in the midst of neoliberal insecurities. This optimism may be a key factor in the development of neoliberalism as it appeals to the entrepreneurial spirit of the individual: a certain dose of optimism is necessary in order to act as an entrepreneur. Optimism involves the idea that the subject has scope for improvement and therefore it is imperative for self-motivation. A postfeminist analysis of the notions of governmentality, affective promises and market rationality, where individuals are encouraged to perpetually improve themselves, explains this entanglement:

neoliberal governmentality [...] fosters market rationality and discipline in all aspects of social life and involves creating self-regulating and self-responsible citizens who are ‘enabled’ by their entrepreneurial ‘freedoms’ [...] this kind of determined, self-motivating individual [...] focus[es] on body management, discipline and self-surveillance under the guise of fashion, fitness and beauty regimes. (Genz & Brabon, 2018:9)

The Sugar Baby fits into the description of a self-motivated individual who focuses on body management and discipline by engaging in beauty routines and fitness exercises. She applies a market rationality to her own body: if she invests in herself with these beautifying routines, she may capitalize on it by acquiring a richer or more generous Sugar Daddy. McRobbie (2007) adds that young women are the ones most addressed and interpellated by this discourse of

³⁸ Actually, Letstalksugar.com seems to be aware that feminism is popular among young women. Several posts encourage women to sugar date even if they consider themselves feminists, and provide clues on how to reconcile apparently contradictory behaviour (see *Sugaring as a feminist* (Mila B., 2017); *How feminists can capitalize in an arrangement* (RowanAsh, 2019); or *Feminism in the sugar bowl* (Eva C., 2018).

neoliberal governmentality in what she denominates a 'new sexual contract' which follows a similar idea to the 'backlash' advanced by Faludi. She argues that young women now feel pressured to engage in the aforementioned self-monitoring techniques by effectively performing as economically active citizens. However, young girls are often constrained by their material reality, as in the case of Sugar Babies. This 'masquerade', according to McRobbie:

functions to re-assure male structures of power [...] re-stabilises gender relations and the heterosexual matrix as defined by Butler by interpellating women repeatedly and ritualistically into knowing and self-reflexive terms of highly-stylised femininity [...] It operates with a double movement, its voluntaristic structure works to conceal that patriarchy is still in place. (2007: 726)

Indeed, in many of the fashion and beauty articles available on Letstalksugar.com, such as the aforementioned *6 beauty regimes that must be maintained*, a 'voluntaristic structure' can be perceived. Sugar Babies need to engage in these routines as a voluntary act with the promise of obtaining pleasure from it because the website has no means to control whether they do it or not. However, the site works as a coercive form of knowledge/power that classifies Sugar Babies according to a 'norm' that is in this case tied to patriarchal ideas of female beauty and neoliberal mandates of self-improvement. The website controls the symbolic power of constructing what a Sugar Baby is and therefore the ritualized expulsion (Hall, 1997) of those who do not conform to this highly stylised notion of femininity. Furthermore, the promise of obtaining pleasure or delight from beauty practices that are supposed to be seen as an investment - as there is arguably an expected revenue in the form of an allowance from the Sugar Daddy - may work as a consolation prize in case the Sugar Baby does not obtain any economic revenue. The fact that the Sugar Baby is willingly engaging in these techniques also places the responsibility of failing or succeeding on her instead of the website, as the website only acts as a sort of advisor.

Another key aspect of postfeminist femininity is the display of a postfeminist sexuality, understood as a sexuality that is 'empowering', leading women to engage "a postfeminist aesthetic of the 'sexy', desirable young woman" (Jackson, Vares, & Gill, 2012: 143). Heterosexual sex seems to be a recurrent topic on Letstalksugar.com. However, the promise of obtaining pleasure is displaced from the Sugar Baby to the Sugar Daddy. The postfeminist representation of sexuality on Letstalksugar.com will be analysed in the next section.

V.V.IV. The pornification of the Sugar Baby

Heterosexual sex is a central aspect of the life of a Sugar Baby, according to Let's Talk Sugar. References to Sugar Babies having sex with their Sugar Daddies are made both indirectly and bluntly. In posts such as *6 things to expect (and learn to love) when you start dating an older daddy* (James, 2018), it is assumed that a sugar relationship is going to include sexual encounters:

What is it with younger dudes and lack of appreciation for lingerie? Do they think we spent 10 minutes putting this strappy onesie from Yandy on so that he could strip it off in ten seconds? An older dude not only appreciates when a little is left to the imagination, he knows how to work around it...if you know what I mean. (James, 2018)

Let's Talk Sugar's employment of an informal, less professional type of speech may appeal to a younger audience. While Sugar Daddies are called 'gentlemen' on Seeking.com, here they are 'older dudes'. In another blog, *Valentine's day essentials that nobody talks about* (Colette, 2017), the author describes two devices that may help a Sugar Baby when she is on a date on Valentine's Day. The first device is a spray that creates a film on top of the water of the WC, so that if the Sugar Baby needs to defecate in the apartment of her Daddy or in a hotel room, the odour will be trapped and will not be smelled by her Daddy because, according to Let's Talk Sugar, "stinking up the bathroom is the absolute last thing you need when you're trying to set (and keep) a mood" (Colette, 2017). Sugar Babies are, again, encouraged to behave more like human-size Barbie dolls than real humans: neither they nor their excrement are allowed to smell for fear of upsetting the Sugar Daddy.

The second device is a sponge designed to be inserted into the top of the vagina when a woman is menstruating so she can have penetrative sex with a man without staining him or the surroundings with menstrual blood (Colette, 2017). This post not only takes for granted that Sugar Babies are going to sleep with their Sugar Daddies no matter what, but also hints that sexual intercourse (under the euphemism 'intimacy') is the only way to 'have fun':

If Aunt Flo has the audacity to pay a visit during your romantic Valentine's Day date, first of all - I'm sorry. That sucks! On the plus side, your date likely bought you chocolates to fulfil your cravings. On the downside, intimacy has now become... complicated. Now you need to go through the awkwardness of figuring out how the two of you can still have fun. Sure, there's shower sex, laying out a sacrificial towel, etc. But if you want to just have sex without awkwardness, the best way to go is by wearing a sponge. (Colette, 2017)

The language is reminiscent of advice columns in women's magazines where a 'sexpert' gives advice to women on sexual topics. Among the content provided by these 'sexperts' is the encouragement to engage in 'compulsory sexual labour': "'mastering the art of sexy stripping', being a 'headmistress', experimenting with sex toys and costumes, watching and emulating mainstream pornographic material, and, post-*Fifty Shades*, adding a light touch of 'kinky chic' or 'bondage babe'" (Favaro, 2017: 322). These recommendations are repackaged in a postfeminist rhetoric by which women should be the ones choosing to engage in these practices rather than feeling forced to do it, highlighting their 'voluntaristic' nature.

The use of the word 'intimacy' as a euphemism for sexual intercourse is not surprising, as several scholars have highlighted that contemporary intimate life is mediated by and configured through "broader social and cultural rationalities, most especially those of postfeminism and neoliberalism" (O'Neill, 2015: 4). Specifically, intimacy is often represented in cultural products as a site of investment that requires meticulous planning - a kind of sexual entrepreneurship (O'Neill, 2015). This notion of intimacy is reproduced in LTS, as the author of the blogpost encourages the Sugar Baby to plan for the eventuality of menstruation during a date with a Sugar Daddy. The possibility of rescheduling the date or cancelling altogether is absent from the post, which shows how the 'voluntaristic' nature of blog works to effectively limit the number of options available for the Sugar Baby.

The website gets more explicit about heterosexual sex in the tab *Sex*. Let's Talk Sugar is a paradigmatic example of the phenomenon that Linda Williams defines as 'on-scenity': "the insistent appearing of representations once deemed obscene in the public arena" (Williams, qtd. in Rossi, 2007: 127). Although LTS is not supposed to be a pornographic site, images that can be considered soft-core porn³⁹ populate the website (see Figure VIII), and therefore it can be considered 'pornified'. This feature is not unique to LTS. Rather, it is part of a wider social trend of content that not long ago would have been considered pornographic being featured in mainstream media. Other authors have spotted the same trend but have named it differently (see McNair, 1996; Attwood, 2006; Dines, 2010). However, the omnipresence of sex has not resulted in a more pluralistic vision regarding intercourse (such as solo, homosexual or queer amatory forms), but rather functions as a way of reinforcing hegemonic heterosexual sex, mainstream porn-like imagery, and "reiterating one particular - and particularly saleable - shorthand for sexiness" (Harvey & Gill, 2011: 54).

³⁹ Soft-core is defined as "arousing but not revealing everything" (Rossi, 2007: 135).



Figure VII. Let's Talk Sugar. (2018). Sex. The ultimate Sugar Baby guide to intimacy [online]. *Let's Talk Sugar*. Accessed 20th April 2020. <https://www.letstalksugar.com/sex/>

The first post ever uploaded to Let's Talk Sugar about sex, called *Fifty shades of sugar*, explicitly erotizes the inherent imbalance of power between a Sugar Baby and a Sugar Daddy and argues that men who are attracted to a power imbalance may join Seeking.com to engage in BDSM (Bondage, Discipline and SadoMasochism) practices with their Sugar Babies. The author argues that:

We're talking about the BDSM Daddy! Men with money often command power and with power comes dominance, in the office and the bedroom [...] Rough sex, choking, tied up in Hermes ties. If any of these terms spark your interest but you're timid, the dominant Daddy might be right for you. (Sugar Experts, 2015)

BDSM seems to be a popular sexual dynamic in the sugar world. In another post uploaded two years later called *What is BDSM*, the author introduces BDSM to Sugar Babies. In these two posts, it is always assumed that the Sugar Daddy will occupy the role of the dominant and the Sugar Baby will be the submissive:

D/s refers to a Dominant/submissive connection. Many successful men like to assume a dominant role in a relationship. But there are Sugar Daddies who prefer to take the dominance a step further [...] they exercise control in all aspects of their life. Including intimacy [...] What a Dom seeks most of all is a woman who will submit herself to his every desire. (BelleC, 2017b)

The choice of writing about BDSM in the context of sugar dating is a peculiar one. BDSM communities place a strong emphasis on the fact that consent must be freely given by every person that engages in a BDSM dynamic. This does not mean that BDSM groups are impermeable to gendered violence or coercion, but the aim of the consent guidelines is to minimise the risk of experiencing a violent situation (Beres & MacDonald, 2015). Likewise, consent is also mentioned in Let's Talk Sugar's post on BDSM:

Like everything else that goes into the D/s dynamic, there are varying degrees of what a Sugar Daddy and Sugar Baby might enjoy. Many women relish the idea of being “taken” by a strong and dominant lover [...] With the consent of both partners, personal likes and limits can be pushed to include paddle or crop spanking, clamp devices, collars or hot wax drips. The more extreme end of the scale can include the use of ball gags, ropes, sensory deprivation, belting and even whipping. (BelleC, 2017b)

Nevertheless, the notion of consent, as explained in the previous chapter and which will be explored in more depth in the following chapter, needs to be problematized in the light of heterosexual dynamics that are inherently unequal in terms of power. BDSM communities tend to have a series of guidelines that aim to prevent abuse; for example, the violent acts are confined to the bedroom and do not permeate other areas of life:

It is common for controlling or punishing acts to be allowed within a scene, but not in every-day interaction, demonstration that BDSM relationships are based on pre-agreed, consensual power exchange, not on the dominant partner exercising power over the submissive partner as they wish. (Beres & MacDonald, 2015: 420)

If a person during a BDSM encounter violates consent or passes the agreed limits, they risk being ostracised from the community (Beres & MacDonald, 2015). However, the same type of peer-protection does not occur in sugar dating. Moreover, sugar dating already involves a considerable lack of power on the part of the Sugar Baby as she is likely to be younger and less affluent than her Sugar Daddy. The very discourse of sugar dating in which sex is tacitly included in the agreements may act as a technology of heterosexual coercion (Gavey, 1992) which further complicates the giving of uncoerced consent.

Although the above-mentioned posts advise that Sugar Babies should only engage in sexual intercourse with their Daddies if they want to, this simplifies the power dynamic that may develop during a sugar relationship. Whether the person engages in BDSM or so-called ‘vanilla sex’, the website’s tacit encouragement of sexual intercourse between a Sugar Daddy and a Sugar Baby obscures the fact that the transactional nature of the relationship may efface the ability of the Sugar Baby to consent and/or to report to the police if this consent is violated and she becomes a victim of sexual assault. Indeed, the only suggestions offered to Sugar Babies with regard to safety are to walk away from ‘Salty’ Daddies, those who may cause “potential harm” or have “attitude problems” (Harana, 2019b), or to be a “good girl”:

Your safety should always be your utmost priority. We cannot stress any further how important it is to read up on the sugaring safety precautions and to always keep a careful eye on your own protection. Skimming through one or two short texts would rarely suffice [...] Most of all, be a

“good girl” and make sure you know a lot more than assumptions before going on your first date. (Harana, 2019b)

Other posts available in Let’s Talk Sugar offer guidance on heterosexual sex and place strong emphasis on teaching Sugar Babies how to please their Daddies; posts such as *Sexual fetishes 101*, where Sugar Babies are advised to “prepare [themselves] to come across all sorts of sexual fetishes. Anything from him wanting you to wear stockings to perhaps something more strong such as wanting you to urinate on him in the shower” (Contessa, 2017); or *Spice things up with your Sugar Daddy*, where it is stated that “sometimes, it is necessary to indulge your SDs fantasies” (Vixen, 2017), can be found on the website. Posts that teach Sugar Daddies how to perform cunnilingus on their Sugar Babies, or any other type of non-reciprocal sexual practice where the Sugar Baby is stimulated, are absent from the website. Even posts that do not specifically teach Sugar Babies how to perform techniques of oral sex, such as *Top seven secret sex zones*, are aimed at Sugar Babies pleasing their Daddies: “While it may seem obvious to go straight for his penis as a direct source of pleasure, there are in fact, plenty of other places he wants you to include in the action” (Contessa, 2017b).

Letstalksugar.com offers a vision of sex where women are encouraged to please their Daddies and focus on their pleasure rather than their own. As has already been argued in this chapter, this vision of heterosexual intercourse is still hegemonic, and women, even those in non-transactional relationships with men, systematically prioritise their partner’s desires over their own (Gavey, 1992; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Heterosexual intercourse as described by Let’s Talk Sugar effectively places sugar dating in a grey area between heterosexual dating and transactional sex. Following this thorough analysis of the website, it becomes clear that a sugar relationship is inherently transactional. If sex occupies a central place in the relationship and is economically compensated, then sugar dating falls into the realm of transactional sex. However, notions of ‘respectability’ and rituals that are typical of heterosexual, non-transactional relationships (such as going on dates) still populate the site; for example, sex is described as something that women ‘give up’ to men but are supposed to keep until an arrangement is secure. In a post published on the Seeking.com blog in 2013, Sugar Babies are advised not to sleep with their Sugar Daddies on the first date or they will not be respected. It is also subtly expressed that having sex with the Sugar Baby is, in fact, the ultimate aim of dating:

Ladies, no matter how good his offer sounds, or how many drinks you've had... never *ever* give it up on the first date. This should be a general rule of thumb in any manner of dating. But especially when money is exchanging hands, or a financial arrangement is on the table. Sex is going to be part of most sugar arrangements, but that doesn't mean it has to start with it. All men generally aspire to sleep with a woman they are interested in, that's the whole point of dating. But he can't expect you to give it up on the first date, and you can't expect him to respect you if you do. (JennSA, 2013)

The Sugar Baby navigates a complex context where she can expect to receive financial compensation if she engages in sexual intercourse with her Sugar Daddy. In parallel, she is subjected to tight moral codes that encourage her to act according to old-fashioned, gendered ideas of prudery. The Sugar Daddy is not subject to the same moral codes: while the Sugar Baby cannot expect to obtain the Sugar Daddy's respect if she sleeps with him after only one date, there is no value judgment made on the Sugar Daddy if he sleeps with her. According to Let's Talk Sugar, sex becomes the bargaining chip that could grant the Sugar Baby some economic capital, but there is no mechanism in place for her to actually ensure that this will happen.

This vision of sex places the Sugar Baby in a vulnerable position, especially if she is already experiencing financial hardship. The website iterates in several of the posts about sex that Sugar Babies should only engage in a sexual relationship with their Daddies if they want to. However, if a sugar relationship is discursively constructed as inherently including sex, this may constrain the ability of the Sugar Baby to agree to sexual intercourse, as that consent can be taken as a given by her Sugar Daddy. Since the Sugar Baby is discursively produced and fits into a category and is governed by terms that are not of her own making (Butler, 1997), it may be difficult for her to be able to actually renegotiate the very meaning of sugar dating if she decides not to sleep with her Sugar Daddy.

As argued, Seeking.com and Let's Talk Sugar meticulously construct the notion of Sugar Daddy and Sugar Baby through their discourses, often seeking to sugar coat gendered dynamics where the Sugar Baby holds a significantly weaker power position that could easily lead to an exploitative relationship. Sugar dating needs to be understood as flourishing in the context of the modernization of patriarchal power in the form of postfeminism and against a background characterised by a neoliberal ideology and economic precariousness. However, as has already been addressed, the fact that sugar dating is discursively constructed means that at least part of its power can be rendered fragile when exposed: "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to

thwart it” (Foucault, 1978: 101). It is possible that the ‘sugar’ subjects, as well as the ‘sugar’ relationships, substantially differ from their discursive production. Although I start from the position that there is an immediate subjugation when a person assumes an identity - in this case, the identity of Sugar Baby - as the subject is “called” into being by the pertinent authority (Butler, 1997), I acknowledge that there is space for resistance and that it is necessary to be cautious when tracing a direct relationship between an authority and its effect on a subject. It is therefore imperative to dive into the first-person accounts of Sugar Babies’ experiences of these relationships. The testimonies of ten Sugar Babies provide information about the actual development of sugar-dating relationships.

Chapter VI: I Have Bills to Pay! Paving the Way for Sugar Dating

As I have explained in the previous chapters, the neoliberalisation of British higher education is one of the results of the adoption of neoliberalism and its consolidation in the country. The preceding chapter has argued that the discourse that the Seeking conglomerate employs to construct the sugar subject is profoundly shaped by neoliberalism and postfeminism. Nevertheless, the analysis of macrostructures - such as the economy - or the matrices of discourses that produce forms of social consciousness - Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com - cannot alone determine the extent to which the lived realities of Sugar Babies are affected by their context. This chapter focuses on the analysis of the semi-structured interviews I conducted with ten women who were sugar dating at the time or had previously done so. Participants were asked to describe their economic circumstances prior to sugar dating, and to reflect on whether these circumstances were a critical factor in their decision to seek a Sugar Daddy. Their testimonies were placed in dialogue with the discourse of the Seeking conglomerate. Critical discourse analysis was employed to analyse the themes and patterns that emerged during these interviews.

VI.I. Material reasons for joining Seeking.com

Before analysing how the interviewed participants reproduced or challenged ideological discourses, I wanted to begin with the material⁴⁰, that is, to understand their economic circumstances at the moment they decided to sugar date. All of the participants reported economic reasons as the critical factor that shaped their decision to enter sugar dating, which echoes the information available on Seeking.com and its Sugar Baby University™, as well as previous research regarding students' participation in the sex industry. Of those Sugar Babies that I interviewed, nine out of ten had sugar dated while attending a higher education institution. In many cases, the participants were working part-time in low-paid jobs before deciding to try

⁴⁰ I am using the word 'material' here in a Marxist sense: the 'material' is "the existence of reality outside of thought or consciousness" (Althusser & Montag, 1991: 18). In classic Marxist theory, historical materialism is defined as "the theory of the conditions, forms, and effects of the class struggle" (Althusser & Montag, 1991: 17). Therefore, what I mean by 'the material' is the economic circumstances - and their effects - that the participant was experiencing at that moment, separately from the ideological discourse that may have influenced their decision to sugar date (i.e. postfeminism, neoliberalism). Material reality and ideological concepts are obviously intertwined, and one cannot be comprehended without the other; yet focusing first on the material can help us understand the economic conditions wherein ideology operates.

sugar dating, and reported that the high number of hours they worked per week interfered with their educational commitments. This is true for Rosa, who before trying sugar dating had worked part-time (30 hours per week) in a bar, and as an escort. She saw escorting as an opportunity for working fewer hours while maintaining her income levels and having more time to dedicate to her studies; later on, she tried sugar dating. While she initially used escorting to save money for studying a semester abroad, Rosa kept working in the sex industry after she returned:

Rosa: So, I guess I went to uni and I had, on my first year, I had like a scholarship thing, and then I stayed on campus, so I was living on campus. And then the second year, I worked a lot, as a waitress in a restaurant; and then I guess in my second year [...] I was going to Berlin to study abroad for a semester, so I needed money. So, I talked with a friend that was kind of doing it [...] yeah, like escorting [...] I was like, if I'm getting into sex work, I can work less hours and have more time for like studying, so I did that. Because in my old job I was doing like, 30 hours a week? Plus studying... so it was quite a lot. So, I did sex work just to like, kind of have more freedom with my time.

This is consistent with the information provided in the first chapter of this thesis: the number of hours that students work every week has been steadily increasing in the UK since 1990 (Roberts et al., 2000; Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005). Government guidelines recommend that students do not work more than ten hours per week during term time (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005); yet plenty of students, such as Rosa, work many more. Salaries have not followed the increase in working hours and many students still struggle despite being employed, which leaves them trapped between their intense educational commitments and the necessity of acquiring a paid job in order to support themselves. During her postgraduate studies, Rosa worked as an escort and as a waitress, and maintained a commodified relationship with a Sugar Daddy. Yet she could not comfortably support herself:

Rosa: I was working two jobs and I was also doing sugar daddies and sex work.
Rocio: could you support yourself?
Rosa: yeah, just about, but it was like... still rough. I was living off about £75-£80 a week?

Antonucci (2018) has reported that student income from paid work fell by 37% in real terms from 2013 to 2018. The reason is that most students work in casual jobs, and the pay for this type of employment has been steadily decreasing for the past decades. Although student loans were introduced with the aim of 'help[ing] with living costs' (GovUK, 2020b), they are often insufficient. Additionally, the quantity of the government loan that a student will receive increases if the person studies in London, but does not account for living in cities outside of

the capital that may be just as expensive. Rosa, who studied in a city in the south, reported having problems affording her rent, despite having taken out a loan:

Rosa: for my master's [the student loan] just covered my fees, because it's like, ten grand and my master's was about... £8000. And then I think I used some of it for rent, and then I used it for expenses, bills, travel, day to day... stuff like that. And then my third year, yeah, again... I got something but it didn't cover for anything and [city in the south of England] is really expensive, so like, rent is very expensive.

The direct correlation between students entering the sex industry and their heightened impoverishment despite acquiring government loans has been documented (Roberts, Bergström, & La Rooy 2007; Haeger & Deil-Amen 2010; Roberts et al., 2010; Sanders & Hardy, 2015); Rosa's testimony constitutes a further example. Because the sex industry can offer higher profits than working in retail, cafés or bars (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005), many students resort to escorting as a coping mechanism. This is problematic since students are still acquiring vast debt from loans that are insufficient to live. Yasmin, a recent graduate from a university in the north of England, had a similar path to Rosa: she started working in casual jobs but found the pay insufficient, and eventually commenced working as an escort. Later on, she decided to try sugar dating, partly because the student loan did not cover her daily expenses:

Yasmin: since I am eighteen in [hometown] I was working in bars, and then I went to university [...] I worked in an art gallery café for a bit, but I went home for the Easter holidays and then I went back, and they said oh... there's no more work here for you. And I was like, ok... anyways, it was like, bare minimum wage, it was like £5 an hour so... I can't work my ass off for £5 an hour so... I said, I see if there's anything else that I can do.

Rocío: did you have a student loan?

Yasmin: I did, yes.

Rocío: was it enough to cover your expenses?

Yasmin: No, not at all. I used the money of the student loan for... I would say travel, because I was... my first year of uni, I didn't really enjoy it that much, so I just tended to go back home... books was [*sic*] quite expensive... my accommodation was really expensive, because I've got put in one of the most expensive ones in [city in the north of England] and I just ended up... I think I didn't get my loan until the end of October, so I went from August to October... I was sort of living in deficit.

A similar situation was experienced by Rebecca, a young woman studying an undergraduate degree in liberal arts in a city in the north of England. She expressed worries about her financial situation, how it pressured her into sugar dating. Although she had also acquired a student loan, it was too meagre to afford her daily expenses and she was deeply worried about the amount of debt she was accumulating:

Rebecca: it's the tuition fees, which is £9520 [per academic year], and then, on top of that, you get the maintenance loan and you have to pay that back too, so... it's just a lot, a lot of money. And then... it's that thing that when you finish uni there's the interest, and just bills over bills until you pay it, so you end up paying 75 grands by the end of it, and you used... what? 20 [thousand]? It's ridiculous!

Rebecca's concern is understandable. Student loans in the United Kingdom are not interest-free; in fact, the interest is applied at the maximum possible rate while the person is still studying (currently, at 5.6%) (GovUK, 2021). Their complex design makes it almost impossible to foresee how much the student will eventually pay (Connington, 2018)⁴¹.

In addition to her future worries, Rebecca was experiencing a dire economic situation that she felt offered her no other choice but to seek a Sugar Daddy. Continuing with the previous conversation about having acquired a loan, she added that:

Rebecca: it's a lot of money, and that's the whole reason why I am going to sugaring, because me being at uni is a lot of struggle, even just to pay rent. And my first year being here, it was like... I was literally living with no electric, and just about any food in the house, going on days just not eating at all because I can't afford it. Like, I had no money, there was nothing.

Rocio: you couldn't live with the loan?

Rebecca: no, that literally all went on mostly rent, yeah. So, it all went on living costs, obviously maintaining the place I am living at, travel to and from uni, it builds up and then you look at your account and there's nothing in there? So, you start like, wait, how am I going to eat? I am not for three days until I get some more money. But it's like, if I need the money what other option [besides sugar dating] is there? Even in the context of, well I will get a job... well, I can't get a job tomorrow! [laughs] It's a whole process that may take a couple of months and I need the money now, so...

Rebecca's situation echoes Standing's argument (2011) that some students need to be considered the new core of the 'precariat' owing to the precarious economic situation they experience. This situation is characterized by "a distinctive bundle of insecurities" (Standing, 2011: VII), despite some students not strictly belonging to a traditional working-class background. Indeed, the testimonies of Rebecca, Yasmin, and Rosa come from young people who are pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, thereby investing time, effort, and money in their education and "holding to the meritocratic promise that talent and ambition can

⁴¹ Although the government offers a calculator, the amount that the person will eventually pay depends on their annual income after graduation, a fact unknown to the majority of students before they finish their studies. Loans are so complex, and their interest changes so quickly, that articles are regularly published in the British press to explain them (see Brignall, 2020; Bushi, 2020).

be converted into economic capital, while simultaneously facing an insecure future of increasing debt” (Genz, 2017: 20). Some of them, such as Rosa - who worked as an escort during her studies - defined themselves as middle class. This may not be surprising since there is increasing evidence that “despite financial vulnerability being the central reason for entering sex work, it is not only women from lower social classes that enter the sex industry” (Roberts et al., 2010: 146). Students from middle-class backgrounds are also experiencing economic distress in terms of not being able to afford basic commodities and thus leading to sugar dating.

However, not all the participants interviewed stated that they came from a middle-class background. Melanie, a woman in her early 20s who lives in Scotland, recounted that her arrangement with her Sugar Daddy began when she was seventeen years old, which she considers now to be a ‘red flag’, in her own words. In a written interview, Melanie, an artist, explained that the two key aspects of her background that played a significant role in her decision to engage in a sugar relationship were her lack of economic means to create artwork coupled with the necessity to make connections in the art industry, and the fact that she grew up below the poverty line and struggled to afford rent and food:

Melanie: I would say that the main reason I entered into this particular style of agreement in the first place was, honestly, a combination of about three factors: firstly, I couldn’t afford to create artwork; secondly, I couldn’t afford a space to live; and thirdly, I was probably desperate for attention that at that time really felt validating [...] A bit of background: I grew up below the poverty line [...] He [her Sugar Daddy] said that he could help me with my financial problems. His intention was to “set me up”, so to speak. Give me the means. Use me for sex, because I was desperate and starving for fame and groceries.

Although Melanie also noted a desire for attention, it is clear that her material reality was a critical factor in her entrance into sugar dating, an experience that she now recalls in a very negative light. Despite stating that she came from a working-class background, Melanie was affected by problems similar to Rosa’s: unaffordable rent, for example. The implications of this are twofold. Firstly, the so-called middle-class is increasingly facing problems such as affordable housing that were previously only experienced by the working-class, supporting my argument that students can now be considered a ‘new precariat’ (Standing, 2011). Secondly, Melanie was still able to attend a higher education institution and pursue a career as an artist, which means that she was in the process of acquiring cultural capital. The different capitals that Sugar Babies navigate will be analysed in the next section.

Melanie grew up in a city in the north of the UK where gentrification of devalued areas had already started. Gentrification is treated as a middle-class experience; it is often described as the return of the middle classes from the suburbs to the inner-city (Paton, 2016), but it also involves the working classes in terms of, for instance, displacement from certain areas or the impossibility of renting a one-bedroom apartment or studio due to the revalorisation of previously devalued zones (Paton, 2016). In Melanie's case, she could not afford an apartment for herself or an art studio. At times, she did not know if she could even afford to buy food, which highlights the exclusivity of being able to afford a life as an artist. The figure of the Sugar Daddy appeared to her as a fairy 'godfather':

Melanie: where I live, art and living the life of an artist is reserved for those who are born with a silver spoon in the mouth. I think, actually, that is applicable everywhere, but what I mean is that, not only that, but the city I live is extortionately expensive. Studio space, for example; a real and good studio space is more than what I pay for in rent... [...] At the time that I was in this arrangement, I couldn't dream of a studio. Sometimes I couldn't even dream of my own apartment. Times were extraordinarily tough, and I didn't know where my next meal was coming from for years. To have someone in the picture who could wave a magic wand, that was a dream come true for a very naïve girl.

Another participant, Elisa, a 28-year-old woman who had recently started sugaring, considered herself working-class and was the only interviewee who did not attend university, although she was considering doing so as a mature student. However, the prospect of getting into debt for an education that, in her words, 'doesn't guarantee security', was daunting. Sugar dating was, for her, a form of saving some money, as well as experiencing a finer lifestyle. When talking about the cost of tuition fees, she was asked if she considered it an obstacle to obtaining a university education:

Elisa: yeah... massively. It's just... it's unattainable [...] I used to have massive problems with money when I was younger because I had mental health issues, but really, I was poorly. I got them years ago and I got into a lot of debt so the idea of owing anyone money... it's terrifying in itself [...] and [an education] doesn't guarantee security.

Elisa was working full-time but she still couldn't afford to save enough money to buy a house, which was her objective. She thought it was risky to acquire a loan to pursue an education that no longer guarantees better economic security later in life. Research has shown that working-class people are less likely to acquire a loan than their middle-class counterparts, and that working-class students are more likely than middle-class "to be deterred from applying to university because of fear of debt" (Callender & Mason, 2017: 20). This fear may also play a role in sugar dating: some women may prefer to enter into a commodified relationship rather than acquiring debt, as in the case of Elisa.

All the participants reported being economically motivated to embark on sugar dating. It therefore becomes clear, based on their testimonies, that the lack of economic means in the form of a decent-paying job or a bigger loan is the most important factor in the decision to engage in sugar dating for these participants. The fear of acquiring a loan can also play a marginal role in the decision to enter a commodified relationship, especially for working-class Sugar Babies. Other economic factors that were systematically mentioned by the Sugar Babies were the lack of (sufficient) financial support from family, and a neoliberal rhetoric of self-responsibility that made them feel responsible for their own economic struggle.

VI.I.I. Lack of parental support and rhetoric of self-responsibility

Ikonen (2013) has argued that part of the currently pervasive neoliberal ideology is the demand for citizens to become economically self-responsible by adopting an entrepreneurial mindset. This process occurs against a background characterized by the volatility of the current economic system, such as the constant threat of a new economic crisis, high unemployment, or increasing devaluation of salaries. These circumstances cause social anxiety and unrest to such an extent that Kathleen Stewart has coined the term ‘trauma time’, defined as the zeitgeist of contemporary neoliberal societies where individuals move between the nostalgia of past, lasting securities and the current dread of vulnerability, subject to ‘forces beyond [their] control or understanding and yet given total responsibility for everything that happens to [them] and to others’ (2005: 338).

As part of this trend, students are actively encouraged by the British government to apply for student loans in order to “ensure their finances are in place for the new academic year” (GovUK, 2021). This rhetoric permeates the participants here interviewed, to the extent that they feel ashamed to ask their families for financial help, despite struggling to pay rent and/or buy food⁴². During her interview Suzanne, a young woman who started sugar dating at the same time as her roommate, who was also interviewed, recounted that she had acquired government-funded loans to support herself while studying in a city in the north of England.

⁴² The only participant who received steady economic help from her parents was Ruth, who reported that her family paid her rent while she was studying.

She was asked if she had started paying them already, and whether she could rely on family support:

Suzanne: oh, no, no... this is the end of my [final] year. I was going through my student loan but... I don't know... I am not from a really bad financial background and neither is my roommate. We could call our families and just like... they would give us money, but in our opinion that was like... calling home and ask for money... I'd rather just know that it was coming and it's my money?

Suzanne is another example of Standing's (2011) description of students forming the core of the new precariat. Despite not coming from a disadvantaged financial background, Suzanne still struggled with her finances, but felt reticent about calling home and asking for financial help, even though she thought her parents would assist her. Along the same lines, when asked if her parents were financially supporting her, Rosa answered:

Rosa: they helped out a bit, yeah. I am really lucky, they could still help me out, if you know what I mean; I am quite fortunate in that sense. I think, it was more like, I didn't ask, as well... I felt a bit bad for asking. And also like, I guess it was also my independence... [...] they could have supported me, and I think if I really needed the money, they would... I think it was more like, I didn't want to admit it, almost.

In spite of Rosa's parents' financial ability to help her, she felt she needed to be financially independent to the extent of not wanting to admit that she was experiencing a dire economic situation. Rosa's and Suzanne's feelings need to be understood within the context of neoliberalism in Britain. Neoliberal rationalities manifest at different scales: macroeconomically, markets are deregulated and 'flexible', but there is also an insistence on individual responsibility and choice (Brady, 2014). Universities also reproduce this neoliberal ideology by placing emphasis on the students' own 'employability' and how to increase it, de facto making students responsible for their own employment success, or lack thereof. Rosa's refusal to admit that she was in need of financial help is in line with this neoliberal script: she felt she needed to be independent and responsible for her own wellbeing, even though she could have potentially obtained help from her parents.

Other participants, however, could not rely on their parents for economic support. Yasmin explained that, although her mother offered some economic help, the amount was not enough to cover her expenses, as the mother was not aware of the cost of living alone in another city:

Yasmin: my mom would send me... but my mom has a very... she doesn't know how much it costs to live, so she would send me £50 and she would say: 'that's enough for a month' and I would say 'no, it can't... it can't even pay for anything else, I still need to travel... afford... life'.

Even if she helped me every then and again, she never... it's never a reliable amount that I could say ok, I have this to try and make up for... because I was living in [city in the north of England] by myself.

Rebecca explained that she felt she could only resort to her family in the case of an emergency situation and needed to be economically independent most of the time, reproducing, again, the idea of students as self-responsible:

Rebecca: if it would be a situation, if I was in... let's say, if I hadn't paid rent and it was overdue and it was... I was going to get evicted, then they would pay the rent. But in a general, day to day, like monthly scale... yeah, no. I am more or less do-it-yourself, I support myself.

Jessica, a woman in her early twenties studying a degree in the Midlands, received some financial help from a distant relative living outside Britain, but none from her close family:

Jessica: mine is such a complex situation. So, I come from a low-income family, but my family in [Asian country] would support us. So, my aunt sends me £300 every three months, but my family here don't support me, they can't.

Since Jessica came from a low-income family, she was entitled to the maximum tuition fee and maintenance loan available. Still, it was not enough money to be able to live and study on her own, and she entered the sex industry when she turned eighteen. Nora, a woman who had sugar dated while pursuing an undergraduate degree, noted that her studies were more expensive than the average because she was training to become a therapist and had to pay for expensive training therapy sessions. Even though she self-identified as middle-class, Nora did not receive financial help from her parents:

Nora: at university, I think you are put under such amount of stress and you... like, pay rent, and bills, and, like I said, in my degree I had to pay for a lot of therapy and... like, my parents didn't give me much but also... I wouldn't... they don't have the means to help me out a lot.

What can be concluded from the testimonies of the participants is that their economic situation while they were pursuing a degree was a key factor that influenced their decision to enter sugar dating. Another minor economic reason to enter the sex industry and sugar dating mentioned by the participants was the speed at which an income can be obtained. This is in line with research conducted by Roberts et al. (2010) among student sex workers, in which the sex industry was perceived as generating 'quick money':

Jessica: [sex work] is something I know I can always return to, and I probably will, 'cause it is easier than... and quicker, than finding a part-time job, so... yeah, like I have applied to, I think, twenty retail or more jobs from August? And I got none back.

While Jessica was combining online sex work with an online relationship with a Sugar Daddy, she expressed her desire to stop working in the sex industry. However, finding a job in retail was proving to be difficult despite her previous experience in the sector. Along the same lines, Nora worked in pubs during her undergraduate studies. Although she had never done any other type of sex work before, she tried sugar dating as she thought it could be a 'quick way of making money'.

Besides some sporadic help, none of the participants had reliable and sustained economic support from their families that allowed them to afford a living during their studies. In the UK, parents tend to feel responsible for contributing to their children's educational expenses. However, those who earn higher salaries are more able to do so, which effectively creates another layer of inequality for students coming from low-income families (West et al., 2015). Some families, such as Rosa's, reported that they could afford to help but chose not to. The reasons why their families decided not to economically support the participants cannot be surmised, but the fact that Rosa wanted to be fully independent in the midst of her dire economic situation can be tied to the neoliberal rationality that is pervasive in the UK. Nevertheless, the independent status of students represents a paradox in the UK: while students are encouraged to acquire a loan to be economically independent from their parents, the amount of money that they can borrow is tied to the income of their family (GovUK, 2021). Students whose parents are less affluent can borrow more, suggesting that the government expects high-income parents to still support their children and make up for the smaller amount that they can borrow. A schism is then created between the student's expectation of being fully independent, and the reliance of the government on parental support. This space leaves students vulnerable to economic distress, especially since they are embedded in a rhetoric that conceives of them as independent. Some of them are clearly resorting to the sex industry and/or to sugar dating in order to cope with this dichotomy, such as Rosa, Nora, or Suzanne.

This constitutes the material reality of the participants that I have interviewed. The same responses were replicated in every interview although, in order to avoid repetition, I have not included extracts from all of these. Additional factors, unrelated to their economic situation, were also mentioned by participants as reasons that favoured their entrance into sugar dating.

VI.I.II. Additional factors

Expectation of fun

Some of the participants interviewed were working, previously or simultaneously to sugar dating, in the sex industry. The causal factors for them were similar to those reported by other researchers who worked with student sex workers. Sagar et al. (2015) conducted research regarding student sex workers and found that they often voiced other reasons for entering the sex industry besides economic struggle; for instance, the expectation of 'fun'. Similar findings have been reported by Bernstein (2007), who argues that entering the sex industry is guided - mostly for middle-class women, whom she calls 'the new petite bourgeoisie' - by a desire for sexual experimentation, or an 'ethic of fun':

In contrast to the old petit-bourgeois values of upwardly mobile asceticism and restraint (which served to distinguish this class from the working class, whose ethos rejects 'pretense' and 'striving'), the new petite bourgeoisie regards fun, pleasure, and freedom as ethical ideals worthy of strenuous pursuit. (Bernstein, 2007: 477)

However, there may be a contradiction between students' expectations of the sex industry, and the actual lived reality. Research conducted by Weinberg, Shaver, and Williams (1999) shows that, compared with male sex workers, female sex workers more often reported a total lack of enjoyment of commercial sex. The study conducted by Sagar et al. (2015) presents a fundamental flaw: it is not segregated by sex so we do not know if women and men answer differently to the expectation of fun. It may be possible that entering the sex industry and/or sugar dating can be affected by an expectation of fun that may not occur, especially for women. Some of the participants I interviewed mentioned an expectation of some kind of enjoyment of the 'sugar' relationship, or at least an antidote for boredom. Suzanne, for example, saw sugar dating as a possibility for entertainment, although she stated that one of the decisive reasons for deciding to try sugar dating was the difficulty of finding a stable job, owing to her constant mobility between two cities:

Suzanne: So, when I decided to do it, I had just finished exams and I was waiting to see like, my exams results. I was in a stage that "I can't get a job here, I can't get a job in [hometown], I can't really do anything but casual work, because I am in between two cities at the moment" and I was like, kind of bored? I mean I am going to be real; I was bored... I just had a rush of adrenaline for like, banging my essays, my music, and I was just kind of sitting at home.

However, sugar dating proved to be a demanding and energy-draining activity, and Suzanne stopped doing it after a few months. Negative experiences with Sugar Daddies, alongside some

unpleasant mental consequences that will be analysed later on, caused Suzanne to refrain from entering into more sugar relationships.

Ruth, a woman living in the north of the United Kingdom, explained in a written interview that although her main motivation to become a Sugar Baby was to earn enough money to cover her rent, she was also driven by other reasons, such as exploring sugar dating as a sexual dynamic. This echoes Bernstein's (2007) findings:

Ruth: As soon as I left uni I started paying my own rent, which they [her family] had done while I was studying. I found that if I was a Sugar Baby to cover rent, I could use my nightclub wages to eat and save up and generally live off [...] but also because that kind of sex work was appealing to me. I had just entered the BDSM community, I had a couple of friends who either were Sugar Babies or were in the past, and it seemed like it could be a lucrative way to basically scam old lonely men out of their money. In my head, I also imagined that it could lead to a few opportunities to travel and make connections [...] I figured this was a path as good as any to explore while I didn't have any concrete responsibilities, plans, or place to live.

Ruth only had a relationship with one Sugar Daddy, as it did not live up to her expectations. She did not travel, make connections, or enjoy the relationship. However, she appreciated the financial freedom that it offered, and added that:

Ruth: However, I did enjoy the thrill of knowing that what I was doing wasn't really accepted in society. I liked exploring that kind of non-conventional relationship, as well as the idea of adopting a kind of alter-ego to win money off people of a class that I generally disagree with the existence of, frankly [...] There's a sense of achievement from using social skills that you usually expend for free (e.g. dating) to get money out of rich people, [while] simultaneously convincing them that the money is an afterthought and that you're genuinely interested in them. In my mind, it's like getting away with a scam, except that the other person is aware of what's going on, and the pretence and illusion is that you're interested in them.

Ruth's description of sugar dating as an activity where you can capitalize on social skills that you tend to employ 'for free' in leisure activities such as dating resonates with Archer's (2019) concept of 'playbour': a combination of play and labour by which the person expects to obtain some type of capital from an activity previously thought of as leisure. 'Playbour' is informed by the neoliberal encouragement of commodifying areas of individuals' lives that were thought to belong to the private sphere of intimate relationships, "effectively eroding boundaries of private and public, care and commerce" (Archer, 2019: 160). In addition, Nancy Fraser has conceptualized the "social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism" (2016: 99) as a 'crisis of care', understanding care in a broad sense to include social relations such as romantic relationships or friendships. Fraser offers 'affective labour' as a synonym, and argues that the current economic system depends on the (re)creation of social bonds as a precondition

for the accumulation of capital. Drawing on classic Marxist theory, Fraser (2016) explains that, since the industrial era, the work of social reproduction is mostly performed by women and is not economically compensated but rather remunerated by 'love' or 'virtue'. Productive work is paid in economic capital and "in this new world, where money became a primary medium of power, its being unpaid sealed the matter: those who do this work are structurally subordinated to those who earn cash wages" (Fraser, 2016: 102).

For Ruth, capitalizing on an activity that she usually did for free, i.e. dating, may feel like both 'playbour' - the capitalization of the private sphere of dating - and also like crossing from the realm of social reproduction to that of productive work, thus 'scamming' those that she is subordinated to: the man earns a salary for his productive work that then flows to her in the form of payment for being a Sugar Baby. Ruth may feel that she is subverting the gendered role of productive versus reproductive worker, and that might satisfy her. Nevertheless, this vision of sugar dating is problematic. The economic capital is still controlled by the Sugar Daddy. Therefore, if it flows from him to the Sugar Baby it is only owing to his willingness, which can change at any moment as there is no legal protection offered to the Sugar Baby to claim unpaid instalments. No subversion of roles is produced in this exchange; rather, they are reinforced, as the Sugar Baby is still left in a vulnerable position where she has no control over the money of her Sugar Daddy - sugar dating is not covered by any labour law. Although obtaining some economic reward from it could potentially relocate sugar dating from the realm of social reproduction to that of productive work, this relocation would only be symbolic. The Sugar Baby would not benefit from the advantages of actually being engaged in productive work (holidays, sick leave, unemployment benefits, etc.); only from obtaining (usually meagre) financial compensation. Sugar dating should be interpreted as akin to receiving a parental allowance, not to accessing paid employment.

Besides the reported sense of achievement, Ruth did not find the arrangement satisfying, and added that she would not have kept it if she had had another option. Her Sugar Daddy was providing her with money for her rent, and she felt she did not have another option at that time but to remain in the relationship.

The only participant who claimed to have a completely positive experience with sugar dating was Patricia. Patricia, however, tried sugar dating with a different objective in mind. Even though she wanted a commodified relationship that would generate an extra income, Patricia

was looking in the figure of the Sugar Daddy for a way of exploring her 'sexual appetite'. In particular, she was seeking a relationship where she would be submissive, and he would be dominant. When asked if her sugar dating experience was positive, she answered:

Patricia: yeah, he taught me a lot [...] he was the first person to crack me open, in terms of helping me understand what really turns me on. I have a great respect for that, because if that hadn't happened, I still will be... I don't know! You know what I mean?

Patricia was also obtaining economic compensation after every encounter with her Sugar Daddy. Eventually, she moved out of the city where she was studying and terminated the agreement. For her, the most important aspect of the relationship was that it offered an avenue for exploring her desire for a dominant sexual partner. The money was perceived as a bonus, but not the main reason behind the relationship.

Overall, the Sugar Babies interviewed here do not tend to experience 'fun' when meeting Sugar Daddies (except Patricia), but rather expressed feelings of boredom. Others, such as Ruth, recall the experience in a very negative light. However, the expectation of fun, even if it was not met, can be considered a factor that impacted the decision of some participants to engage in a commodified relationship. Another factor which was repeatedly reported was an unsatisfactory dating life.

Unsatisfactory (heterosexual) dating life

Many participants applied a cost-benefit logic to their intimate, noncommodified relationships with men. Rosa and Suzanne complained about their unsuccessful dating experience with men despite the amount of work they invested in it; they felt all that effort went, ultimately, unrewarded:

Rosa: the reason I kind of went into Sugar Daddies and sex work was because I was like, dating... I've been a serial dater at uni, so I've dated quite a few people and I got no one, I've been in so many shit dates, I had sex with so many different people, and I was like, 'why am I at least not being paid for it'? [...] I am doing the work, and you know, I am doing the emotional labour and I am not getting anything from it? So, like... why don't I just get something from it. So that's why I started... in uni, it just made sense. Also, I needed money and it was like, for me, something that I was quite good at, like chatting and... you know, getting along with people.

Suzanne shared a similar opinion:

Suzanne: so... obviously, I had been dating, exploring dating guys... and I just realized that it was very... underwhelming, I don't know... just, lacking? So, I was like, hey, if I am going to do this, I may as well get money from it. Like, I am seeing these guys, I am going and spending all this money and looking nice, so it'd be helpful to have somebody who was helping me to do that and like, go on adventures with...

Bauman (2003), drawing on Giddens' (1992) description of a 'pure relationship'⁴³, argues in *Liquid Love* that contemporary relationships (romantic and non-romantic) are constructed within a logic of cost/benefit: the relationship is formed based on what a person can obtain from the other, and continues as long as it delivers enough satisfaction for each of the parties. Because each individual can terminate the relationship at any point, Bauman (2003) argues, each person avoids feeling dependent on the other as there is no security that the relationship will continue. Ruth and Suzanne reproduce this logic, as they both desired an additional benefit from the relationship, i.e. money, when they felt that their non-commodified dating life was not satisfactory.

Rosa's and Suzanne's motivations may also be interpreted within the framework of postfeminism: they can be conceived as 'sexual entrepreneurs'. As Harvey and Gill argue, "this 'new femininity' [sexual entrepreneurship] constitutes a hybrid of discourses of sexual freedom for women, *intimately entangled with* attempts to recuperate this (male-dominated) consumer capitalism" (2011: 52, emphasis original). Indeed, for Rosa and Suzanne, sugar dating can be an exercise of freedom, but within a constrained scenario characterized by a lack of economic means in a male-dominated consumer capitalism. In the 'sugar' relationships my participants engaged in, the economic means still comes from the male party, and it is young women who are encouraged to commodify their bodies. McRobbie (2007) has argued that postfeminist ideologies target mainly young women due to both their greater body capital, and the increased risk of experiencing financial insecurity if compared with mature women.

For Rosa and Suzanne, engaging in expensive beautifying rituals is understood as an investment that is hard to justify if dating is not satisfactory, especially against a background

⁴³ Giddens (1992) states that, while the durability of marriage was previously taken for granted, now any relationship can be terminated at any point by either partner. Commitment is necessary for a relationship to work, yet commitment now resembles a trap to be avoided. Admittedly, Giddens maintains a romanticised vision of marriage: marriages lasted not only because of 'commitment' but because divorce was illegal, and wives were subjugated to their husbands, often amidst economic, emotional, and physical violence. Nevertheless, I believe that Giddens' description of a 'pure relationship' accurately reflects contemporary fears about vulnerability and describes the 'liquid' nature of *some* romantic relationships.

of economic insecurity. Sugar dating may offer the possibility of capitalising on the beautifying labour that they were already performing. It is important to understand that postfeminist sexualities operate within the framework of compulsory heterosexuality precisely because it is men who own the majority of global economic capital. Although Ruth and Suzanne defined their sexual orientation as queer; Rosa, Jessica, and Patricia as bisexual; Nora as pansexual; and Elisa as lesbian - only Yasmin and Rebecca identified as heterosexual, while Melanie answered that she did not need to label her sexuality - all of them had engaged in 'sugar' relationships with men, despite several stating that, outside the realm of sugar dating, they usually date women. It seems that, when dating is economically motivated, dating heterosexual men is more productive than dating women. Suzanne articulated this idea:

Suzanne: women, because of the pay gap, because of how hard it is to get a well-paid job, they hold onto their money a lot more than men do. Obviously dating women... I would have preferred to meet women but...

Elisa articulated a similar response when I asked what motivated her decision to engage in a sugar relationship with men despite self-identifying as a lesbian:

Elisa: I don't come across as openly gay and I don't know... men just... I find them... historically, men have hit on me more than women do, so I kind of thought well... let's exploit that [laughs] [...] And I do genuinely enjoy just meeting new people and chatting to them and just, spending time with them and things like that, so... that's kind of a part of it, I suppose. But the other part of it is that I like pretty shiny things and if they want to buy them for me, I am not going to say no!

Different levels of agency are reflected in the words of the participants. While Rebecca, who struggled to buy groceries, or Ruth, who depended on the money of her Sugar Daddy to pay her rent, reported feeling that there was no other option but to date their Sugar Daddies, Elisa's remarks emit a different message. The difference lies in their accumulated economic capital: Elisa worked full-time and lived with her fiancée, who also worked full-time. Elisa also stated that she had had previous sexual experiences with men, but that she never enjoyed them. Her statement can be interpreted as a postfeminist strategy that intersects with gendered scripts about the nature of heterosexual relationships, as well as with heterosexuality as a political institution. Despite the fact that Elisa's own sexual desire is exclusively focused on women, the hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality as a political system (Rich, 1986) is powerful enough to open the possibility for her to date heterosexual men.

At the moment of the interview, Elisa was about to depart on a weekend trip with her Sugar Daddy, which constituted the first time that they were going to spend a weekend together. In

spite of not having explicitly discussed sex, it was mutually understood that sexual intercourse was due to happen during the weekend. Elisa accepted it as part of the nature of a sugar relationship:

Elisa: if I had met him at any other point without SeekingArrangement, I actually think we could have gotten along as friends, which is really bizarre... [...] he is just lovely to chat to... But yeah, there's that kind of undertone that he wants sex, and this is... that's kind of what he wants or expects for these couple of days.

As part of the agreement, she also had certain expectations regarding his behaviour. For example, she envisaged that all the weekend's expenses were going to be covered by him:

Elisa: if you sign for a site like that [Seeking.com], as a man, there's kind of unspoken expectations... you can't be surprised, you know, if you are expected to pay for everything, if you signed up for that.

The discursive construction of the 'sugar' dynamic depicted on the website and the respective behaviour of the Sugar Daddy and the Sugar Baby permeates the actual relationships: the Sugar Daddy is expected to take care of all the expenses, and the Sugar Baby will have sex with him. Although I will develop this argument further later in this chapter, it can be posited that sugar relationships develop within the framework of hegemonic heterosexuality (Gavey, 1992). One example is the subordination of Elisa's sexual desires to those of the Sugar Daddy: despite her lack of interest in heterosexual sex, she had accepted the fact that the relationship would include sex because he desired it to.

The behaviour of Elisa, Suzanne, and Rosa can be understood as postfeminist monetization of heterosexual relationships, partly motivated by previous experience of an unsatisfactory dating life. However, this strategy occurs within two frameworks: gendered economic inequalities, and compulsory heterosexuality that subordinates women, and their desires, to men (Dworkin, 1996; Rich 1980). Heterosexuality here does not work as a marker of sexual preference. Suzanne and Elisa, who usually only date women, chose to sugar date with men. This responds to the hegemony of heterosexuality as a social order: even lesbian women will, under the right circumstances – e.g. lack of economic capital - consider dating or sleeping with men. Heterosexuality is compulsory

in the same sense that wage labor, as Marx argued, is compulsory under capitalism: The legally free laborer has no choice but to exchange his or her labour power for a wage. Similarly, under conditions of compulsory heterosexuality, the social machinery of punishment and regulation is

mobilized to enforce a social order based on gender binary, male dominance, and heterosexuality. (Seidman, 2009: 20)

Seidman's metaphor works in the context of sugar dating in two different ways: the woman decides to sell her femininity as a commodity, but that femininity cannot be understood outside heterosexuality. It is not merely their femininity but their performed *heterosexual femininity* which can be sold as a commodity. The sexual orientation of the Sugar Baby becomes irrelevant in the sugar market as this market operates within the context of heterosexuality.

An example of the pervasiveness of women's desires constructed within a heteronormative framework is another common reason provided by the participants to enter a 'sugar' relationship: the pleasure derived from being desired by a heterosexual man.

Lack of self-esteem

Another crucial factor in entering sugar dating mentioned by some of the participants, and which ties into the previously mentioned hegemonic character of heterosexuality, was the reported satisfaction of being sexually desired by men, which in some cases improved the women's self-esteem. This was the case for Jessica, who tried sugar dating when she turned eighteen, but after one unsuccessful attempt, moved to online blogging. Although this decision was economically motivated, she also mentioned problems with self-esteem and the opening of her porn blog as a coping mechanism:

Jessica: I got into other sex work like a year later, doing a porn blog... and I started making my own porn videos, because my friend was doing it, and I was only doing it part time. My main reason was... for like, probably confidence issues and just to get an extra money from it [...] But it's nice because I started off doing it because I was self-conscious of my body, I felt like I had the body of a child almost, like... as I grew up and grew up... like, at first, I wasn't making any money, I was just making it for my blog, and just feeling like... people were like 'oh you look amazing' and I was like 'oh that's good'.

Along the same lines, Suzanne articulated how sugar dating made her feel that her beauty had exchange value. In non-commercial dating, she complained, she was not obtaining anything valuable from it:

Suzanne: I am gonna be real, as much as it [sugar dating] can make you think 'oh my gosh, I am being self-conscious', it also makes you feel like you are the prettiest person in the entire world. You got men constantly messaging you, trying to set up a date with you, like... they want to take you out to eat, like... you can see the effect that you have on somebody, especially when you can see it on your [bank] account the effect that you have on somebody, it just gives you the kind of

confidence and you are like... wow! I am that person, like I can get guys to do whatever I want. And then, put that in the real world, and they think you are being crazy, because it's like... in the sugar world I am just being paid for? like... if they [men] are not going to emotionally support me, at least I am getting something. And in the real world it's like... well, guys are not actually interesting; they don't have anything to say.

Although feeling sexually desirable can provide true satisfaction, it cannot be analysed separately from women's pervasive sexual objectification in contemporary Western societies. Sandra Bartky (1990), drawing on existentialist philosophy as well as psychoanalysis, has argued that women's narcissistic delights⁴⁴ can be explained by their systematic experience of sexual objectification. Women live in patriarchal societies where they are subjected to sexual objectification by men from childhood. Therefore, they eventually internalize the gaze of 'the Other' – men - and learn to see themselves as an object, valued by the aesthetic pleasure they can produce. According to Simone de Beauvoir, this process begins in early adolescence when the young girl "becomes an object and she sees herself as an object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist outside" (Beauvoir, 1961: 316).

In the same manner, Suzanne obtains pleasure, and is almost surprised - 'wow!' - by her ability to actually capitalize on her beauty, while Jessica reaffirms her own sexual desirability through the comments of those who view her erotic blog. However, Bartky (1990) warns about this obtained pleasure: she explains that women do not really enjoy how they naturally look, but the curated and highly stylised performance of femininity that has resulted from previously engaging in beautifying labour. What she calls the fashion-beauty complex - the conglomerate of companies, media outlets, etc. that set the parameters of what is considered beautiful and attractive in a particular time and geographical location - conceptualizes the body as "a task, an object in need of transformation" (Bartky, 1990: 41). The body, in order to become an object that women can capitalize on, has to first become docile and plastic to conform to patriarchal notions of beauty that will grant it its value. Sugar Babies first need to invest in their bodies in order to create erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) that will eventually return profit. Without previous investment and beautifying labour, the Sugar Baby will not profit from her beauty as effectively. Aspiring to heteronormative beauty standards, however, may have detrimental

⁴⁴ Narcissism is understood as a neutral term to define an erotic disposition towards one's own body (Bartky, 1990).

consequences for women's mental health, such as body dysmorphia or eating disorders (Wolf, 1991); and, especially for Black women, self-hatred (Bryant, 2019).

Imogen Tyler (2005) has argued that, inasmuch as we live in a society saturated with images of female beauty, the sexual self-objectification of women needs to be understood as an internalization of heteronormative power relations. Far from patronizing women who engage in beauty routines, Tyler argues that “[t]his explains why women can be acutely conscious of the negative effects upon their self-esteem of cultural ideas of femininity but nevertheless feel compelled to approximate those ideals in order to assuage the anxiety of failure” (2005: 30). Suzanne, for example, articulated the ambivalence of enjoying being sexually desired by her Sugar Daddies while simultaneously feeling dehumanised by being reduced to her beauty:

Suzanne: as a woman, you can be there [with the Sugar Daddy] like, ‘I am the most beautiful creature ever’ and... ‘look at all this money that shows that my beauty is worth something’. That’s very dangerous, to have that concept as a woman... [...] if you are around men, that only facilitates that you... like, the only thing that they care to hear about you is your beauty, and the way that you look, so you are conditioned to present that as the highlight of who you are...

While some participants, such as Jessica or Suzanne, expressed a brief boost in self-esteem and self-worth when they first entered sugar dating and/or other types of sex work, in the long run the participants articulated a series of mental health problems they experienced due to the dehumanizing reduction of their selves to their sexuality and/or their beauty. The mental health consequences of sugar dating for the participants interviewed in this work, however, are vast and cannot be reduced only to the effects of beauty labour. This topic will be analysed in the next chapter. Nevertheless, self-esteem problems may be a relevant factor for entering into sugar dating, or remaining in it.

Sugar dating, as I argue in the next section, involves an extensive amount of body management and beautifying labour that often results in the alienation of the Sugar Baby from her own body, as well as her own sexuality. In order to be a successful Sugar Baby, the accumulation of other types of capital beyond erotic is a precondition to capitalize on a ‘sugar’ relationship. The different types of capital and fields that a Sugar Baby needs to navigate to succeed in a ‘sugar’ relationship will be analysed in the next section.

VI.II. Sugar Dating as a field: Erotic and cultural capitals

VI.III.I. Erotic capital

Erotic capital can be defined as the combined sexual, social, visual and aesthetic attractiveness to other members of the same social group, especially members of the opposite sex (Hakim, 2010). As with any other type of capital, an investment in erotic capital has the aim of ultimately converting it into some kind of economic capital. Since part of the economic success of the Sugar Baby derives from her ability to attract a Sugar Daddy, it is in the interest of the Sugar Baby to accumulate as much erotic capital as possible. The investment in different types of capital (e.g. social and cultural) holds the promise of a future income, but does not guarantee it. Beauty labour, generally a precondition for erotic capital, can be considered a type of aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016) since it may potentially lead to the acquisition of economic capital. As has been argued in the previous chapter, Sugar Babies need to navigate a complex field of affective relations where they need to look aesthetically and erotically pleasing to their Sugar Daddy, while simultaneously being ‘classy’ and ‘tasteful’. This often involves a considerable amount of beauty labour. Rosa exemplifies this idea:

Rosa: you have to take care of your body more [...] I go to the gym, I mean... I think in my day-to-day life, I'm not like a 'beautifying person'. Like, I don't wear makeup, I don't really shave, I don't do my hair... so when I was going out to meet someone for sex work or sugar dating, I would shave, moisturize, do my face properly like, full on, my eyebrows, my hair... get really dressed up, all really nice. They want you to dress quite posh. That's another thing, they really like the fact that you spoke quite posh.

Rosa's aesthetic labour can be analysed through the optic of neoliberal governmentality, which creates a subject who “focus[es] on body management, discipline and self-surveillance under the guise of fashion, fitness and beauty regimes” (Genz & Brabon, 2018: 9). However, Rosa explains that outside the realm of sugar dating or sex work, she does not normally engage in these practices. This suggests that these beautifying routines are not ingrained in the subject but rather consciously performed in order to convert them into economic capital. Cressida Heyes (2006, emphasis added) has theorised that women may feel *empowered* by engaging in self-monitoring practices such as exercising in order to control one's own weight, and that this should not necessarily be considered a manifestation of Foucault's ‘docile bodies’ (1979) but rather a conscious, agentic choice. Rosa consciously chose to maximize her possibilities for capitalizing from her own beauty, and therefore first engaged in the necessary beautifying practices. However, empowerment is absent from Rosa's words. Even though she may feel

empowered by the economic gains, Rosa does not feel empowered by the beauty routine as she does not engage with it in her day-to-day life. Nor does Rosa express narcissistic delights. Rather, beauty labour is described as neutral, neither empowering nor especially disempowering, but as an accepted precondition for sugar dating. McRobbie has argued that women are interpellated by neoliberal governmentality and encouraged to perform a highly stylised femininity that “re-stabilises gender relations and the heterosexual matrix as defined by Butler [...] it operates with a double movement, its voluntaristic structure works to conceal that patriarchy is still in place” (2007: 726). Here, beauty labour is presented as ‘voluntary’: Rosa is not coerced by the Sugar Daddy to perform it, but rather she understands it as an unquestioned precondition to dating. This labour is aimed at increasing her sexual attractiveness based on what Sugar Daddies want, hence Rosa’s emphasis on what they like – a ‘posh’ accent, for example – and not what she wants. The voluntariness of the beauty labour is therefore fragile: “you *have* to take care of your body more”. The hegemony of patriarchal notions of beauty and (hetero)sexual desirability is still intact and accompanied by a strong emphasis on class, as in the desirability of the ‘posh’ accent which signifies that Rosa belongs to the middle-class.

Suzanne articulates how contemporary ideas of beauty are entangled with other cultural identity markers such as race. After explaining that she was very mindful of the fact that she was sugaring as a black woman in the United Kingdom, Suzanne was asked if she felt she had to conform to social beauty standards:

Suzanne: oh, a thousand percent. So, I usually wear a hair wrap but... I wouldn’t wear my natural hair; I always wear longer hair. So, not straight but I always have a weave because they like the fact that I am a Black woman, otherwise I would go for lighter, but they like that about me. But they still want that kind of goddess kind of look? So, I would have more like, a bigger hair, longer hair, but more feminine than what I actually... like I wouldn’t wear trainers and stuff, I would wear high heels. So, I did have to make myself more feminine [...] soft, gentle, giggling, silly... [...] not too smart, not too adamant [...] to me, it’s like... Ok... I come here, I play a role, I get paid and I go home.

Again, as with Rosa, we see a different aesthetic behaviour in sugar dating from day-to-day life. When she wished to act as a Sugar Baby, Suzanne had to engage in beautifying practices to alter her image and adapt it to the desires of her Sugar Daddies – ‘they still want that kind of goddess kind of look’. Bartky has argued that women, when forced to adapt to the new beauty standard that the beauty complex commands, may feel split between two selves:

What occurs is not just the splitting of a person into mind and body but the splitting of the self into a number of personae, some who witness and some who are witnessed [...] Woman has lost control of the production of her own image, lost control to those whose production of these images is neither innocent nor benevolent, but obedient to imperatives which are both capitalist and phallogentric. (1990: 43)

While I do not necessarily believe that women have lost control over their image - after all, both Rosa and Suzanne decided not to engage with this labour in their everyday lives - there is obedience in conforming to a series of patriarchal and racist beauty standards in order to capitalize from one's own beauty. There is a part of the self that actively chooses to engage in beauty routines and/or in body management practices. Elisa, for example, stated that she dieted 'a lot' in order to keep a low body weight, which suggests an interiorization of (unhealthy) beauty standards. Jessica, for example, despite stating that she feels lucky with the body she has, articulated the pressure that she felt to look 'sexy':

Jessica: I am very stereotypically the petite Asian girl [...] which actually they like, but yeah, for other people that actually like makeup, I have to make a porn face and that's part... you know, that takes a good hour to do [...] I do complete makeup just to make myself look prettier and just more sexy [*sic*]. Nobody wants you getting out of bed in the morning like... you know [laugh]. So there's definitely pressure, I always kind of feel conscious of my body.

She added concerns about how her body looked on the videos and pictures that she sent her Sugar Daddy. While she did not report complaints from her clients/Sugar Daddy, Jessica scrutinized her own body in these videos and applied self-disciplinary techniques to eliminate what she did not like; in this case, tummy rolls. Women, as individuals affected by a neoliberal mentality of self-improvement, as well as patriarchal notions of beauty, often direct towards themselves what Foucault denominates an "inspecting gaze [...]" each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against [her]self" (Foucault, 1979: 27):

Jessica: there was a time last year, at the end of uni, I had put on a bit of weight and doing videos became a bit harder because there were certain angles that you could see tummy rolls or... I wasn't feeling as attractive [...] I just cut down on portion sizes and everything because I was seeing some things I didn't like in the videos... especially so many angles and stuff, you are just like 'ugh'...

Jessica enunciates a dissatisfaction with the way she looks in certain videos and pictures which may also be a common experience among women who do not sugar date. However, self-objectification can be exacerbated by sugar dating because the Sugar Baby's income depends on her beauty. Hence the participants paid more attention to their image when they sugar dated than when they lived their 'normal life'.

Nevertheless, some of the participants' testimonies, such as Suzanne's comments that she needed to make herself more 'feminine' or Rosa's remarks about how her clients/Sugar Daddies wanted her to speak 'posh', show that a Sugar Baby needs to be *more* than just conventionally beautiful and attractive. What is implicitly required by the Sugar Daddies is a gendered performance of 'middle-classness', which not only involves a disciplined body but a complete management of one's own behaviour, from beautifying practices to the Sugar Baby's accent. This requirement, as I will argue in the next section, serves as a way of placating the Sugar Daddies' conscience regarding the potential sexual exploitation of the Sugar Baby.

VI.II.II. The racial politics of middle-classness

Sugar Babies are encouraged by the Sugar Daddies - sometimes indirectly, with positive reinforcement - to perform gendered middle-classness. This performance serves the same purpose in the 'sugar' relationships as it does on Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com. These websites emphasize the fact that the Sugar Baby (supposedly) uses the money obtained through the commodified relationship to invest in her own education, as opposed to basic items such as food. In this sense, the economic capital is not an aim in itself but rather has to be converted into cultural capital in the form of a university degree. This highlights the fact that the Sugar Baby is, according to these websites, not a member of the working class and therefore, susceptible to exploitation by the Sugar Daddies, but rather a middle-class young woman who wishes to capitalize on a relationship in order to advance in her studies.

Rosa's comment about how her outfit choices needed to reflect a certain social class, reinforced by her own accent - 'They want you to dress quite posh. That's another thing, they really like the fact that you spoke quite posh' - is nothing more than a proof the Sugar Daddy requires of the Sugar Baby to legitimate her 'middle-classness':

It is no accident that, to designate the legitimate manners or taste, ordinary language is content to say 'manners' or 'taste', 'in the absolute sense', as grammarians say. The properties attached to the dominant - Paris or Oxford 'accents', bourgeois 'distinction' etc. - have the power to discourage the intention of discerning what they are 'in reality', in and for themselves, and the distinctive value they derive from unconscious reference to their class distribution. (Bourdieu, 1984: 92)

The 'posh' accent may indicate that Rosa was, indeed, brought up in a middle-class realm - and Rosa herself identified as middle-class. However, as I have already argued, being middle-

class, similarly to possessing an undergraduate or even a graduate degree, no longer guarantees access to sufficient economical capital to avoid experiencing economic precarity and/or distress (Standing, 2011).

Suzanne's former remarks about how she needed to behave in a more 'feminine' manner highlight that sugar dating requires an exacerbation of a gendered performance of class. In the case of Suzanne, however, other factors, such as race, may play a role. While Rosa's ethnicity is white British, Suzanne identified as Caribbean Black British. None of the white research participants mentioned the fact that they were white, while all the black participants did⁴⁵. Here it can be inferred that, like any other member of a Western European society, the white participants too reproduced the idea that whiteness is assumed as the 'norm' and therefore need not be mentioned, while blackness has to be registered in speech (Deliovsky, 2008). The black participants understood sugar dating as affected by race, while this was not the case for the white participants or for Jessica (White Asian).

Suzanne's idea of having to 'make herself more feminine' - 'So, I did have to make myself more feminine [...] soft, gentle, giggling, silly... [...] not too smart, not too adamant' - during her dates with Sugar Daddies is an example of the hegemonic construction of femininity and its nexus with whiteness. Susan Bordo (2003), paraphrasing Beauvoir, argues that one is born female, but one needs to achieve femininity. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) adds that femininity is hierarchised, with white, blonde, Anglo women at the top while black women are relegated to the bottom. However, femininity goes beyond the physical features of a woman, as women "also learn that feminine beauty has less to do with physical perfection and more to do with behaviour and decorum in service of white masculinity" (Deliovsky, 2008: 57). Hence Suzanne's emphasis not only on aesthetics, but also on monitoring her behaviour to make it 'softer, gentler' and therefore, more feminine.

Sugar dating, like any other social phenomenon, is affected by the racialised politics of beauty. However, for black women, other parameters such as nationality also matter. Racist ideas, deeply rooted in colonization, still apply. Suzanne was fully aware of this and aptly articulated her thoughts:

⁴⁵ Although Jessica mentioned that she is biracial (Asian and white).

Suzanne: me being a Caribbean Black woman is different from being an African Black woman [...] Because an African Black woman... Nigerian men probably don't want to meet me because there's more risk that I know somebody they know, or that our families are related. Caribbean, especially Jamaican women, are seeing as more sexual, again... colonization, more sexual, more free, more promiscuous, more likely to do things that other women won't do, so then... that's a bonus.

At the same time, she was aware of the stereotypes associated with Caribbean women, and of the possibility of her profiting from them: 'that's a bonus', she says. Suzanne also recalled that, in order to profit most from sugar dating, she needed to conform to white European standards of beauty as much as she could. When asked what would be at the top of the beauty hierarchy in sugar dating, she referred to blonde hair, blue eyes, and white skin. Then, she added:

Suzanne: just like, in everyday life, because it [sugar dating] still has the Eurocentric view of beauty. But for me to get the most of me, if I had straight hair, took off my glasses and wore contacts, had like, makeup, put lashes... that's how I would make the most money [...] I would make a lot more if I showed my cleavage more, but not too much because you don't want to look like a prostitute. You need the balance of it.

The idea that she needed to be 'classy' is, again, an example of how middle-class notions of taste (Bourdieu, 1984) play a role in sugar dating; as well as how there is a difficult balance to be achieved between investing in erotic capital while not 'looking like a prostitute'. As argued in the previous chapter, the discourse employed on Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com sought to distance the dynamic from the sex industry. Here, the same idea is repeated by Suzanne. However, other participants considered sugar dating as part of the sex industry and may hold other views on what 'looking like a prostitute' means. Nevertheless, research suggests that men who frequent brothels tend to view women in prostitution as 'dirty' or 'inferior' (Tyler & Jovanovski, 2018). Choosing not to adopt an aesthetic that may resemble women in prostitution could be understood as a protective measure by Suzanne in order to avoid potential stigmatization by the Sugar Daddies, as well as by society.

Suzanne and Yasmin, as black women, had different views on who to date during their sugar dating experience. Suzanne's decision not to date white men, for example, is based on a conscious political reasoning:

Suzanne: because men don't really value women as it is, and to have that blackness on top of it... over the white male... I think that that's too much not caring. Guys think that you are way more sexual [...] and it's like, I don't want to be in a situation where you are actually pushing me to this thing even though I say no, so... yeah, no. And I may seem overly cautious, but just from my experience in everyday life with men anyway, I know that I need to think like that. If I was getting like, white guys in their fifties, asking me if I would like to meet with them, and I know

that they have way more money, and also are more free [*sic*] with their money when it comes to, like, sugaring? They want to do it properly, so I could be making like a lot of money, but I didn't want to leave like, completely destroyed [laughs] I don't want to do this and feel like my whole sense of self and principles were completely gone... I have no issues with sex work, I'm just like... it's an exchange of goods. I have no issues with that, but my principles and morals are not put to sale.

Yasmin, on the other hand, stated exactly the opposite: that black men often treated her in an overtly sexual way, and she found them unreliable. Regarding white men, she disclosed that "white men tend to fetishize me, in a way that came with some sort of idolization so... like, weirdly, it weirdly made the power dynamic as such that I thought I had more power in those relationships". Both Suzanne and Yasmin describe the same phenomenon: Yasmin states that she is fetishized by white men whereas Suzanne notes that she will be treated by them in an overtly sexual way to the extent that she fears being sexually 'pushed' by them. As Mireille Miller-Young argues, "seen as particularly sexual, black women continue to be fetishized as the very embodiment of excessive or non-normative sexuality" (2014: 4). However, the participants can also exploit this stereotype for their own gain; for example, Suzanne remarked in the previous section that she went for the 'goddess kind of look' because this is what her Sugar Daddies wanted. She thus makes a rational, entrepreneurial decision based on this fetishization. This can also be interpreted as a performance of black femininity and sexuality, and "[g]iven the brutal history of sexual expropriation and objectification of black bodies, these attempts by black women to reappropriate a sexualised image can be seen as a bid to reshape the terms assigned to black womanhood" (Miller-Young, 2014: 5).

What is clear is that gender, class, and race intersect in the lives of the black Sugar Babies in a different manner to how they operate in the lives of the white, or even Asian, women interviewed. However, all of the participants were held to the same standard of 'middle-classness', even if for black Sugar Babies this entailed assimilation into white standards of femininity. Suzanne and Yasmin were both aware of the racist, sexual stereotypes that describe black women as more sexual than men, despite embracing opposite behaviour. Although it is beyond the scope of this work, Suzanne's views on interracial relationships seem to be more widespread, with black women - at least in the US - often expressing negative attitudes towards dating white men (Chito Childs, 2005).

The performance of middle-classness is attractive to the Sugar Daddies because it gives the impression that the Sugar Daddy/sex client is engaging in what has been called 'ethical consumption' of prostitution (Tyler & Jovanovski, 2018). In the words of Rosa:

Rosa: that idea of ethical consumption of sex workers that are students and they just need a little bit of extra cash... like, you know. You are not trafficked; you are not being abused. You are middle-class, smart, young women who just want a nice handbag. I guess it is like, if you have a posh accent, it means that you are not being abused, so I am doing good, right? And to be fair, yeah, I did choose to do it [...] and to be honest I used to save for like, holidays and stuff like that but... it was mostly boring, day to day stuff. They really didn't want to know that; they didn't want to think that.

The figure of the 'ethical consumer' has gained momentum in mainstream discourses. Meagan Tyler and Natalie Jovanovski (2018) define the ethical consumer as concerned with the consequences that a particular purchase choice has on the world, for example in terms of pollution or sustainable development, but also in terms of how that particular commodity has been produced - with slave labour, for instance. This narrative is increasingly applied to the sex industry. Janice Raymond (2013) has argued that framing the consumption of prostitution as 'ethical consumption' obscures the pervasive sexual and economic inequalities at the foundations of this industry. She is sceptical of the idea that 'unethical' prostitution actually constitutes a problem for punters (Raymond, 2013). Indeed, Coy, Horvath, and Kelly (2007) found that male sex buyers in London were not dissuaded by the possibility of women being trafficked. This is in line with Rosa's remarks about Sugar Daddies not being genuinely interested in her material reality but rather choosing to think that she needed the money for superfluous items. However, one cannot assume that this is the motivation for the Sugar Daddies, as they have not been interviewed in this work. Rather, the lack of genuine interest needs to be interpreted as the impression obtained by Rosa through her experiences with her Sugar Daddies/clients. Nevertheless, this feeling is also reported by Rebecca, who explained her frustration with the long list of requirements expected of the Sugar Baby, when ultimately, she felt that sex was the Sugar Daddies' only real desire:

Rebecca: men are just, actually, a different species because... you have to be a certain... they are weird, because they say: certain age, certain look, and the way you talk, and all of those things, it all comes into it. But at the end of the day, what they want to do is sleep with me. So, none of that actually matters because you are going to do it anyways... regardless of your criteria or what you say, if that makes sense?

The interviewed participants expressed feelings of pressure and anxieties that correlate with the discursive production of the 'Sugar Baby' as a subject position analysed in the previous

chapter. Sugar Babies felt the need to be heteronormatively beautiful, sexy, and attractive, often in a way that implied an assimilation to racist standards of beauty. In order to invest in their erotic capital, body management and self-surveillance techniques such as dieting, beautifying practices, and/or exercise often had to be employed. Simultaneously, Sugar Babies needed to perform 'middle-classness' through their speech, accent, manners, and body gestures. Sugar dating, therefore, requires a vast investment of labour from the Sugar Babies that has no immediate or even stable reward.

The entrance of young women into sugar dating is affected by a multiplicity of factors, though lack of economic capital is the crucial one - in the form of insufficient loans, lack of parental economic support, or underpaid jobs. Less relevant factors also played a role, such as the expectation of enjoyment, low self-esteem, or an unsatisfactory dating life. The relationships that my participants maintained with their Sugar Daddies developed in a substrate of economic distress, although there were some differences in the level of economic vulnerability that they were experiencing. This created a profound power imbalance that was voiced by the Sugar Babies. A deep analysis of their relationships with their respective Sugar Daddies has revealed that sugar relationships are deeply problematic, and that several patterns tend to repeat themselves. The complex dynamics in these relationships are analysed in the next chapter.

Chapter VII: Blurred Lines: Lived Experiences of Sugar Dating

This chapter argues that the discursive frameworks at play on Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com operate through a technology of coercion that impairs the ability of the Sugar Babies to consent. In many cases, the participants experienced situations of liminal consent and, in the case of Rebecca, sexual abuse, as defined in UK law. Informed by the economic vulnerability of the Sugar Babies, the discursive operation of sugaring facilitates, yet obscures, abuse as constitutive of the sugar relationships. This power imbalance is purposely exploited by the Sugar Daddies, who often transgress the boundaries that the Sugar Babies have tried to establish. These boundaries not only refer to lines of sexual consent but also concern the emotional exploitation of the Sugar Babies.

VII.I. Sugar dating: the mainstreaming of the sex industry

The relationships with Sugar Daddies, as described by the participants, ordinarily started by messaging each other through Seeking.com. There were a few exceptions: the participants who, prior to sugar dating, had done any other type of sex work - escorting, cam work, etc. - occasionally started a 'sugar' relationship with a regular client, as in the case of Jessica. This difference affected their description of sugar dating, as those who had worked in the sex industry tended to define sugar dating as sex work and themselves as sex workers, whereas those who had never participated in the sex industry tended to interpret sugar dating as a different form of dating. The exceptions are Melanie and Ruth, who considered sugar dating part of the sex industry but did not self-identify as sex workers.

Rosa, for example, was unable to find a Sugar Daddy through Seeking.com, and while she did not delete her profile on this site, she soon moved to Adultwork.com. In Adultwork.com, sex workers create a public profile where clients can rate them and write a review of their services. Once Rosa started having regular clients, she proposed a 'sugar' relationship, inspired by what she had learnt from sugaring on Seeking.com. Although for Rosa sugar dating and escorting belong to the sex industry (and she described herself as a sex worker), she found some differences between the two activities:

Rosa: to be honest, I think they are kind of the same [...] I mean, they are similar, it's kind of hard... I think with sex work, it's kind of like, something that it's more defined, almost? Whereas sugar dating... I think there's more of like, emotional labour, an emotional contract, which is

harder to define. I think, that's kind of where the difference lies for me. I think sugar dating... you don't have as much power in the dynamic.

Jessica started in the sex industry by creating a blog post and later moved to an adult content website called Manyvids.com. When she decided to look for a Sugar Daddy, she registered on Seeking.com, but her search for a Sugar Daddy was unsuccessful. Later she tried another strategy: she downloaded the dating app Tinder, selected older men as her target population, and wrote in her biography that she was looking for 'an arrangement'. Jessica explained that the word 'arrangement' is critical, because 'people sort of catch on', and understood that she wanted a transactional relationship. The vocabulary used by Seeking.com, which, until 2019, was called 'SeekingArrangement', has clearly permeated the mainstream and is used to define commodified relationships.

When Jessica was eighteen, she met one man through Tinder but she did not feel comfortable and the relationship did not prosper. She met her second Sugar Daddy through her porn blog. After he became a regular client, acquiring porn videos and pictures from her, they eventually agreed to exchange a fixed number of videos and pictures, as well as some erotic conversations through instant messaging apps, for a fixed amount of money per month. At the time of the interview, the relationship had already ended but they were still sporadically in contact. While Jessica considered herself a sex worker, she described the relationship with this particular client as sugaring:

Jessica: we are a lot closer, we definitely talk a lot and... there was a moment even when... so he was married but it was an unhappy marriage and... even I was... like, I was supporting him emotionally through that [...] So we talk a lot, even though is not on chat anymore, we do email a lot and I guess it's like... it's the companionship, maybe? So yeah... [...] for example, when I sell to another person, that's just one transaction, we don't really talk about each other's lives, but I know quite a lot about his life, so... yeah.

What Jessica is describing echoes Rosa's remarks about the emotional contract attached to a 'sugar' relationship. It seems that it is the emotional attachment - or labour - that differentiates sex work from sugar dating. The emotional labour involved in sugar dating will be discussed later in section VII.IV of this chapter, yet it can be advanced that when Jessica was asked if the emotional support she offered her Sugar Daddies was reciprocated, the answer was negative.

Other participants held different views on sugar dating belonging to the sex industry. Nora, who never slept with her Sugar Daddy, did not think of sugar dating as sex work but rather as a 'fun way of making some money'. Before trying Seeking.com, Nora used

Whatsyourprice.com, a website where men can bid on women to go on a date with them: the one who bids the highest offer is the one who 'wins' the right to take the woman on a date. She explained that there was no expectation of sex on these dates, but it is also not a very lucrative activity, as she was paid only £50 per date. Nora soon moved to something that could provide more economic capital and found that Seeking.com better suited her interests. Similarly to Nora, other participants, such as Elisa, did not think of sugar dating as sex work, but rather as a second source of income; or Patricia, who categorically expressed at the beginning of the interview that sugar dating is not sex work, despite having ambivalent feelings later on. When asked if she would receive a weekly or monthly allowance, she answered:

Patricia: mmm it was monthly but... I guess... this is a bit like, this is where I guess the lines blur, as is it sex work? Because... he'd give me cash when I got there...

The blurred boundaries of the sex industry, aided by the increasing mainstreaming of sexual commerce in contemporary neoliberal societies (Brents & Sanders, 2010), complicate the location of sugar dating in relation to the sex industry. Some sexual businesses, such as massage parlours, have moved towards a heightened social respectability aided by the fact that there has been a growth in middle-class consumers, as well as workers, in the sex industry (Brents & Sanders, 2010). This is also the case in sugar dating: many of my participants' Sugar Daddies were working in business or had middle-class jobs (Jessica's Sugar Daddy, for example, was a university professor based in Paris). Owing to the difficulty in placing sugar dating inside or outside the sex industry, it is not surprising that discrepancies are found among the participants. Inconsistencies can also be found throughout the participants' own testimonies, which highlight the hybrid nature of sugar dating as a phenomenon difficult to situate, and their ambivalent feelings about it. Suzanne, for example, responded negatively to the question of whether she considered sugar dating sex work or not. Nevertheless, the response reflected the fact that sugar dating was not providing her with enough money and therefore she could not think of it as a job; it did not speak of the nature of sugar dating itself. What translates from her words is that if she had found a person who would support her, maybe she would consider it her job:

Suzanne: oh, no, not at all. The way everything ended up... it just wouldn't be useful for me to have that [sugar dating] as my main source of income. I mean, if I could meet somebody that could provide that for me... but... no.

Contrary to Suzanne, Rebecca described sugar dating as a job, separated from her 'normal' life. This answer was motivated by a very negative and distressing sugar dating experience that had caused her significant emotional trauma:

Rebecca: yeah... I have to look at it... because, if it's my life, is like... it's too deep... it's too much and then it becomes... when you look at it, it's not worth it, and then... I am in a worse position than I was before I even started, so... I have to look at it like a job. If you give me what I need, then I can give you what you need.

Rebecca frames sugar dating as separated from her 'life' as a coping mechanism. She is distancing herself from the neoliberal capitalization of the individual's intimate life by setting clear boundaries between life and sugar dating. These boundaries are, nevertheless, artificial: sugar dating, even if conceptualized as 'work', is still part of the Sugar Baby's life.

With the exception of Jessica and Nora, the rest of the participants were engaged in 'sugar' relationships that involved sexual contact. Despite its virtual status, the relationship that Jessica maintained with her Sugar Daddy can be described as indirect sex work or non-contact sex work (Roberts et al., 2010) since it did not involve physical stimulation but rather an exchange of pornographic material. Nora's relationship with her Sugar Daddy was different from the rest because there was no erotic exchange beyond cuddling and hugging. However, it has been previously reported that some sex workers' clients seek non-sexual activities (Milrod & Monto, 2017), although they constitute a minority.

Based on the data gathered, sugar dating needs to be understood as a type of commercial sexual activity that blurs the lines between the sex industry and dating, even if sexual intercourse, in a minority of cases, is not included in the sugaring agreements. Sugar dating replicates the process of mainstreaming and diversification that the sex industry has undergone in the United Kingdom (Brents & Sanders, 2010). It constitutes a hybrid activity that uses the same mechanisms of the sex industry to gain social acceptability. Barbara Brents and Teela Sanders (201) argue that the sex industry has expanded through two processes: mainstreaming in economic and social institutions. The former refers to the integration of sexual services into the economy, aided by adopting a middle-class code:

Economic mainstreaming can involve changes in business forms, marketing, and distribution whereby sex businesses look and act like majority, conventional, ordinary, normal business [...]
Quite often these attempts to 'look' more mainstream are coded with class – upscaling in order

to move away from traditional working-class sexual codes. (Brents & Sanders, 2010: 43, emphasis added)

The mainstreaming of the sex industry through social institutions refers to the heightened acceptability of sexuality as a legitimate form of commerce and “pushes business toward smoother integration with mainstream social institutions” (Brents & Sanders, 2010: 43-44). Websites which promote sugar dating, such as Seeking.com, resemble mainstream dating websites, as I have argued in the previous chapter. Seeking.com seeks to elevate the status of sugar dating by suggesting that only middle- and upper-class people can be found on the website, therefore adopting a middle-class code and distancing itself from working-class sexual commerce. This is also the purpose of Letstalksugar.com, where sugar dating is described as a lifestyle choice that involves a considerable amount of capital to be able to afford clothes, gym memberships, makeup, or even surgeries, reinforcing the idea that only individuals who can afford this previous investment can capitalize on sugar dating. Sugar Babies are aware of the fact that sugar dating demands their performance of ‘middle-classness’. They thus behave accordingly.

Sugaring has clearly benefitted from both the dire economic situation of the UK post-2008, the neoliberalisation of the university, and the blurring of the contours between the sex industry and mainstream society. This context is conducive to an increasing number of middle-class women opting to work in the sex industry or related activities. The permeation of neoliberal mantras of self-responsibility, alongside the commercialization of all realms of human life, has also facilitated the - arguably gendered - conceptualization of sexuality as a commodity with exchange value. The recruitment of university students contributes to the increased social acceptability of sugar dating, as university students are often middle class. Even if they do not belong to a middle-class background they accumulate certain cultural capital that elevates them from the working class.

Nevertheless, what makes sugar dating fundamentally different from other transactional sexual activities such as escorting is the emotional labour that is often performed in a sugar relationship. In this sense, sugar dating obscures the meanings of sex work and involves the emotional exploitation of the Sugar Babies, as the emotional contract attached is often used by the Sugar Daddies as an excuse for not complying with the agreed financial compensations. Therefore, sugar dating can be considered a hybrid activity between sex work and heterosexual dating which has benefitted from the mainstreaming processes of the sex industry, yet a series

of differentiating features make it a unique phenomenon. The nexus between emotions and affect, and financial compensation, is one of the distinct features of sugar relationships.

VII.II The economics of affect in sugar dating

Sugar relationships, as has already been argued, are discursively constructed as involving some kind of payment to the Sugar Baby, generally called ‘an allowance’, in exchange for company and, sometimes, sexual labour. However, far from being a direct transaction, settled prior to the commencement of the relationship, the parameters of the payment are often diffuse and hard to pinpoint. This occurs partly because of the Sugar Babies’ feelings of shame with regard to requests for money, and partly because the Sugar Daddies tend to exploit both their privileged power position in the relationship and the affective disposition of the Sugar Babies. The economic dimension of sugar dating is pierced by affects, emotions, and gendered power imbalances that blur the contours of sugar dating as a ‘business transaction’.

Anaëse Richard and Daromir Rudnyckyj have coined the term ‘economics of affect’ to “provide analytical purchase on the connection between economic transformations and affective transactions” (2009: 58). Rather than belonging to two separate realms, economy and affect are deeply intertwined. Here, affect is understood as collective flows of emotions that create a medium which individuals navigate, as opposed to the more solipsistic term ‘emotion’ which describes the feelings of one particular individual. Theories of affect can illuminate the emotional dimension of economic choices and eliminate the idea that they are purely rational (Richard & Rudnyckyj, 2009).

Affect is determined by gendered emotional rules⁴⁶ (Bartky, 1990; Gill & Kanai, 2018) as well as by a neoliberal rhetoric that encourages individuals to always display positive emotions, even against the background of a precarious existence (Berlant, 2011). Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai (2018) have argued that women in particular are prevented from displaying in public

⁴⁶ Gill and Kanai explain that emotions, rather than individual experiences, “constitute a vital part of a functioning capitalist framework and indeed feelings follow social *rules*” (2018: 319, emphasis original). Different emotional rules apply to men and women: for example, women are socially encouraged to be ‘confident’ more often than men. The gendered rules follow a hierarchy: men are considered ‘more rational’ or ‘less emotional’, which is more socially valued than being (reportedly) ‘emotional’ in a ‘feminine’ way.

'negative' emotions such as insecurity, shame, or anger, regardless of the reason for the emotion. The interviewed participants systematically reported what can be understood as exploitation of these 'feeling rules' by the Sugar Daddies in order to avoid payment. Suzanne and Rosa, for example, quickly realized that in order for their relationships with their Sugar Daddies to work, they needed to resemble a non-transactional one, understood as a relationship in which the Sugar Baby would be genuinely interested in the Sugar Daddy and not expect any kind of financial compensation from him despite having been defined as transactional prior to their beginnings. Suzanne exemplifies the dialectic relationship between the Sugar Daddy's expectation of 'authenticity' - i.e. not receiving economic compensation - and her desire to receive the agreed amount of money. After meeting each other on Seeking.com, messaging for a few days, and having a couple of phone conversations, Suzanne agreed to travel to the north of Scotland and meet him in person. He agreed to send her a certain amount of money before the trip so she could buy some requested underwear in preparation for the encounter. However, a few days before the departure, the Sugar Daddy had only sent Suzanne half the agreed amount, and tried to provoke in her feelings of shame and guilt:

Suzanne: so, I said to him, can I have the rest of the money? And he started being really, really intense. So, I was like... I don't know how to describe it.

Rocío: was he verbally abusive?

Suzanne: no, he is a very intelligent man. It's something to be known... they [Sugar Daddies] don't make money by being idiots; so, they are intelligent men, they know how to be charming and they know how to get what they want, and they use it so people would give them what they want. So, he started saying things like, 'why do you need an extra £100... you don't need the money when you come here...' and I was like, 'well, that was never agreed that you would give me the money when I came [there], I want the money for the things that I needed to do before I came there' and he's like, 'yeah, but if you come here, and then you gonna want more money after you leave...' So, instantly, that's a red flag to me because it's like 'if you earn this much money a day, why is it now an issue that I am asking for what we agreed to?'

Suzanne recalls how her Sugar Daddy used affect - 'being charming' - to obtain what he desired, and deliberately behaved in manipulative ways to avoid fulfilling his part of the verbal agreement. Nevertheless, he demanded that she fulfill hers - travelling to Scotland - and simultaneously accused Suzanne of blackmailing him:

Suzanne: so, going back and forth, back and forth and I am literally like, 'if you are not going to send the money, I am not coming'. So, he was like 'you are trying to blackmail me', and I am like, 'I am not blackmailing you! [laughs] This is what we agreed on, this is what we said. If it is too stressful for you just leave it, like, it's fine'. He said, 'I am sorry, I apologize', and he sent me the £100. And I said, ok cool, I will still go, we could actually have a good time, this was just a bit of a hiccup, it's fine. He then went on to like... nit-pick at me, like... 'you've got the money

now, you have really upset me with what you were saying', now, like, 'you put a bad energy, you haven't impressed me today...'. Like, really little things like that, to kind of... it was not straight-out abuse, he was just trying to make me feel guilty so I would do what he wanted. He was like, you know, 'I don't really have to pay, we already have a great connection, why are you trying to make it all about the money...'. This is a common theme with all the guys that I spoke to, why are you trying to make it all about money, like we should just enjoy...

By appealing to romantic discourses such as the notion of having 'a great connection', the Sugar Daddy tried to manipulate Suzanne's emotions by making her feel guilty for requesting the agreed amount of money. In addition, the Sugar Daddy accused Suzanne of behaving in a transactional way - 'why are you trying to make it all about the money...' - something forbidden in a 'sugar relationship' according to Seeking.com (as addressed earlier in Chapter V), where they met. Here, the Sugar Daddy manipulatively encouraged Suzanne to engage in emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) and change her own emotions regarding the relationship: just 'enjoy', or change her 'energy', in order for him not to give her the agreed amount of money. The Sugar Daddy may be, according to Suzanne's testimony, exploiting traditional affective regulations that instruct girls and women to please others (Gill & Kanai, 2018).

Rosa recalled a similar episode with one of her Sugar Daddies. Before they started dating, they had discussed that an exchange of money for company and sexual encounters would be the essence of the relationship. However, he would often try to avoid paying Rosa's agreed amount using several techniques, such as paying amounts different from those agreed depending on the outcome of the date - i.e. whether the date led to a sexual encounter or not - or refusing to pay based on a common enjoyment of the evening:

Rosa: so that's the thing, it would vary, but he would give me around £200 a date, but then, if the date would like, go on... that would be £200 more, does that make sense? So we would go for dinner and then he would give me some money at the end... and if we went out for like... he would give me some money, but occasionally he would try to get out of it, and I was like... [rolls her eyes] [...] He tried, and I was like nope, cashpoint, now [laughs]. No, I was just like, I'm enjoying spending time with you, but I have bills to pay, bills to pay!

Similar episodes were recalled by Yasmin, who explained that she was made to feel guilty by some of her Sugar Daddies when she demanded to be paid the agreed amount. Other participants, such as Jessica, were occasionally not paid at all. Her Sugar Daddy disappeared without paying her the agreed amount and left her in a distressing situation. According to the majority of the participants' testimonies, Sugar Daddies can be financially unreliable, especially if the Sugar Baby has no contact information other than his email address:

Jessica: I was relying on my Sugar Daddy quite a bit in the last few months. I was going on a trip somewhere in Asia and he told me that he was going to give me £500 for five videos and I was like, 'ok cool I'll do that'; so, I was spending money like I had money, essentially. And when it came to the day that he was going to send me the money, he didn't, and I didn't hear from him for two months and that really fucked me over, financially. I was like 'fuck!'.

The case of Jessica is unusual since she maintained only an online relationship with her Sugar Daddy, and therefore it was easier for him to disappear. The Sugar Daddies of Rosa and Suzanne, according to their testimonies, seemed to understand the economic aspect of the relationship as antagonistic to the enjoyment, and reproduced the idea that the enjoyment of the relationship was enough payment; for example, Suzanne's Sugar Daddy stated 'why are you trying to make it all about the money', as if money constituted only an insignificant part of the agreement rather than its core, and was only dependent on lack of enjoyment of the relationship (according to the logic of the Sugar Daddy, the enjoyment of the relationship would cancel the payment). Of course, this can be understood as a strategy employed by the Sugar Daddy to avoid paying Suzanne and framing having 'a great connection' as sufficient reward. Along the same lines, Rosa's Sugar Daddy occasionally tried to avoid paying her, and while she recognized that she enjoyed spending time with him, that did not invalidate her desire to be paid.

On the other hand, Sugar Daddies may actually have acquired a different idea regarding sugar dating than that of the Sugar Babies, in part due to discourses available on Seeking.com which promise 'genuine attraction'. It seems that the Sugar Daddies are expecting some kind of authenticity within a series of parameters; what Cassini Chu (2018) has defined as "a sense of mutual and authentic serious experience [...] restricted by temporal and financial constraints". The payment may remind the Sugar Daddies that the 'authenticity' is contingent, and not 'genuine attraction'. Chu, theorising about compensated dating, has argued that

The GFE [girlfriend experience] with sex model not only emulates the idealized notion of a romantic relationship, but also frees men from the emotional attachment and commitment that are normally attached to a conventional relationship. Men can suspend their disbelief and freely enjoy the mutuality of passions during the limited time in a commercial context. Once they are out of the financial contract, everything is back to normal such that husbands can go back to their wives, boyfriends can go back to their girlfriends, and men can resume their normal life without any emotional burdens and responsibilities. (2018: 154)

Chu's analysis of the girlfriend experience can be applied to sugar dating, as some of the Sugar Daddies behaved in a similar way to the one she describes; for example, Yasmin explained

during the interview that the relationship with one of her Sugar Daddies occurred precisely owing to the man's lack of interest in having a non-commercial relationship with a woman. He found in sugar dating a more suitable form of having sexual intercourse with women while avoiding further commitments:

Yasmin: he knew what he wanted so he was there... he had done it before, so he was always seeing girls through sex work, so he just knew what was happening. It was a solution for him, it was just that... 'I cannot be fucked to be in a relationship with anyone, I am past that time in my life when I was trying to settle down with somebody', but the guy had other needs to be met, so...

The relationship with her did not involve a reciprocal emotional attachment. For Yasmin, this was an anomaly when compared to her other Sugar Daddies, as all the other relationships involved some kind of emotional labour on her part. The lack of communication made the relationship feel 'unnatural' for her, although she also stated that she enjoyed being with someone who was 'sure of himself' and would 'take her along in that way'. The parameters of the relationship, however, seemed to be set by the Sugar Daddy.

Not all the participants' Sugar Daddies were single men who considered sugar dating akin to prostitution. Patricia, for example, was involved in a 'sugar' relationship with a married man and father of two. She explained that after they had sex, he would often show her pictures of his family and they would casually chat about his family holidays. According to her, the Sugar Daddy was engaged in a 'sugar' relationship not because he did not love his wife and kids, but rather because it provided him with a space to meet unfulfilled sexual desires. Moreover, she stated that the sugar relationship could actually help the Sugar Daddy become a better father and husband:

Patricia: the way he spoke about it was... if he didn't have this release, he wouldn't be such a good father, or such a good husband [...] this way, he could get what he needed sexually and still go home and be a good dad, a good husband [...] Maybe, he didn't want to slap his wife on the face. Maybe that, for him, was stepping over certain boundaries while doing it to another female, to his mistress or whatever, didn't seem so bad.

Patricia reproduces a heteronormative discourse that describes men and masculinity as "active, powerful, and [sexually] persistent, and femininity as passive but sympathetic to male sexuality" (Eaton & Matamala, 2014: 1443). Here the Sugar Daddy emerges as a virtuous figure who is not subject to normal ethical standards; for example, Patricia stated that the Sugar Daddy's wife was not aware of his sugar relationships, but she does not find it problematic that the Sugar Daddy was lying or cheating; rather, he should be praised for finding an outlet for

his sexual desires and therefore being able to be a 'good father' or a 'good husband'. When describing her Sugar Daddy, Patricia repeats discourses that characterize men as having permanent sexual 'needs' which, if unfulfilled, will prevent them from behaving in a socially acceptable manner. This removes the responsibility for his behaviour from the shoulders of the Sugar Daddy: if he absolutely cannot be 'a good father' or a 'good husband' without engaging in sugar relationships due to his imperative needs, he cannot be made accountable for his behaviour; the fact that his sexual desires are framed as 'needs' implies that he has no choice but to relinquish them.

Simultaneously, Patricia's words echo the classical cultural division of women into either Madonnas or Whores - that is, the polarized perception of women as either good, chaste, motherly (Madonnas) or as bad, seductive, sexual (whores) (Bareket et al., 2018). Patricia explained during the interview that the relationship with her Sugar Daddy was characterized by dominant/submissive roles where some consented violence was experienced by her; thus it can be labelled BDSM. In this case, based on Patricia's words, it can be argued that a hierarchy is reproduced in the relationship: Patricia occupies the social position of 'the whore', and therefore she can be slapped on the face and it is not 'so bad'. The Sugar Daddy's wife, on the other hand, will occupy the position of 'Madonna': she is the mother of his children, and maybe for him slapping her on the face is overstepping certain boundaries.

The artificial division of women into either Whores or Madonnas presents several problems, not only because men who hold this vision tend to endorse patriarchy-enhancing ideologies, such as "preference for hierarchical social structures [...] desire to maintain the existing gender system [...] and sexist attitudes" (Bareket et al., 2018: 519), but also because it reduces women to narrow categories based on men's perception of women's sexual behaviour, and therefore dehumanizes women. Needless to say, there is no social equivalent of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy that could be used to categorise different types of men. Rather, as in the case of Patricia's Sugar Daddy, men can be both at the same time: men can have extramarital relationships and still be good fathers. Moreover, Patricia's Sugar Daddy is a good father/husband *because* he is cheating on his wife. A patriarchal double standard is reproduced in the relationship, according to Patricia's justification.

Many participants reported not caring about the marital status of their Sugar Daddies, and some of them linked this lack of interest to their lack of *real* commitment to the sugar relationship.

Others, such as Rebecca, were not committed to the relationship and yet expressed negative feelings towards the behaviour of their Sugar Daddies regarding their wives. Rebecca highlighted how often her Sugar Daddies hid their marital status from her, telling her ‘what [she] want[ed] to hear’. She found it really distressing and expressed very negative feelings towards one particular Sugar Daddy who was cheating on his wife with her:

Rebecca: He’s [the Sugar Daddy] just, like... disgusting. I have to say disgusting because... it...wow. They just... and firstly, the way they speak to their wives [...] it’s like you speak to her like dirt, that’s your wife! So, one of the situations was... his wife is at home in London, looking after their children and she was complaining because he wasn’t there, and she needed help. And he was like, why are you complaining for? [*sic*] There’s [*sic*] other people in worse situations than you! [...] And I was there thinking, I am in the room and you are here on a work placement, having sex with a random girl, which is me... How... how is that coming out of your mouth? They have no respect for anybody, including themselves, no respect... but also, yeah, but also, at the same time, they have the sense of entitlement [...] By the end of it, I totally despised him.

We live in a sexualised culture, where attitudes regarding sex have changed and become more positive in the last three decades (Attwood, 2006), yet social hostility towards affairs has not decreased and cheating on a partner is still perceived in a very negative light (van Hooff, 2017). However, Rebecca’s negative feelings were also affected by the perceived sense of entitlement of her Sugar Daddies, and she felt that the way the Sugar Daddy was treating his wife was another example of this entitlement.

According to many participants, Sugar Daddies tended to display a profound sense of entitlement, which was often displayed in their demands for sex. Sex was a requirement for the majority of the sugar relationships - except in Jessica’s and Nora’s cases - which brings us back to the link between sugar dating and the sex industry, especially the ‘girlfriend experience’. Some similarities with the girlfriend experience can be found. As the testimonies of Yasmin and Patricia show, part of the reason why some men reportedly turn to sugar dating may be similar to the motives for their consumption of commercial sex; performing sexual practices that they do not perform with their wives, for example. However, the ‘dating’ nature of the sugar relationship blurs the contours of the business transaction and is purposely exploited by some of the Sugar Daddies in order to not fulfil their part of the economic agreement. By invoking discourses of ‘chemistry’ and ‘good connection’, the Sugar Daddies try to affect the emotions of the Sugar Babies and make them feel ashamed or guilty. Women are socially encouraged by society not to experience these emotions or at least to hide them, as I have already explained (Gill & Kanai, 2018). Therefore, Sugar Daddies may be trying to force Sugar Babies to perform ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild, 1979) and to change these emotions into more

positive ones by acquiescing to their demands. Sugar Babies may display negative feelings towards questionable behaviours from the Sugar Daddies such as their infidelity, but also their sense of entitlement. How this sense of entitlement is often expressed during sexual encounters, and how Sugar Babies navigate sexual consent, will be explored in the next section.

VII.III. 'Sugar' sex and liminal sexual consent

It has been a complicated task to write about sexual consent in sugar dating because the relationships of my participants with their Sugar Daddies were diverse. Jessica, for example, maintained a fully online relationship and never had sex with her Sugar Daddy, while for others such as Rebecca, Rosa, Elisa, or Yasmin, sex was always expected in these relationships. Nevertheless, although the number of participants interviewed in this work is relatively small, a pattern continued to emerge during the interviews. According to the women I interviewed, Sugar Daddies tended to be attracted to the inherent inequality of the 'sugar' relationships, which informed the type of sex they demanded; for example, several of the participants either engaged in BDSM relationships⁴⁷ with the Sugar Daddy as the 'master' and the Sugar Baby as the 'submissive', or refused to do so when asked by their Sugar Daddies. Almost all of the participants experienced what can be considered heteronormative sex, in which the sexual desires of the Sugar Daddy were prioritised over the desires of the Sugar Babies.

The difference between consensual and non-consensual sex in sugar dating appears to be blurred in many cases. I have used the expression 'liminal consent' to illustrate how a sexual act can be perceived both as consensual and as non-consensual, depending on the parameters that are used. Participants often had problems articulating whether or not sex was consensual, or had a different opinion of it years after the relationship ended. However, this cannot only be attributed to the 'sugar' aspect of relationships, as situations of liminal consent are also found in non-commodified heterosexual dating (Gavey, 1992; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Nevertheless, as I have been arguing, a sugar relationship creates a milieu where inequality is more pronounced than in non-sugar relationships, which is reflected in the negotiations of consent occurring within the relationships.

⁴⁷ While BDSM can be a valid sexual choice between two consenting, uncoerced adults, there is a strong emphasis within the community on the necessity to give an "explicit and direct form of consent" (Beres & MacDonald, 2015: 428). This does not necessarily occur in sugar dating, as I argue in this chapter.

BDSM sexual dynamics in Sugar Dating

BDSM was a recurrent topic during some of the interviews. Specifically, Ruth, Jessica, and Patricia had experiences with BDSM in sugar dating. Jessica explained that she met a potential Sugar Daddy online who wanted to engage in a dominance/submission relationship with her, but it did not prosper:

Jessica: I was going to have another online Sugar Daddy, but he wanted the role of the dominating/controlling thing, and I was like... at first, ok, we can try this but then my nan [grandmother] got ill and I was like, 'I need to step out of this role for a second, I need to deal with this' and he went 'no, you are mine, you cannot step out of this'. And I was, 'ok, I am not doing this', like, that's it.

The experience of Jessica was short-lived. However, it exemplifies how the Sugar Daddy did not respect the principles of the BDSM community: a strong emphasis on consent and respect for the other partner (Beres & MacDonal, 2015). The Sugar Daddy reportedly showed a dominant attitude that extended beyond the agreed role play. For Jessica, since the relationship was purely online, she could terminate it without difficulty, although she lost the income generated by the relationship.

Another participant, Ruth, had entered the BDSM community and found that several women maintained 'sugar' relationships, so she decided to try. Her 'sugar' relationship also included BDSM sex with her Sugar Daddy. Ruth stated that although the sex was consensual, she treated sugar dating 'as a job' because in her personal relationships she preferred 'some sort of power balance', highlighting the enhanced power imbalance of the sugar relationship. In a written interview, she declared:

Ruth: in my closer relationships, I prefer some sort of power balance - for example, my current partner and I have a Dom/Sub relationship in bed, but otherwise we are pretty equal and understanding of each other's space and boundaries [...] [the relationship] was consented, and desired to an extent. I wanted a dominant partner, but I think my Sugar Daddy's idea of dominance and mine didn't match up very well, and I wasn't quite sure (or good at communicating) what exactly I wanted in that respect.

Ruth's ambivalence towards her effectiveness in communicating what she wanted is not uncommon in heterosexual relationships. Research has found that ambiguous situations in which it is unclear whether or not the sexual intercourse was wanted, which can involve liminal consent, lead to women "being more cautious in their interpretations of consent and

acceptability” (Humphreys, 2007: 314). Ruth, for example, declared that the relationship was consenting and, to an extent, desired, yet she also wrote that boundaries were difficult to communicate and that she tended to do what the Sugar Daddy wanted, until a ‘hard boundary was reached’:

Ruth: sometimes it was very difficult to communicate boundaries and have them respected. I think that part of the appeal of being a Sugar Daddy is some sense of control or power that stems from having money. Money = power (over women). I still wasn’t very comfortable communicating my boundaries in a way that invited further interaction, so I felt pressured to kinda go along with what the Sugar Daddy wanted until a hard boundary was reached (one which I concretely and definitely did not want to cross).

From Ruth’s last statement it can be deduced that the Sugar Daddy transgressed some ‘soft’ boundary, which Ruth thinks could have been a problem of communication. At the same time she articulates that the Sugar Daddy was drawn to the imbalance of power in the relationship. Burkett and Hamilton (2012) identified that women often lack proper vocabulary to define their experiences, and that this may act as a barrier to identifying coercive behaviour; for example, if Ruth does not register feeling pressured to ‘go along with what the Sugar Daddy wanted’ (despite the boundaries that she had established for herself) as a violation, she may have problems defining the encounter as non-consensual. In addition, heteronormative sexuality encourages women to continue with sexual intercourse once it has started even if it is unpleasant (Burkett & Halmiton, 2012), which makes voicing a concern more difficult. Ruth felt pressured to ‘go along’ with what the Sugar Daddy wanted but attributed it to a lack of communication *on her part*, rather than a problematic behaviour of her Sugar Daddy. If he pressured her into sexual acts she did not feel comfortable with, or crossed some boundary, it can be understood as sexual misconduct. Burkett and Hamilton (2012: 817) found that in heterosexual relationships there are often “implicit pressures that disrupt the negotiation of consent”, which is what may have happened in Ruth’s relationship. Moreover, Nicola Gavey (1992: 329) has argued that:

[T]he gender-specific deployment of sexuality enables, if not actually encourages, heterosexual practice which contains much invisible coercion [...] the normalizing social technologies of sex produce a material practice of heterosexuality in which women are produced as subjects who are encouraged to regulate our own behaviour in ways which comply with androcentric versions of sexuality [...] In these versions of sexuality [...] women’s sexual desire is relatively neglected and, concomitantly, women often lack power to determine our involvement in heterosexual relations – both in general, and in specific forms of sex.

In Ruth’s case, owing to the way a ‘sugar’ relationship is discursively constructed as involving sex, and because of how heterosexuality conditions women to neglect their own desire or even

wellbeing, she may have experienced a situation of liminal consent. She had *some* power over how the sexual relationship developed, as the Sugar Daddy did not manage to transgress a 'hard' boundary, but she also lacked full capacity to establish a sexual relationship on her own terms, as some boundaries were violated. Whether the sex was conventional or included elements of BDSM may be irrelevant, as the experience of liminal consent was also prevalent in other interviews. However, it may indicate that men who enjoy a profound imbalance of power in their romantic relationships may be drawn to sugar dating.

Another participant who engaged in a BDSM relationship with her Sugar Daddy, but had a different experience, was Patricia. In contrast to Ruth, Patricia did not frame her sugar dating as sex work. She declared she wanted a relationship with a Sugar Daddy that would feel intimate and that would involve some sexual dynamic based on domination/submission:

Patricia: I don't know how other people do it, but on my first meetings I didn't have sex with anyone. I wanted something more meaningful, something more intimate, and I wanted to be like a psychological game behind it, otherwise it's boring for me.

It was important for Patricia that the relationship should help her explore some aspects of her sexuality that she was curious about. She dated another man before meeting the one who would eventually become her Sugar Daddy. She explained that they visited a sex dungeon during their first date but her date 'got nervous and didn't want to do anything with anyone else'. She terminated the date and resolved not to meet with this potential Sugar Daddy again, as she felt she could not explore her sexuality with him. Here, Patricia, alongside her financial necessity, made it clear that she could not afford her rent at the time, and thus needed the extra income of the 'sugar' relationship. She was acting as a sexually agentic woman, in line with postfeminist scripts of sexual entrepreneurship (Harvey & Gill, 2011): it suited her own interests to seek a commodified relationship that would simultaneously serve to explore her sexuality. Eventually, Patricia met the man who became her Sugar Daddy. The arrangement that she agreed on included a dominance/submission relationship, with her occupying the position of the submissive person. Beres and MacDonald, in their research on BDSM, found that

BDSM play has potential both to subvert and reify heteropatriarchy. The trouble is that it becomes difficult to tell the difference between activities where heteronormative power relationships are subverted and played with, from those where they are re-inscribed [...] This is particularly the case for heterosexual interactions with a submissive woman. (2015: 429)

The case of Patricia could be a paradigmatic example of Beres and MacDonald's argument. Patricia, a self-declared feminist, was very conscious of the politics behind BDSM, and explained that she always felt she had a lot of control during the relationship:

Patricia: I always had a lot of control [...] we talked about what fantasies I had, what sexual exploration I wanted to do, one of the things was that I wanted to be intimate with a woman, so the next time he brought a beautiful lady along and I was like... oh, very cool.

She explained that the relationship sometimes involved some controlling action from her Sugar Daddy outside their sexual encounters; for example, she recalled how, one morning, she received a text from her Sugar Daddy requesting her not to wear a bra that day, and to send him a picture to prove she had obeyed. Patricia stated that she loved these kinds of games in the relationship, not only because of the sexual exploration it afforded, but also because she 'had a relationship with a man that [she] knew wasn't going to invade [her] personal space'.

This vision of the relationship can be considered, to an extent, revolutionary. Heterosexual romantic love and romantic relationships have traditionally been defined for women as involving a sort of self-abnegation or sacrifice, even as a self-disappearing act (Rowland, 1996). In this sense, Patricia was much more independent in this relationship compared to other, more traditional heterosexual arrangements, as according to her, they only met when she needed money. Patricia recalled that she liked the conversations with her Sugar Daddy, and also enjoyed the dinners and the champagne he provided. This behaviour fits into the idea of 'sexual entrepreneurship', a contradictory subject position defined as "a hybrid of discourses of sexual freedom for women, *intimately entangled* with attempts to recuperate this (male-dominated) consumer capitalism" (Harvey & Gill, 2011: 52, emphasis original). Indeed, Patricia as a subject presents some contradictions: she was in need of money, as we have discussed at the beginning of the chapter, but she was also making agentic choices regarding engaging in a commodifying relationship that would allow her to explore alternative sexual practices. Nevertheless, the relationship proved to be problematic in some respects; for example, Patricia was not allowed to sleep with anybody else or engage in any romantic relationship with another person besides her Sugar Daddy. The same conditions did not apply to him:

Patricia: so, the deal with him [the Sugar Daddy] was that when we were together, I could not have sex with any other man, which is where the psychological game comes in [...] with him it was no other man, we wanted that... for him it was a control thing, maybe... I assumed it was a

control thing and that turned me on, so he was like... 'you have no other masters, and no boyfriends, if you meet somebody, you let me know and this is over'. And it wasn't a negative thing, it's just... that's what he wants. So, I was like, done!

Anna Jónnasdóttir (2011) has written extensively about unequal exchanges in heterosexual romantic relationships. She argues that when women and men meet and decide to establish a relationship, the "systemic conditions on which these meetings occur are not equal" (2011: 54), and there is space for men to exploit women's "sociosexual resources" (2011: 49). Far from considering that women are deceived into participating in these kinds of relationships, or are experiencing any form of false consciousness, Jónnasdóttir argues that:

In both cases exploitation is far from always involving coercion or abuse, and in both cases it most often benefits both parties (although one party controls much more effectively than the other the circumstances of differential advantages which keeps the exploitative system going). In both cases exploitation not only may benefit the exploited, it most often occurs with the full voluntary consent of the exploited. (2011: 52)

Although Jónnasdóttir writes in the context of the appropriation of 'love power', her analysis can be used to understand how the relationship between Patricia and her Sugar Daddy developed in a way that reproduced gendered imbalances of power and yet was considered by Patricia to be beneficial. Patricia did not question that her Sugar Daddy felt the desire to control her sexuality to the extent of forbidding her to sleep with any other man. She expressed that she wanted to explore her sexuality by engaging in a dominant/submissive relationship and that involved surrendering to her Sugar Daddy's desires. Nevertheless, the case of Patricia seems, reportedly, different from that of Ruth or even Jessica: Patricia reported being able to explore her own fantasies with her Sugar Daddy, as opposed to Ruth's complaints about having her boundaries breached. Patricia's relationship is not exempt from criticism, as her weak economic position may have acted as a coercive layer in her capacity to refuse or accept sexual intercourse. Patricia stated, for example, that the encounters with the Sugar Daddy took place whenever she wished, but she ordinarily called him when she was in need of money. The necessity of money blurs the lines of consent, and makes sugar dating an optimal milieu for situations of liminal consent to occur.

What translates from the testimonies of other participants is that some Sugar Daddies may appropriate BDSM dynamics to sexually exploit the Sugar Babies, as in the case of Ruth or Jessica. Nevertheless, situations of liminal consent are not restricted to BDSM sex: other participants reported experiencing moments of liminal consent during 'conventional' sex.

Liminal consent in 'vanilla' sexual dynamics

The majority of the sexual relationships that the participants maintained with their Sugar Daddies fall under the umbrella term of conventional sex – that is, not including elements of BDSM, kink, or fetish. For all the participants except Nora and Jessica, the 'sugar' relationship included an exchange of sexual favours for a payment. Sexual consent during these relationships was often taken for granted by both the Sugar Daddy and the Sugar Baby, as it was assumed that consent was given once the relationship had started and it was not necessary to reiterate it during sexual intercourse. In this sense, their 'vanilla sex' was not exempt from problematic encounters where sexual consent was not actively voiced, nor required from the Sugar Daddy.

The prescriptive notion of sugar dating as a relationship that necessarily includes sex works as a technology of coercion that prevents the Sugar Babies from having full control over sexual consent. This assumption is favoured by Seeking.com's and Letstalksugar.com's discursive construction of sex in 'sugar relationships', as well as by normative visions of heterosexuality. According to Gavey:

language and discourses on sexuality have the power to effect the material practice of heterosexuality in ways that subordinate women. Dominant discourses on sexuality provide subject positions for women which are relatively passive, and which prescribe compliance with submission to male initiatives or demands. (1992: 325)

Thus many participants may have adopted a subordinated position regarding the sexual desires of the Sugar Daddy without questioning whether or not they desired to do so, simply following prescriptive notions of heterosexual sexuality. In fact, many participants had problems articulating how they conceptualize consent, perhaps because they had adopted a passive position and consent requires to be actively voiced or refused. This is far from uncommon in heterosexual relationships (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Gavey (1992: 348) has argued that women, because of the subject position granted to them as passive gatekeepers, may "sometimes not [be] aware of consent and non-consent as distinct choices (given certain, acceptable, parameters of the relationship)". The way a sugar relationship is discursively produced creates these acceptable parameters.

During the interview with Rebecca, she recalled an episode with her Sugar Daddy that can be considered an example of a situation where sexual consent may not have been freely given

owing to her dire economic situation. She and her Sugar Daddy were arguing about his breach of their verbal contract - paying her a certain amount of money - while simultaneously demanding a sexual encounter:

Rebecca: I opened a can of worms because he was just... the way he was speaking to me, it was very degrading, and I was like... 'you know why you are here, and I know why I am here, so why haven't you given me anything, but you are demanding so much? [...]. All he was doing was buying me drinks and cigarettes [...] he sent me like £200 once to buy a train ticket and that's it.

When asked what motivated her to maintain the relationship with her Sugar Daddy despite his lack of commitment to their agreement, Rebecca answered:

Rebecca: I kept holding because usually some of the guys, they are very... sceptical in terms of giving up their money to anybody, so I'm like... ok it makes sense to build up the trust and then you can just... but it's been three weeks now, and I have seen you for three weeks.

Rocio: and you had sex with him every day?

Rebecca: every day.

Rocio: did you want it?

Rebecca: no [laughs] but it's like... we know what this is. There is no way I could be like no, no... and then it's like why are you here then? Yeah, it doesn't make any sense...

Rocio: is it totally assumed that [sexual intercourse] is going to happen?

Rebecca: yeah, yeah.

Because of the tacit understanding that a 'sugar' relationship involves an exchange of sexual services for any type of payment, Rebecca felt that it "wouldn't make sense" to refuse sex, despite the fact that her Sugar Daddy was not fulfilling his part of the agreement. In the same way that beauty labour was often seen by Sugar Babies as aspirational labour, Rebecca could have considered sex in the relationship a type of aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016). She was willing to 'build up trust' in order to access the promised financial compensation, and to do so she needed to comply with the sexual demands of the Sugar Daddy, ignoring her own lack of desire. Here, Rebecca's decision to engage in sexual intercourse with her Sugar Daddy as a type of aspirational labour needs to be understood as a postfeminist and neoliberal choice. Negra (2009) has criticised postfeminism's emphasis on women's 'choices' while being oblivious to collective problems - in this case, the increased impoverishment of students. According to Foucault (2008), neoliberal governmentality acts in a similar way, producing subjects who behave as atomized entrepreneurs who, theoretically, choose to apply a cost-

benefit optic to private realms of their lives. In Rebecca's case she was acting as a postfeminist, neoliberal subject who 'chose' to sleep with this Sugar Daddy to potentially obtain economic gain. The emphasis on personal choice, however, obscures how Rebecca's sexual entrepreneurialism is constrained by her ruinous finances and hinders her capacity to consent. The notion of consent is somehow diluted, as even if Rebecca chose to sleep with this man, this decision was taken in a context of severe economic coercion. Furthermore, if Rebecca and her Sugar Daddy had agreed on different economic compensation from what she was obtaining, this could also be understood as an offence as obtaining sex from someone on false pretences is considered sexual abuse by deception under UK law.

Other participants such as Rosa and Yasmin also had problems articulating their ability to consent to sex, as they assumed that sexual intercourse was always included in the agreements and therefore consent had already been given at the beginning of the relationship. Rosa, when asked if she felt she was in control of consenting to or refusing sexual intercourse with the Sugar Daddies she dated, answered:

Rosa: It's really hard to know [...] I need to think back... I mean, to an extent, no, in a way. Because there's always a part of me that says, I am being paid for this, so like... so I may as well just get on with it... but then, also, if something would be really uncomfortable, I will say... I'd be like, no. I need to think about those specific moments... I think it was more like, especially the Sugar Daddy stuff [as opposed to sex work], it was hard because, for me, consent was kind of a tricky thing because I have consented to it but, do I want to do it? You know what I mean... yeah... did I desire it? Probably not, but... it's a different kind of consent, I don't know. It is hard to explain.

Along the same lines, Yasmin recalled that during the relationship with her second Sugar Daddy, sex was always assumed, and she did not feel there was space for saying no:

Yasmin: With him it was a bit more sexual, so it was always expected. Maybe we went for dinner somewhere but there was always that sexual expectation... I think because it was assumed, I didn't necessarily feel like I could say no, but I think also I didn't want to, because... I think I would have known before agreeing that... they are also very explicit, so they'd always say, 'I am expecting some sort of sexual... practice'. So it was up to me to say 'No, I don't really want to'. So, there was the expectation, but it wasn't as though I felt... pressured to it... maybe in some way there was because I did need the help financially, but I think... consciously no, maybe subconsciously a bit.

Consent is hard to articulate for Rosa and Yasmin because sugar dating eliminates the notion of consent from the vocabulary of sugar relationships: there is no clear before or after consent, and there is no space where consent can be voiced or refused: consent is simply absent. This generates situations of liminal consent: the sex between some participants and their Sugar

Daddies is consensual depending on what definition of consent one employs. According to Susan Hickman and Charlene Muehlenhard, “a person may be unable to give or withhold consent freely as a result of alcohol or drugs, threat of harm, economic coercion, or compulsory heterosexuality” (1999: 259). In the case of Yasmin, Rosa, or Rebecca, economic coercion can be considered a factor that affected their ability to consent. Yet one cannot say without doubt that the relationship was *not* consensual: there was a degree of consent, albeit liminal.

Catherine MacKinnon has argued that women’s sexual experiences with men often blur the line between sexual assault and ‘normal’ intercourse. In this light, one may wonder if consent is the best word to separate these experiences:

That consent rather than nonmutuality is the line between rape and intercourse further exposes the inequality in normal social expectations [...] If sex is ordinarily accepted as something men do *to* women, the better question would be whether consent is a meaningful concept. (1982: 532, emphasis original)

Melanie, for example, seems to hold a contradictory view regarding sexual consent in her past relationship with a Sugar Daddy. In her case, consent may not be a meaningful concept anymore. The relationship started when she was seventeen years old and her Sugar Daddy was fifty-three. She now considers the age gap a ‘red flag’. Nevertheless, in a written interview, she declared that:

Melanie: there was no talk of intimacy in exchange, but it was implied within the subtext. Probably he was scared that I was going to run away screaming. Luckily for him, I had self-destructive tendencies that often manifested in fucking the wrong people. I think the conditioning I had received from birth switched my mentality from spitfire to hummingbird. A society full of Lolitas and other soft-core sexualisation of my girlhood.

MacKinnon (1982) theorised the feeling that Melanie describes: the conditioning of women as sexual beings who exist for the pleasure of men. For MacKinnon, this process of sexual objectification is a key stage in the recognition of the subject as a woman; because men hold higher social power than women do, women learn to eroticise this imbalance in power (MacKinnon, 1982; Dworkin, 1987), which may explain Melanie’s attraction to an older, more powerful man who could help her enter the art industry. Melanie stated that at the time, the sex was consensual, but she also expressed very negative feelings regarding the experience:

Melanie: it was never coercive, I was never pushed into a situation I didn’t want to be in, everything was consensual, but looking back on it is sickening.

When asked if she wanted to elaborate, Melanie explained that only after therapy could she see how damaging the relationship had been for her, especially how her body had been used:

Melanie: the negative [aspect] is overwhelmingly the predatory aspects of the arrangement. Huge power imbalance. I played it though [...] [now] I'm my own boss, I choose what happens and when. How ironic that this type of freedom should only exist because of (what now feels) a special type of slavery? Maybe I sold out when I effectively sold my body. Who knows. I have to live with the knowledge that my initial success was due to a man with a fetish for very young girls and not my own initiative.

Melanie reflected on how sugaring may feel empowering for other women, but it certainly did not feel like that for her:

Melanie: I suppose that because ultimately it is my own skill that has carried my career, I shouldn't be so sad about the beginning. I can't help it though. Whenever I think about how I used my body as currency (or how my body was used FOR me as currency) I am vulnerable. I know that this is empowering for some women, but I was a girl who had no idea how the real world actually worked. I had no idea how bizarre this whole situation was until years of therapy and a stint in rehab. Then it hit me like a freight train. A real "oooooh shit" moment. I can decontextualise it from my emotions as a savvy business move, but I was not savvy.

The ambivalent feeling that Melanie describes regarding her sugaring experience may be a result of the lack of proper vocabulary to define women's experiences of sexual intercourse and the vanishing relevance of consent in sugar dating. Melanie was, at the time, still a minor. However, the age of sexual consent in Britain is sixteen so if Melanie stated that she consented to the sexual acts, what happened would not have been deemed unlawful. Looking back on the experience, however, Melanie seems to perceive the situation as dubious: 'whenever I think about how I used my body as currency (or how my body was used FOR me as currency)'. While she says she could try to conceptualize it as a savvy business move, in line with current postfeminist discourses that see women as always 'up-for-it' by overlooking gender imbalances (Gill, 2007), the reality is that now she considers her involvement with sugar dating 'sickening'. The experience of Melanie may fall into a grey area of consent where it may not be considered rape, but is not fully consensual either. In her own words, she lived what she now considers a 'type of slavery', and the situation has clearly been distressing for her even if she states that she 'consented'. Consent, in this context, may not be the key to understanding how this situation could be perceived as sexual violence against a minor.

According to the testimonies of some of participants, consent is not requested from the Sugar Daddies either. In Rebecca's case, she had to drink alcohol before meeting the Sugar Daddies so she could go through these dates with them. She explained that she found sleeping with the

Sugar Daddies, especially when they were old - one of them was sixty years old at the time, forty years her senior - 'disgusting':

Rebecca: It's disgusting. It's like... because most of the times I am drunk, I am just... my head is not there so it's like, ok, cool. But when you think about it after... ew, ew. It's not fun, it's not fun at all. If people say that they enjoy it... good for you. Me? No... no, no, no, but... but I have been like, dealing with older people for a very long time, since before... since I was about 16, 15-16, I was dealing with people that are like, in their 30s...

Rebecca did not specify what 'dealing with older people' meant. However, she continued to describe her lack of enjoyment during the sexual encounters. When asked if the Sugar Daddies cared about it, she replied:

Rebecca: they don't care [...] I could not make any sound for an hour and they won't even realize. It's... you are just there, like... is he done yet? Ok, cool, going back to sleep, good night!

Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) found that this is a common experience among young heterosexual women. In many sexual encounters, women reported that they did not actively consent, but they did not resist either, and their male partners interpreted their silence as consent. Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) highlight that because men are seen as initiators and women as gatekeepers, the moment the woman engages in any behaviour that is considered to be accepting the sexual invitation - kissing, going to the man's bedroom or house - consent is automatically assumed. This usually means that there is no other opportunity for the woman to agree or refuse the encounter, which falls into a grey area between sexual assault and consensual sex:

If a man goes ahead with a sexual encounter without affording his female partner the opportunity to provide an affirmative agreement or a refusal, does this fit a legal or perhaps ethical definition of sexual assault or rape? Such sexual activity seems to fall into a gray space between consensual and nonconsensual sex. (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013: 522)

The situations Rebecca and Melanie described fit into the grey area described by Jozkowski and Peterson and into the notion of liminal consent, where legally a sexual assault did not occur, yet the encounter cannot be described as fully consensual. Alisa Kessel (2020: 359) has criticised the prevalence of what she denominates "the cruel optimism of sexual consent". While the idea of consent seeks to clearly separate rape from sex, it presupposes an agreement between two equal agents, and therefore ignores the context in which consent is given. Victims and perpetrators alike, according to Kessel,

maintain an optimistic attachment to consent because consent seems so powerful; through a kind of discursive magic, it transforms rape into sex [...] Consent, alone, is not a sufficient tool to transform the problem of rape into the promise of mutually desirable sex. (2020: 361)

Rebecca's Sugar Daddies reportedly exhibited problematic behaviour as they repeatedly tried to break the boundaries that she had established. While the situations that she describes may have been consensual (Rebecca never claimed to have been sexually assaulted), it was not mutually desired. Whether or not Rebecca consented may not be the relevant question here, as this places the responsibility for avoiding being raped on Rebecca's shoulders; rather, one should ask to what extent a constant violation of someone's boundaries against a background of impoverishment should be considered sexual assault perpetrated by the Sugar Daddies. The magic discursive power of Rebecca's 'consent' obscures situations where she constantly needs to iterate that she does not want to engage in certain practices:

Rebecca: most of them ask if I am on contraception, but I always say no, that forces them to use protection. Because... they are insane [...] Most of them ask like, oh can you do anal? And stuff like that... and I am like, no. They try, and then I am like, do you want me to leave?

In some cases, her Sugar Daddies did not even ask for consent to engage in certain practices. Rebecca was asked how she navigated these kinds of situations, and she described the difficulty she had balancing her boundaries while trying not to upset the Sugar Daddies:

Rebecca: to be fair, no, they don't really ask, they just do. And if you don't say no, they will just do it. If you say no, they will try to go back and forth, but if you stand your ground they'd be like, ok, cool... But, even said that, there's levels to it because if you keep saying no, no, no, to everything, then... why are you here?

She had explained before that she did not like kissing her Sugar Daddies; that she did not know why, but to her, kissing felt more personal than having sex. Possibly Rebecca was trying to detach herself from the act of having intercourse, as she tried to do by drinking alcohol. Kissing requires more than just passivity; kissing is an active act, and she refused to do it. Nevertheless, a Sugar Daddy ignored her wish and violated the boundary she had established:

Rebecca: choose your battles... like, with one of the guys, he kept trying to kiss me. And it's like... he's just all there, and he's heavy so it's like, you are trying to kiss me and my face is here, and now you are coming around to where my face is, and you are trying, and I am pushing you away but you are heavy and it doesn't matter, because you are still going to be there regardless of how hard I push... and that's why it's so draining, because it's like, you are just not listening to me... you are not responding to any of my behaviour, you are just doing what you want, and I am a whole human being with a consciousness so I am aware of what's happening.

The episodes narrated by Rebecca describe a very distressing situation. Even if they do not fit into the narrow category of ‘rape’, in the UK they could be considered sexual assault: the sexualised touching of another person without their consent is a legal offence in the UK (Crown Prosecution Service, 2019). Liz Kelly coined the term ‘the continuum of sexual violence’ (1987) to define the complete series of acts that women often experience during their lives which can be considered sexually violent. They range from looks, gestures, and remarks, to sexual assault. Kelly establishes that the concept is “intended to highlight the fact that sexual violence exists in most women’s lives, whilst the form it takes, how women define events [...] and its impact on them at the time and over time [...] varies” (1987: 48). The use of the word ‘continuum’ also connects heterosexual practice as it has been defined in this work to forms of sexual violence: heterosexuality already implies an imbalance in power which is more pronounced whenever a violent act occurs. The violence can be physical, but also includes verbal coercion or the threat of physical violence (Kelly, 1987). In Rebecca’s case, the fact that the Sugar Daddy tried to kiss her already implies violence, as she clearly stated that she did not want that to occur. However, the situation was even graver as she tried to push the Sugar Daddy away and he did not move, ignoring her wellbeing and breaking the consent, however fragile. This situation cannot be described in any other manner than as an episode of sexual violence.

Suzanne also experienced a situation that can be considered sexually violent as, during a date with one of her Sugar Daddies, he tried to force her to perform oral sex on him. However, because the Sugar Daddy was not paying her (in contrast to Rebecca, who had already received some payment from her Sugar Daddy, albeit meagre), she refused and decided to end the date. Nevertheless, before she could do that, she experienced unwanted kissing and touching:

Suzanne: we went to the cinema and it felt like I was sixteen again, like, taking me to the back of the cinema and was like, trying to like, kiss me [...] and then he kissed me and, and I was like, ok, it was expected, this is what you really brought me for, whatever... just keep pushing through [...] So, then he was like, trying to get me to give him oral sex and stuff, at the back of the cinema.

Rocio: but him doing it to you or you doing it to him?

Suzanne: no, yeah. So, at no point was he like ‘oh I want to do anything to you... you just need to do all of this for me’. Which I prefer, because you are not touching me, and I can control... like, what I am doing, so it is what it is, but I would prefer. At that point I was not... I really didn’t want him to be like, touching me like that, so it was irritating [...] I was just getting angry, this is the bit when I was getting to the point of... so you are demanding on my time, you are demanding on my emotions, and now you are demanding me sexually? Like... this is a lot of thing [...] and I hadn’t had any money yet. So that night I’m like ok, I’m gonna go, let’s go home.

Framing the sexual experiences of Melanie, Rosa, Yasmin, or Rebecca around consent perpetuates the idea that women are sexual gatekeepers, responsible for the development of the situation (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013), and that there are clear lines that separate rape from consensual sex (Kessel, 2020), which does not fully account for what occurred during the encounters. Sexual violence, in varying degrees, is experienced by a very high percentage of women throughout their lives (Kelly, 1987; Gavey, 1992). This, as the testimonies of the participants have shown, is facilitated by the way sugar dating is set up, and may attract men who are interested in overstepping boundaries. Not all the participants had negative sexual experiences: Patricia, for example, did not narrate any, nor did Elisa. Jessica, because she was sugaring online, could cut the relationship with the dominant Sugar Daddy when it became problematic. Nora only sugared for a brief time and did not wish to include sexual intercourse in the relationship with her Sugar Daddy, which was respected by him. However, some of the participants experienced sexual violence and situations of liminal consent to varying degrees. The most accurate question is not whether or not Sugar Babies experience sexual violence because, as women who are dating men, it is likely that a high percentage of them will experience some type(s) of it, just like any other woman who dates men. The question, then, is to what extent sugar dating favours an imbalanced relationship in terms of power, which is more likely to lead to a situation of violence; in other words, whether sugar dating attracts more violent or controlling men, or men that enjoy the pronounced imbalance of power in the relationship. The answer to this question, based on the testimonies of the participants, seems to be affirmative. One key element that plays a part in this power imbalance is the age gap between the Sugar Babies and their Sugar Daddies.

Age-based power imbalance in sugar dating

All the participants except Elisa, who was twenty-seven, started sugaring where they were very young, in their early twenties or even earlier. Yasmin and Jessica had just turned eighteen, and Melanie was seventeen. Yasmin explained that her youth was praised by the Sugar Daddies, reportedly because they could feel they had more control over her:

Yasmin: they always knew my age so, I think, for them... they quite like that, that I was young, because... maybe that made them seem that they had more control of the relationship like, she's naïve... maybe I was a bit naïve.

The analysis of Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com revealed that the websites sold the image of the Sugar Baby as young, sometimes employing the pornographic term 'barely legal', used in pornography to describe women who have just turned eighteen and/or women who still look like minors. Therefore, it is not surprising that men who are attracted to very young women are drawn to sugar dating. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Seeking.com and Letstalksugar.com employ a discourse that echoes pornographic themes where girls either seduce or are seduced by much older men (Dines, 2010). In some cases, in the fictional setting of these videos, the men are related to them by blood, e.g. as their fathers, stepfathers, or fathers-in-law. In others, the girls receive cash after the sexual encounter is over. Some Sugar Daddies may seek in the 'sugar' relationship a live experience of this type of pornography; for example, Melanie, who was seventeen when she met her fifty-year-old Sugar Daddy, recalled that her Sugar Daddy had children older than her. According to Melanie, her Sugar Daddy had 'a fetish for very young girls'.

Jessica had different experiences with two Sugar Daddies which can illustrate how some men are attracted by the pronounced age gap. At the time when she met with the first one, she had just turned eighteen; however, she recalled that she looked younger. The Sugar Daddy never asked whether or not she was still a minor. She had never thought about how this could be problematic until the moment of the interview, when it occurred to her that the Sugar Daddy should have asked:

Jessica: No... he didn't [ask her age] actually. Yeah now... I guess you need complete trust but, I look quite young, as well, and when I was eighteen, I looked like, veery young so... I could have definitely passed for fourteen kind-of-thing. Yeah... maybe he should have.

Jessica waited until she was eighteen to try sugar dating, as well as to start her own porn blog. Since the Sugar Daddy never asked whether or not she was eighteen, either he had complete trust in her statement on her profile on Tinder (where they met) that she was eighteen, or it was not relevant for him. Another possibility is that in the case of a potential trial, the Sugar Daddy could argue plausible deniability as a defence. Her second Sugar Daddy, who asked her age, tended to request particular videos where she looked younger. This could be understood as a recreation of a sexual fantasy as the Sugar Daddy worked as a university professor in a Parisian university, and demanded that Jessica enact the role of one of his students:

Jessica: a lot of the time he would give me these very detailed scenarios to help me make it more realistic and... he is very specific. Like for example I need to film me in portrait, so it makes it more intimate for him as opposed to the phone... he doesn't like me wearing makeup, he likes

me very natural [...] he says makeup does make me look older [...] He is a uni lecturer and... a professor even. And he likes the dynamic, we do a role play... where... I am attending his uni and I am a student there and he's the professor... we have done play roles like that.

Based on the testimonies of the participants, sugar dating clearly favours the coupling of older men with younger women. In some cases, the Sugar Daddy seeks an even more pronounced power imbalance, as is the case with Jessica's Sugar Daddy, who requested she play the role of his student. The fact that she pretends to be a young student automatically situates the Sugar Daddy in a position of authority both as her pretended lecturer and as an older, more affluent man; many universities do not allow nor condone this type of relationship, considering them a potential abuse of power. It could be argued that, in Jessica's case, the Sugar Daddy is merely recreating a fantasy. However, sexual desires and sexual fantasies need "to be understood in relation to a larger system of subordination" (Bartky, 1990: 45). Men who are attracted to imbalanced relationships in terms of power may be attracted to sugar dating precisely because it accentuates this imbalance, and this may also be reflected in the kind of sexual fantasies they want to enact.

Based on the testimonies analysed throughout this chapter, the relationships formed through sugar arrangements are profoundly inequitable. Not only do the participants encounter problems receiving the payments promised, but the fact that a sugar relationship discursively involves economic compensation in exchange for sex makes it harder for the Sugar Babies to refuse unwanted practices. From milder cases such as Rosa's to more violent ones such as Rebecca's, the discursive construction of sugar dating can be considered a technology of coercion (Gavey, 1992) which makes the notion of consent inadequate for evaluating whether or not sexual violence occurred. In addition, the Sugar Daddies often reportedly behave in exploitative ways to ensure sexual access to the Sugar Babies.

One may wonder why the Sugar Daddies of Melanie, Rosa, and Suzanne did not ensure that their sexual partners also desired the sexual encounter, rather than just dubiously consented to it. While Rosa's and Melanie's accounts of their sexual encounters were more ambivalent, Rebecca adamantly expressed that she did not desire to have sex with her Sugar Daddies, but she did not see how she could refuse. If we accept that there is a clear power imbalance in heterosexual relationships, accentuated in 'sugar' dynamics because of the age difference and the economic situation, then the responsibility to ensure that the sex is consenting and not coerced *in any way* should fall on the shoulders of the most powerful party: the Sugar Daddy.

Sugar dating, however, seems to create a milieu which attracts men who seek a markedly imbalanced relationship and, for the most part, do not care about the emotional wellbeing of the Sugar Babies. Many participants have reported that sugaring affected their mental health, a topic that I will analyse in the next and final section.

VII.IV. The emotional toll of sugar dating

The 'sugar' relationships impacted on many of the participants in two different ways. Firstly, several interviewees reported feeling drained owing to the high volume of emotional labour the relationships involved. The emotional labour was never reciprocated, and many participants felt that the Sugar Daddies requested too much attention and dedication without giving enough in return, or without providing fair economic compensation. Secondly, some participants voiced emotional problems deriving from sugaring, such as feeling dehumanized – for example, reduced to their sexuality - or having to resort to substance abuse to tolerate the encounters with the Sugar Daddies.

Emotional labour in sugar dating

Emotional labour was first defined by Arlie Hochschild as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (1983: 7). However, the term has now been expanded to cover the “labour involved in dealing with other people’s feelings, a core component of which is the regulation of emotions” (James, 1989: 15). Emotional labour is profoundly gendered: women do more emotional labour than men in any realm, including dating (Hochschild, 1983). Even in heterosexual relationships that could be considered egalitarian, an equal exchange of emotional labour is, according to Hochschild, impossible: “an equalitarian couple in a society that as a whole subordinates women cannot, at the basic level of emotional exchanges, be equal” (1983: 85). Women occupy a subordinate position in society compared to men, hence the fact that they are also often the target of other people’s unmanaged feelings, such as anger (Hochschild, 1983). A sugar relationship, marked by profoundly unequal exchanges, constitutes an optimal milieu for the emotional exploitation of the Sugar Babies.

The participants described having to pay constant attention to the Sugar Daddies, even before receiving any payment. For Rosa, who had been a sex worker in the past, the emotional labour

involved in the sugar relationship was one of the main differences between escorting and sugaring. This was detrimental to her wellbeing and made the relationship feel pronouncedly imbalanced in terms of power:

Rosa: In sugar dating, I think there's more of like, emotional labour, an emotional contract, which is harder to define [than sex work]. I think sugar dating... you don't have much power in the dynamic, because it is really hard to define, like, the emotional contract because... I think, a lot of guys, the Sugar Daddies, they don't want to feel like they are using a sex worker so it's more like a relationship. So, it is very hard to monitor the balance as a 'businessperson'.

Rosa considered sex work more straightforward than sugar dating and therefore easier to tax. Sugar dating blurs the lines between heterosexual dating and sex work and this hybridity is exploited by the Sugar Daddies, who see the Sugar Baby as an emotional support without the need to reciprocate. The relationship that Rosa had with her second Sugar Daddy - a 47-year-old man - resembled a traditional relationship in which they would spend plenty of time together at his apartment just sharing meals or watching TV. Rosa had to engage in deep emotional labour to manage her own feelings in order not to feel attached to her Sugar Daddy and potentially lose the income from the relationship:

Rosa: We just got along really well, he was really good looking... but he was a lot older than me and I think you cannot avoid that. I think he was kind of, like mid-life crisis and he... definitely was more like, a relationship. I think this is a little bit trickier [than sex work] because unless you are emotionally guarded, you can kind of get quite emotionally attached? And then they want to do something else.

Rosa enjoyed, to an extent, the relationship that she had with her Sugar Daddy. She also explained that, as a student, she could not afford to live in the type of apartment she would have liked. She could spend time in the Sugar Daddy's apartment which was, according to her, a nice, well heated space; however, because of the resemblance with a traditional relationship, she felt powerless to demand the promised payment. She realised that the Sugar Daddy enjoyed the emotional attachment and exploited her emotional labour, which was the reason she decided to terminate the arrangement even though he invited her to live with him without paying for rent:

Rosa: I found him too needy... this guy was really needy, and he was just like... I don't know, it is weird, something cringed me a bit more about how he was... The guy was like, you know, when you finish uni, you can live here like, rent-free, and he had a really nice flat in [city in the south of England]. So, 'you can live here, rent-free, you wouldn't want to work'. And I was like, no [...] I was just like, what I am doing? I am not getting as much money as I used to, and like... he's enjoying our dynamic because he always talked about how I was young, and people would be jealous and that kind of bullshit. And I was like, you know what? Fuck it, like, I am not making

money out of it anymore, the lifestyle is nice but I'm like... I can just, you know, do sex work again, work hard and just not have the emotional dumping around like, from a middle-aged guy.

She continued and explained that she felt she was doing emotional labour for the Sugar Daddy without receiving enough economic support because the affective dimension of the relationship acted as a psychological barrier for her to demand payment. The blurring of lines between a sexual, transactional relationship and a non-commodified, 'authentic' relationship was exploited by the Sugar Daddy:

Rosa: [in sugar dating] you cannot be the one who sets the boundaries and says, look, this is business, so you kind of... you are more easily coerced [...] I think the emotional barrier is quite dangerous for me, because that's when it becomes messy, that's when you don't want to charge... but then... I just kind of got all the emotional side of it and it got too emotional and I was like... look, if I wanted to get like, your emotional stuff I would be a therapist, or I'd get a real relationship.

Rosa was asked if, contrary to sex work, the hybrid nature of sugar dating created a power imbalance that left her in a weaker position to negotiate the terms of the relationship:

Rosa: yeah, definitely, I think so. It creates this kind of feeling of being owed something anyways, like, from his part. Like, 'oh I took you out for dinner, and I bought you this, and I did this, so you should have sex with me and...' you know, all this stuff. Which is fair enough, I suppose, but I didn't feel like I was getting enough money out of it. So, for me, I think sex work is a bit better than Sugar Daddies kind of stuff. Because they all end up being a bit creepy and needy.

The fact that a sugar relationship creates an optimal milieu for sexual coercion has already been explored, but the dynamic also favours the emotional exploitation of the Sugar Baby. A similar episode was narrated by Rebecca, who explained how her Sugar Daddies demanded to be constantly texted, with the consequent dedication of time and effort. Ruth also mentioned how she terminated a relationship with a Sugar Daddy because she felt she was being drawn into an emotionally intense relationship where her boundaries were not being respected:

Ruth: I was contacted by a prospective Sugar Daddy from Ireland, but he wanted to constantly chat and talk over the phone and plunge very fast into a kind of emotional relationship I wasn't capable of or interested in, and didn't understand that I needed boundaries in place and some sort of incentive to put that emotional labour in. I think he thought the site we were using [Seeking.com] was kind of Plenty of Fish [a dating site] for rich dudes, or he didn't understand the exact dynamics of a Sugar Daddy relationship, he was looking for some sort of trophy wife...

In the case of Ruth, Rebecca, and others who complained about the constant attention their Sugar Daddies demanded, the extraction of emotional labour from the Sugar Baby is acutely gendered. Emotional work from women is seen as natural by both men and women within the

domestic realm: women are conceived as carrying the prime responsibility for working with emotions, and they often take up the task without questioning it (James, 1989). Women, for example, are usually the ones in charge of calling relatives, buying birthday presents, and in general maintaining the social rituals that reinforce a bond. Outside of the domestic sphere, emotional work - sometimes attached to other types of care, such as caring for the elderly or the very young - has exchange value and is, albeit meagrely, remunerated (Hochschild, 1983). Sugar dating is theoretically an economically compensated activity, hence the Sugar Babies' expectations of receiving remuneration for their emotional work. However, the fact that the relationship involves a certain kind of intimacy that is often developed within a domestic environment (the Sugar Daddy's apartment, for example) is exploited by the Sugar Daddies, who appropriate this emotional labour by considering it to belong to the private sphere - which suits their own interests as they are stripping it of its exchange value - and therefore refuse to adequately compensate it. This is problematic because emotional labour is taxing on the mental health of the person who performs it. According to Nicky James (1989), the management of emotions - comforting a person, being empathic, etc. - is hard work. The person who performs the emotional labour often feels drained after doing it since it requires close attention and a deep performance if one wishes to show that there is a *deep* caring. In this sense, participants such as Ruth wanted to set some boundaries that would not allow the Sugar Daddy to exploit her limited emotional capacity.

Nevertheless, while other participants mentioned similar comments, Rosa's case presents a different nuance. Rosa felt that her emotional surplus value was being consumed by the Sugar Daddy. Her feelings - that the relationship with the 47-year-old Sugar Daddy was more 'loving' than the ones she had with other Daddies - prevented her from demanding payment. Not only was Rosa performing emotional labour, but her love power was being exploited by the Sugar Daddy. Jónnasdóttir defines 'love power' as a "creative/productive - and exploitable - human capacity, comparable in significance to labour or labour power" (2011: 45). Based on Rosa's words, it can be interpreted that she had started having feelings for her Sugar Daddy and she felt the relationship could transform into a non-commercial one that would exploit her love capacity. Rosa felt she was doing more emotional labour than her Sugar Daddy, without receiving adequate payment for it.

The fact that women do more emotional labour than men does not mean that men, and Sugar Daddies in particular, are more dependent on the Sugar Babies than the opposite. On the

contrary, men are, overall, less dependent on a particular woman than women are on a particular man. Nevertheless,

[a]lthough all humans are ultimately constrained by relations of dependence on nature and other people, those in a dominant position are in a sense freed even from some of these most basic constraints, since these are carried, in accumulated form, by the subordinated. (Gunnarsson, 2016: 5)

Sugar Daddies, and men as a social class, rely on Sugar Babies to perform emotional labour for them, not necessarily because they are Sugar Babies but because they are *women*. Mirjam Müller (2018) calls men's extraction of emotional labour from women 'gender-specific exploitation'. The Sugar Daddies will demand this type of labour from every Sugar Baby they date because they are women. The fact that the relationship is pronouncedly imbalanced facilitates the extraction of the emotional labour, which becomes easier than in more egalitarian ones. However, relations of love are developed in the relationship, as in Rosa's case; not only can the Sugar Daddy extract emotional labour - support, companionship, etc. - but also love power - being cared for, for instance. The Sugar Baby, therefore, is twice exploited: as a woman and as a Sugar Baby.

This unequal emotional exchange is sustained by an uneven distribution of economic resources: patriarchal domination is intimately linked to a brutal neoliberalism that leaves many young women economically struggling. The Sugar Baby, as a young heterosexual woman, is poorly equipped to protect her emotional and love power:

If she abstains from selling her labour power, in order not to be exploited, it is likely that she will not be able to satisfy her basic needs for food and shelter. If she does sell her labour in order to have these needs met, she will be exploited of the life forces that the selling of her labour was meant to secure [...] Women find themselves in similar contradictory knots in patriarchy in that the sociosexual relations through which women are compelled to satisfy their need for love are structured in a way that deprives them of the personal power and worthiness that their loving and love-seeking is about. (Gunnarsson, 2016: 5)

Owing to the vulnerable economic position of the Sugar Baby, she is left with no other choice but to comply with the emotional demands of the Sugar Daddy, or to terminate the relationship. This feeling was articulated by Ruth, who complained about how demanding it was to pretend to be interested in the Sugar Daddies, but how it was imperative to maintain these relationships:

Ruth: It's a lot of effort to pretend to be interested in someone who you simply don't want to be around, and the SD is looking for an as authentic as possible experience, I guess. For them, the relationship is first and foremost, money is just the means. So, if you can't deliver something that

satisfies at least the basic level of what they're looking for, then they're going to terminate the agreement.

Another participant, Suzanne, recalled an episode when she had a disagreement with her Sugar Daddy. Because she was in a weak economic position, she needed to engage in deep emotional labour and control her own emotions in order not to offend the Sugar Daddy and risk her payment. Suzanne explained that she could not behave the way she would have behaved with a boyfriend because of this pronounced power imbalance:

Suzanne: He was so upset, he kept messaging me: you've got my heart, I'm not going to trust any other girl on the site because of you... like, it was all... I was like, 'what? What are you talking about?' Because, as a Sugar Babe, you need to defuse the situation, you can't start getting angry and shouting like you would if you were breaking up with a guy, or a boyfriend, it is a business transaction, so you have to keep it professional. So, I was like, 'I don't want to argue with you, I am not angry at you, I just have to think about my safety'.

In this situation, Suzanne is the one who needs to control her emotions; the Sugar Daddy was reportedly not engaging in any type of emotional labour but rather was expressing his frustrations in a very clear way. Suzanne states that she cannot behave with her Sugar Daddy the way she would with her boyfriend, and nor is her Sugar Daddy treating her as a girlfriend. The Sugar Babies are treated by the Sugar Daddies as disposable commodities: he can find another who will perform the required labour. What emerges here is a gendered pattern affected by Suzanne's economic reality. She, both as a woman and a Sugar Baby, is the one who needs to navigate the complex set of emotions, both her own and those of her Sugar Daddy. It is a difficult balance between setting her own boundaries and thinking about her own safety, and not upsetting the Sugar Daddy to avoid the risk of not being paid.

Similar situations were often reported by other participants which caused them to feel emotionally drained, and generated mental health problems which I will analyse in the next section.

A toll on mental health

Participants narrated how sugar dating had an impact on their mental health. Although I have already briefly covered some issues, such as Melanie's experience with therapy and how it helped her process her sugar dating experience, more participants recalled different mental health issues deriving from this dynamic. Suzanne, for example, felt emotionally drained, not

only because she had to pay constant attention to her Sugar Daddies, but also because she felt used by them:

Suzanne: [Sugar Daddies are] emotionally, like dependent, very, very needy. And it was just... suffocating. Like, absolutely suffocating [...] All Sugar Daddies do this thing, they ask you questions, and they don't care. They are just waiting for you to respond, and they continue talking [...] You are there to serve them, they don't care. Like, 'I give you money' and that's the service.

In this case, it can be argued that the Sugar Daddy saw Suzanne as a means to an end: a person who would provide him with emotional care in exchange for a small amount of money. It is a dehumanizing vision that reduces a human being to the value that can be extracted from them. Suzanne felt that she had absorbed this mindset and had started applying it to her interactions with other men, which left her feeling uneasy. When asked if she felt that sugar dating had an impact on her mental health, she replied:

Suzanne: yeah, a hundred per cent. Like, I can feel it now, like if I interact... as soon as a guy approaches me, I can feel myself assessing the worth, like, financially. Which is something that I personally don't care about when it comes to dating, but instantly I am like, assessing how much money they make. Little things like that, like... the mistrusting... yeah, it starts to affect the way that you have relationships with people and... I am not trying to be that girl.

Suzanne explained that she felt that women younger than twenty-three should not be allowed to sugar date. In her opinion, sugar dating could cause some psychological problems, as she articulated previously:

Suzanne: this is why I say, being twenty-three, these men can mess with your mind if you are not sure of what you are, and you don't feel like playing a part? It can stop your personality; it can mess with yourself. So, you have to be careful like, mentally, sexually... So, I had to learn how to recalibrate my thoughts towards men...

Research conducted by Harris, Lee, and Capestany (2014) found that people can engage in dehumanizing behaviour when they treat other humans as commodities in an economic market⁴⁸. They found that this “dehumanized brain response occurs in healthy adults when viewing members of extreme social outgroups”, such as “in males viewing scantily clad females” (Harris, Lee, & Capestany, 2014: 152). Bauman (2003) argues that current romantic encounters are shaped after consumerism, hence the disposable nature of lovers. Perhaps

⁴⁸ The authors discovered that the same neuronal pathway which is usually activated when people make rational economic choices was also activated when their research participants treated other people as commodities by giving them a price and purchasing and exchanging them in a simulated environment.

unsurprisingly, Bauman describes the current envisioning of relationships as a matter of value for money and effort in a similar fashion to Seeking.com's:

A relationship, the expert will tell you, is an investment like all the others: you put in time, money, efforts that you could have turned to other aims but did not, hoping that you were doing the right thing and that you've lost or refrained from otherwise enjoying would be in due course repaid - with profit [...] If found faulty or not 'fully satisfactory', goods may be exchanged for other, hopefully more satisfying, commodities. (2003: 12-13)

By applying an economic logic to potential relationships, Suzanne felt uneasy with the person she was becoming – 'I'm not trying to be that girl'. A value-for-money approach to a romantic relationship will make the encounter feel inauthentic and commodified and can cause a disconnection from one's real feelings – 'it can stop your personality, it can mess with yourself'. In addition, it can prevent the creation of a genuine connection with another person.

Another participant, Rebecca, experienced a similar situation. She resorted to drinking alcohol as a coping mechanism. For her, meeting with the Sugar Daddies without drinking first became unthinkable:

Rebecca: last year, it was worse because I was drinking every single day but this year... being like, meeting the guys and stuff, I have to be drunk before I leave the house, I can't go there sober... I could have never had done it sober.

Research conducted by Roberts, Bergström, & La Rooy (2007) showed that students working in the sex industry had a higher risk of abusing drugs and alcohol than those who did not. Sugar dating can have a similar effect on the Sugar Babies, especially if their experience of sugar dating resembles sex work such as escorting. Rebecca had reported barely any positive experience with her Sugar Daddies, and this changed the opinion she held about men in general. She explained that she often felt dehumanized by the Sugar Daddies: her opinions did not matter, and she could not express her authentic opinions during an argument because the Sugar Daddies would not listen to her. In addition, she expressed frustration about not receiving enough money. When asked how sugar dating was affecting her mental health, she answered that she was being emotionally abused:

Rebecca: because it's like, the constant emotional abuse and emotional... baggage. There's only so much that you can take as a person, and if it's multiple people, consistently... eventually, it's going to have an effect on you. It's just... because I was putting so much energy into all of these people, and now... now I have no energy for anything else.

Blum et al. (2018) found a correlation between students involved in the sex industry and low self-esteem, anxiety, and symptoms of PTSD. Sugar dating may have similar effects for some

Sugar Babies, such as Rebecca. She narrated how her personality was changing, not only in relation to her Sugar Daddies but also in relation to relatives and friends. As a consequence, she was isolating herself from them:

Rebecca: it's the way I speak to people because I am like, since I started, I am a lot more snappy. So, if somebody says something to me, because I am constantly on back and forth battles with these guys, it's like... you built up that, I don't know, resistance to bullshit. To every little thing that someone does or says, I am like, what are you doing? [...] I am tired, I am exhausted. I don't want to see anybody today, I just want to be by myself, I don't want to spend time with my friends.

Rebecca had a very negative opinion of men and, like Suzanne, started applying an economic logic to her encounters with them, even the ones who were not her Sugar Daddies:

Rebecca: since doing this, I have just gotten to a place where I hate men, I hate them. So every person that looks at me or talks to me I am like, 'what are you trying to do? Are you trying to sleep with me? Ugh, no. See you later, don't talk to me'. And it gets... like I am just looking at them like, 'do you have money? You don't, so why are you talking to me'. It's almost it's the only purpose for them, for them to give me money. Why else would I need a man? Because all they do is violate, it's all they do, it's continuing to violate people.

Other participants mentioned other problems deriving from sugar dating. Jessica and Suzanne mentioned that the dynamic made them feel as if their lives had been reduced to their sexuality. Jessica did not know how to cope with that feeling, and had to stop sugaring and uploading content to her porn blog for a while:

Jessica: I guess you are not always ready to be there and... if you are doing it full time, like I was at one point, it is emotionally draining because you are just seen... like, your whole thing is your sexuality and... that's all your life is. And it can consume you sometimes, and it can make things like dating hard and... I had to take a long break from it because it really did mess up with my head and made me think all I was good for was sex and it really does... mess up with who you think you are. People think it's just an easy job but actually the emotional aspect of it is so much more intense than people realize... you've gotta act, these people are coming to you with, you know... trying to escape their own problems, you cannot bring your own into that space.

Jessica's feeling can be interpreted as the result of her deep acting. According to Hochschild (1983), deep acting is different from surface acting: while in surface acting the person changes the expression of an emotion - the gestures, the face - in deep acting the person successfully suppresses an emotion, but in doing so, she changes herself⁴⁹. Hochschild (1983) argues that

⁴⁹ Hochschild (1983) borrows the terms 'surface acting' and 'deep acting' from drama theory. However, she applies them to daily life, and in doing so, expands the meaning. Thus, here acting should be understood as purposely altering our outward expression to express a feeling (surface acting) or suppressing or altering an inner emotion (deep acting) in our daily interactions with other persons.

when one successfully deep acts, one sustains a lie, or an illusion that, when discovered, can be unsettling for the person:

When in private life we recognize an illusion we have held, we form a different relation to what we have thought of as our self. We come to distrust our sense of what is true, as we know it through feeling. And if your feelings have lied to us, they cannot be part of our good, trustworthy, "true" self. (1983: 47)

When performing for her Sugar Daddy or for her porn blog, Jessica had to believe that she was good at doing so. The problem arrived when Jessica started to believe that she was good *only* for that, because she spent so much time working on her sexual act that she deeply altered her own conception of the self. Her acting became so natural - and, at the same time, disconnected from her own feelings - that she had problems stopping acting when she engaged in sexual activity in her personal life. During her videos and pictures, she portrayed what her Sugar Daddy liked: the kinds of pictures and role play that he asked for. By engaging in deep acting for a long period of time, Jessica felt that she did not know what she actually found arousing anymore:

Jessica: I went through relationships like, treating sex as if it was my sex work and... that's not good for relationships [laughs]. My last relationship completely broke down because I just didn't want to have sex with him anymore, because... I established this sort of thing where I was taking my needs... not taking pleasure from it, and he thought it was all real, but it wasn't... and... it's just, you are losing a sense of what you actually like.

Jessica also explained that when she started sugaring, as well as her own porn blog, she used to boast about it as a way to cope with low self-esteem. In the same way that sugar dating invaded her private sexuality, her identity as sex worker started to interfere with her identity as a student. She suffered from stigmatisation from other students, and she was mistreated by men who used her, partly because of her status as a sex worker:

Jessica: definitely first year of uni, I was losing the sense of myself. I almost like, wore it like a badge of honour to try and impress guy, kind of thing? Like, 'I am a sex worker', like, 'I am interesting'. But then it's kind of, obviously like... 'oh, she's a sex worker, so I can just use her whatever I want' so that's how they saw me... and I obviously got hurt by a lot of guys because of that... But then, I was in this loop of thinking that that was all I was worth and... just getting hurt again and again by it and... so I did lose so much myself and just made my whole identity surrounded by the fact that I was a sex worker, and it was horrible. You can try and talk to your friends about it, who knew I was doing but couldn't understand to a full extent, especially some of my conservative friends who... were like, why are you doing this? You know... it was hard. And I had a friend that was doing it but she... I don't know... she was doing it full time, she was not a student so for her... didn't affect her as much I guess but... yeah I don't know... it was very lonely at the time

Jessica took time off to try to recalibrate her own feelings towards her sexuality. However, after a while, she returned to sugar dating and tried to incorporate her own fantasies into the videos she was recording for her Sugar Daddy. Like Jessica, Rosa also mentioned feelings of loneliness because of her status as a Sugar Baby and as a sex worker. Rosa feared the possible stigma and did not tell many of her friends nor her roommates that she was a sex worker, which made her feel alone and uneasy about concealing parts of her life. Haeger & Deil-Amen (2010) found that university students involved in the sex industry are often stigmatised by students and teachers; the fears of Rosa and Jessica were very much rooted in reality.

Although some participants, such as Nora and Patricia, did not report any mental health problems deriving from sugar dating, it is clear that sugaring posed significant problems for others. Sugaring, as well as sex work, may contribute to poor self-esteem, substance abuse, and isolation. Suffering from stigmatisation may also be an unintended consequence of sex work: many of the participants did not reveal their status as Sugar Babies to their friends or relatives, for fear of the possible reactions. Other participants, such as Melanie, had therapy after sugar dating, which helped them understand that the relationships had negative consequences for them. As a dynamic within the sex industry, the impact of sugaring on the sugar babies' mental health needs to be closely monitored. Universities and other entities should include Sugar Babies in their support for sex workers, as they may benefit from it.

Conclusion

I began this thesis guided by a series of research questions to understand the extent to which the increase in the number of female university students involved in sugar dating in the UK was informed by the current hegemony of neoliberal governmentality, as well as the neoliberalisation of higher education. I sought to explore whether the discourse employed by the dating platform Seeking.com and its sister website Letstalksugar.com reproduced hegemonic heterosexuality, and how this discourse affected Sugar Babies' experience of transactional relationships with their Sugar Daddies. Additionally, I focused on understanding how Sugar Babies exercised their agency and negotiated power within these relationships which seemed, a priori, unbalanced in terms of economic privilege. I also aimed to understand the extent to which the dynamic of these relationships reflected the current gendered configurations of neoliberal subjectivity.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the success of sugar dating has been aided by the dire economic situation experienced by many students, as corroborated by the experiences of the participants I have interviewed in this work. The increased impoverishment of university students, in part due to the low-paid nature of part-time jobs, was a major factor reported by them. Nevertheless, the meagre salaries were not the only economic factor; the most critical has been, in nine out of ten cases, the insufficient economic capital provided by their student loans. Thus it can be argued that the emergence of sugar dating is affected by a de-regulated neoliberal economic model that allows part-time jobs' remunerations to fall freely, but also by a series of political decisions - taken by Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Conservative governments since 1998 - which effectively caused the debt *and* impoverishment of students to rise exponentially. In fact, one can argue that the prosperity of sugar dating is a by-product of the neoliberalisation of the university: if students from low-income households were entitled to a maintenance grant, if tuition fees and apartments' rents had a reasonable price adapted to the average household income in the UK, and if the minimum salary allowed workers to live on a part-time job, sugar dating would not be as widespread. In other words, economic struggle constitutes the substratum where a sugar relationship can flourish. Eliminating university students' economic precarity would drastically reduce the number of students that would engage in this dynamic. That a limited number of the participants interviewed used sugar dating as a way to afford non-essential commodities or activities does not change the fact that the

majority used the money to pay for basic necessities such as food, rent, or train tickets to go home.

Yet the figure of the Sugar Baby does not correspond with the social image of an impoverished student. Certainly, Sugar Babies are complex figures who navigate several fields and accumulate different types of capital: cultural (if they are highly educated) and bodily and erotic (if they are normatively attractive). Many Sugar Babies, including some of my participants, will define themselves as middle-class, perhaps reproducing hegemonic ideas as reflected by John Prescott's claim that 'we are all middle-class now' (Jones, 2012). While they may come from a middle-class background, the truth is that some of the participants were struggling to afford basic needs. While the middle-class is effectively losing purchase power in Britain (Jones, 2012), perhaps the notion of 'class' does not fully grasp the position that the Sugar Baby inhabits. Sugar dating needs to be understood as a coping mechanism that university female students employ against a background of relative poverty and economic vulnerability, despite their potential possession of other types of capital. Anecdotal 'evidence' in the press of Sugar Babies earning thousands of pounds sterling per year (see Andrews, 2019) should be considered an anomaly as well as a romanticised vision of sugar dating which justifies the commodification of female students' intimacy.

That said, the neoliberalisation of higher education and students' heightened impoverishment cannot, on its own, explain the popularity of sugar dating. As argued in Chapter III, another critical factor - albeit less relevant than the economic context - was a postfeminist approach towards their own sexuality, alongside a cost-benefit perspective on private realms of their lives such as romantic dating. This vision, together with a rhetoric of self-responsibility that prevented them from asking for parental help (in those cases where parents could reportedly afford to help), drove some participants to seek economic benefit from commodifying their private lives. The participants became 'sexual entrepreneurs' (Harvey & Gill, 2011), an identification that obscures that this entrepreneurship is executed within a constrained scenario characterized by a lack of economic means in a male-dominated consumer capitalism. Some participants, such as Elisa, Suzanne, and Ruth, described sugar dating as a 'method' to economically exploit their Sugar Daddies by mobilizing the erotic and beauty labour that they usually employ free of charge, and obtaining economic capital in exchange. As I have argued in Chapter VII, this can be interpreted, following Nancy Fraser's (2016) critical framework, as a 'method' that enables the subject to cross from the realm of social reproduction to that of

productive work. By dating a Sugar Daddy, the participant argues, she could potentially subvert gender roles by including financial gain into the equation, and therefore acquiring economic capital for something that she usually does for free. Nevertheless, this vision of sugar dating is problematic for various reasons. First, the economic capital is still controlled by the Sugar Daddy, whose regulation of the flow of capital grants him the power to exploit the Sugar Baby as there is no legal protection offered to her to claim unpaid instalments. No subversion of roles is produced in this exchange; rather, they are reinforced, as the Sugar Baby is still left in a vulnerable position where she has no control over the money. Secondly, sugar dating is not covered by any institutional or legal framework. Therefore, although obtaining some economic gain from it could potentially relocate sugar dating from the realm of social reproduction to that of productive work, this relocation would only be symbolic. The Sugar Baby would not benefit from the advantages of actually being engaged in productive work (holidays, sick leave, unemployment benefits, etc.); only from obtaining (usually meagre) financial compensation. In contrast to other activities within the sex industry, such as lap dancing or independent escorting which are considered jobs in the UK and therefore taxable, sugar dating should be interpreted as akin to receiving a parental allowance.

Some of my participants, such as Rosa, Nora, and Suzanne, cited their frustration with their dating life as a factor that favoured their entrance into sugar dating. Tired of engaging in relationships with men that involved extensive beautifying labour and left them feeling used (in the case of Nora and Rosa) or unsatisfied (in the case of Suzanne), these participants sought in sugar dating a more equal exchange in terms of power. Nevertheless, none reported having found this power balance, and none were satisfied with the relationships they maintained with their Sugar Daddies, with the exception of Patricia. The rest of the participants did not enjoy their relationships, nor did they describe them as effective in terms of cost-benefit⁵⁰. Moreover, participants such as Rebecca and Suzanne expressed regret concerning their newly-acquired tendency to evaluate men, even the men they knew in other contexts who were not related to sugar dating, solely in economic terms, which prevented them from establishing real connections with potential romantic partners. My intention here is not to revalorise romantic relationships but to highlight that applying a cost-benefit calculation to a (potential) personal relationship can prevent the development of a genuine relation between equal partners.

⁵⁰ Rosa considered returning to sex work (escorting) owing to its economic benefits, but never to sugar dating as she considered it extremely 'energy draining'.

Authentic relationships that are not motivated by economic gain, whether romantic or not, can counterbalance the increased feeling of vulnerability and instability that late-capitalism societies often report (Berlant, 2011).

Many participants saw their mental health deteriorate after engaging in sugar dating. In Chapter VII, I have argued that sugar dating can cause a series of mental health problems such as overconsumption of alcohol, detriment to sense of self by feeling reduced to one's sexuality, and estrangement from one's sexuality and inability to stop 'performing' during intimate relationships. Some participants have, years later, a view of the relationship with their Sugar Daddies as predatory or exploitative. Yet in many cases, despite the negative consequences that the relationships caused for the participants, they did not receive significant economic compensation; compensation which, however significant, would never justify the impact of the relationship on their mental health, but could explain the popularity of sugar dating.

Nevertheless, the problems arising from sugar dating are not necessarily caused solely by the monetized aspect of the relationship. Non-commodified heterosexual relationships can also turn deeply exploitative, and women usually report having negative experiences (see Gavey, 1992, among others). What distinguishes sugar dating from non-commodified dating, in terms of the potential problems that it can cause to the Sugar Babies, is that these types of relationship seem to attract men who are interested in the increased power imbalance facilitated by the asymmetry in economic capital, age, and gender. It is not accidental that out of ten participants, three either had BDSM relationships with their Sugar Daddies or were asked to engage in one. Whereas there is a strong emphasis in the BDSM community on consent, this emphasis was virtually absent from all of the relationships, indicating that men interested in the power imbalance may be drawn to sugar dating. Moreover, many Sugar Daddies seemed to frequently transgress the boundaries that the Sugar Babies had set, whether during BDSM or non-BDSM sex. The Sugar Daddies chose to start sexual relationships with young women who started from a weaker position in terms of gender, age, and economic capital (the Sugar Babies). In this sense, it can be argued that sugar dating exacerbates the inherent power imbalance that characterizes *any* heterosexual relationship and may attract those who are already interested in having a dominant position regarding their partner and/or exhibiting controlling behaviour. This, in turn, can cause systematic transgressions of the boundaries set by the Sugar Babies, which, alongside their legal and economic vulnerability, means that abuse in the relationship becomes more likely.

As I have analysed in Chapter VII, this imbalance in power is reflected in the testimonies of my participants, many of whom reported experiencing what I denominated situations of liminal consent. In the same chapter, I have described and analysed situations that can be considered sexual assault: deception, sexual touching and kissing without consent; and others that can be thought of as liminally consensual: lack of space for voicing or refusing to consent, or situations where the Sugar Baby was affected by technologies of heterosexual coercion. This liminality was aided by the discursive construction of sugar dating: since both Sugar Babies and Daddies alike conceived sugar dating as involving sex, there was, in many cases, no space for the Sugar Babies to voice or refuse sexual consent, which effectively turns the discursive construction of sugar dating into a technology of heterosexual coercion (Gavey, 1992). Some situations, like those experienced by Rebecca (who stated that she did not want to sleep with her Sugar Daddies, yet felt it made ‘no sense’ to say no), Ruth (who reported feeling pressured to ‘go along with what the Sugar Daddy wanted [sexually]’), or Yasmin (who explained that she did not ‘necessarily feel like [she] could say no’ because she knew before agreeing to the relationship that her Sugar Daddies expected some sort of sexual intercourse), can be considered to border on sexual assault or even sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation of vulnerable adults includes, in British law, being manipulated, coerced or deceived into participating in sexual activities in exchange for money and/or goods (food, alcohol, gifts, etc.) (South Ayrshire Council, 2021). Therefore, some of the episodes narrated by my participants in Chapter VII can be considered sexual exploitation, as the Sugar Babies were deceived into entering the relationships on the basis of obtaining financial assistance that they did not receive.

The exploitative nature of some of the relationships was aided by the economic vulnerability of the Sugar Baby. In this sense, neoliberalism in its economic and ideological forms is the overarching element that connects all the different aspects of sugar dating I have analysed: it is the economic substrate, but also the ideological context in which young women see their private lives as commodifiable and aim to capitalize on their relationships with others, and adopt a postfeminist approach towards their own sexual agency. This involves seeing themselves as gatekeepers of the sexual relationship and therefore the ones who bear the responsibility for consenting. The analysis of situations of liminal consent is critical to understanding how a postfeminist approach to sexual agency masks ongoing heterosexual inequalities which affect the agency of young women to consent or refuse sexual intercourse: many participants experienced situations where their consent was violated, yet they did not

perceive the act as an assault because consent was thought of as already given. In these cases, consent may not be the relevant tool to dictate whether a relationship is exploitative and/or whether an encounter has constituted an assault. Rather, the relationships should be placed in the context of economic vulnerability, technologies of coercion, and the Sugar Daddies' frequent transgression of boundaries. For all of the above, it can be concluded that sugar dating constitutes a dynamic where women are exceptionally vulnerable and exposed to potential sexual and emotional exploitation, owing to their weak economic position and lack of legal protection. In addition, exploitation of their emotional labour was reported by a high number of the participants interviewed. Many articulated feeling drained, tired, and used as a consequence of the non-reciprocated emotional labour they performed. Sugar dating intensifies the inherent gender imbalance in the performance of emotional labour as it becomes easier for the Sugar Daddies to emotionally exploit the Sugar Babies owing to their weaker economic position.

Sugar dating offers new insight into contemporary articulations of gender in the United Kingdom. In a society where women have theoretically achieved formal equality (e.g. in law), male dominance operates in different forms to maintain structural inequalities. Sugar dating offers an example of how economic models affect women and men in different ways, because women already start from weaker positions, as well as an example of how postfeminist visions of sexuality aid women in the commodification of their own bodies. Gendered neoliberalism is the connecting thread of the different dimensions of sugar dating, understood as a series of forces that discipline the subject into 'choosing' different pathways within the enclosed context created by neoliberalism (Foucault, 1991) and patriarchal domination. These two forces operate together to create both the problem - economic vulnerability - and the solution - sugar dating with affluent men - in order to maintain male domination over women in so-called formally equal societies. Sugar dating constitutes a complex dynamic affected by many variables that differ depending on the personal circumstances of the Sugar Baby, but there is a constant refrain: the Sugar Baby's lack of economic capital to afford basic commodities such as food and rent. Until this problem is resolved, one can expect many dynamics that favour the exploitation of impoverished female students to flourish. Sugar dating is only one of these.

Recommendations

Research on sugar dating in the United Kingdom is still in its infancy. This thesis constitutes a pioneering incursion into the topic, but it necessarily leaves some areas unexplored owing to time and other constraints. Therefore, I propose a series of recommendations in order to expand knowledge about sugar dating.

I have centred the Sugar Babies' experiences in this thesis for reasons explained in Chapter II: Methodology & Methods: as part of a feminist investigation, I was more interested in researching the voices of the Sugar Babies to understand how their lives have been affected *as women*. Researching the context in which young women chose to become Sugar Babies could illuminate structural inequalities (gendered neoliberalism, postfeminism) that specifically target women and impact on them differently than on men. That being said, further research on sugar dating, starting with or at least including interviews with Sugar Daddies, will increase our knowledge not only of sugar dating but also of heterosexual, commodified dating in the current neoliberal context. Their perspective can shed some light on how the power dynamics that I have identified are perceived by the dominant subjects. In addition, exploring their motivating reasons for embarking on sugar dating could reveal what attracts Sugar Daddies to the field, something that I could only glimpse through the words of my participants.

This research has a strong focus on compulsory heterosexuality as a key component in sugar dating, since all of the participants had been involved in heterosexual sugar relationships. Nevertheless, many of the participants did not identify as straight but reported being queer, lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual. Given the limited sample, the variety in sexual orientation is remarkable. In spite of this, research regarding queer/homosexual sugaring, in both lesbian and gay relationships, would be valuable. Research on homosexual sugar dating could reveal new dynamics, different from those I have analysed, and potentially offer a new perspective on sugar dating.

Finally, more research with young women who engage in heterosexual sugar relationships in the UK is recommended, as the findings presented in this work could be replicated or challenged by other investigations. This work constitutes a qualitative study which focuses on a small number of research participants. Smaller samples are common when conducting research with hard-to-reach populations (Faugier & Sargeant, 1996) such as Sugar Babies. In fact, despite the limited number of participants, saturation of themes was perceived, especially regarding the economic factors that favoured the participants' entrance into sugar dating - one

of the main research questions. Notwithstanding, more interviews will add depth to scientific knowledge on sugar dating and could potentially lead to the identification of new topics and issues worthy of critical investigation. Moreover, a quantitative study on sugar dating could also provide valuable information regarding the statistical popularity of sugar dating among the British population.

I believe sugar dating will remain a relevant dynamic in the years to come, considering that the United Kingdom is likely to face a double economic crisis caused by Brexit and the SARS-CoV-2 global pandemic. There are no reasons to think that the impoverishment of students and the number entering the sex industry or liminal activities such as sugar dating will decrease, especially in light of the astounding inefficiency of recent UK governments in resolving, or at least paying attention to, this problem.

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