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Sugar and Spice: Sex, Money, and Social Media

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Rachel Elizabeth Davis, Student

Dr. Claire M. Renzetti, Major Professor

Dr. Janet Stamatel, Director of Graduate Studies



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Rachel Elizabeth Davis

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Rachel Elizabeth Davis, Student

Dr. Claire M. Renzetti, Major Professor

Dr. Janet Stamatel, Director of Graduate Studies

SUGAR AND SPICE: SEX, MONEY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
Rachel Elizabeth Davis
Lexington, Kentucky
Director: Dr. Claire M. Renzetti, Professor of Sociology
Lexington, Kentucky
2023

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

SUGAR AND SPICE: SEX, MONEY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Interest in transactional sex, or the provision of a sexual relationship in exchange for gifts and/or money, has increased in recent years among researchers, nongovernmental organizations, and law enforcement officials as increasing numbers of women self-identify as hypergamous, indicating their interest in forming heterosexual partnerships with men of higher status. Hypergamous women may identify as sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, or high-value women. A sugar baby is a woman providing romantic companionship to an older man, known as a sugar daddy, in exchange for money and/or gifts. A spoiled girlfriend is a woman whose partner provides her with money and/or gifts as a condition of the relationship. A high-value woman may best be described as a woman seeking to improve herself and her life circumstances, or “level up,” with the objective of establishing a relationship with a “high-value man,” which has different definitions for different women.

This study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the online behaviors of self-identified hypergamous women? (2) What are the similarities and differences among sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women? To answer these questions, I conducted a digital ethnography of sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women on Tumblr and conducted a mixed-methods textual analysis on scraped TikTok posts associated with sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women.

Results show that hypergamous communities use social media to share advice, often about relationships and gender performance. Postfeminist sentiment is common among sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women, but there are significant distinctions between the three groups, particularly regarding their theories and praxis related to social class. This research demonstrates trends in intimate relationships that have implications for political and social inequalities.

KEYWORDS: Transactional Sex, Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, Hypergamy, Intimacy, Sexual Labor

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SUGAR AND SPICE: SEX, MONEY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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CHAPTER 1. NEOLIBERAL PRECARITY, HUSTLE CULTURE, AND HYPERGAMY

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Class Inequalities

Around the world, wealth and income are increasingly concentrated at the top of the social ladder, and intergenerational social mobility is on the decline (Chancel et al. 2022; Narayan et al. 2018). In the United States, a high incidence of low wages, an insufficient social safety net, and a poor healthcare system compared to similar nations has led to lowered social mobility despite a relatively low unemployment rate and high rate of technology access (World Economic Forum 2020). Relatedly, the top 1 percent's share of wealth in the United States grew to 35 percent in 2020, nearing the historic high of over 40 percent during the Gilded Age (Chancel et al. 2022).

1.1.2 Gender Inequalities

Worsening class inequalities are related to persistent gender inequalities. Although some experts lament men's declining position in the economy, as reflected by their educational mobility decreasing to below that of women, women's income and occupational mobility are still lower than men's, indicating that gains in education are not translating into economic gains for women (Narayan et al. 2018; OECD 2018). Accordingly, women's labor income share in North America only increased by 4 percent, from 34 percent to 38 percent, in the last three decades (Chancel et al. 2022). Across the globe, women earn just one-third of the labor income share, while men earn the remaining two-thirds (Chancel et al. 2022). When household labor is considered alongside non-household labor, women's labor income share is even lower (Chancel et al. 2022).

1.1.3 Neoliberalism

Many of these persistent and increasing inequalities have been exacerbated by neoliberalism. Briefly, neoliberalism is an ideology and practice of governments, institutions, and individuals marked by privatization of public properties, goods, and services; deregulation of industries; and individualization of risks, responsibilities, and problems. The consequences of neoliberalism reverberate in all spheres of life, even shaping individuals' psychologies (Adams et al. 2019). One of the most significant consequences of neoliberalism is the dramatic rise in economic, occupational, and social precarity as lower- and middle-class people accrue debt, lose job security and/or benefits, and become increasingly isolated from one another (Schram 2015).

1.1.4 Hustle Culture

While precarity has been proposed as a foundation for coalitional political solidarity in opposition to neoliberalism and increasing class inequalities (Butler 2010; Schram 2015), many have responded to precarity by embracing neoliberal values. One consequence of this is the rise of so-called "hustle culture." Dozens, if not hundreds, of op-eds have been written about hustle culture, but there have been few academic attempts to address the phenomenon. Spence (2016:2) writes:

Whereas in the late sixties and early seventies the hustler was someone who consistently sought to get over, the person who tried to do as little work as possible in order to make ends meet, with the "hustled" being the people who were victimized by these individuals ("He hustled me"), the hustler is now someone who consistently works.

Spence is writing in opposition to the rise of hustle culture in black communities. Varner (2018), on the other hand, writes about the hustle as an evolution of the late sixties and

early seventies type. However, rather than describe hustling as necessitating deceit, Varner (2018) describes it as simply a means of getting by through participation in the “informal” or illegal economy. Varner (2018:210) writes of the hustle:

[It] is necessitated by and reinscribes capitalist economic structures but . . . also resists certain capitalist logics in important ways: those who hustle refuse, or partially refuse, the injunction to participate in or buy into the economy of wage labor, are willing to break the law and eschew a politics of respectability and inclusion, and resist the capitalist temporal logic of futurity by privileging immediate gains over long-term ones and spending rather than saving.

In Varner’s conceptualization, hustling is a partial capitulation to neoliberalism but also a form of resistance.

I conceptualize hustle culture as an extension of neoliberal ideologies and practices into an individual’s motivations and work-related behaviors. Hustle culture necessitates a relentless work ethic in which work subsumes one’s personal life, a victim-blaming mentality toward those who are failed by neoliberalism, and an acceptance of individual responsibility for one’s class position at the expense of collectivist politics. This definition is compatible with both Spence’s (2016) and Varner’s (2018), encompassing those who hustle within the legitimate economy as well as those who participate in the illegal economy. Hustle culture informs more than an individual’s “work” life. It also informs an individual’s “personal” life. Often, hustle culture involves monetizing aspects of the self that have historically been considered private and separate from the economic market. For instance, monetizing one’s romantic and sexual relationships may be understood as a form of participation in hustle culture.

1.2 Transactional Sex

The sex industry facilitates the exchange of billions of dollars each year in the United States alone and continues to grow (Weitzer 2010). The sex industry is often described as a red umbrella, with red symbolizing the stigma surrounding all types of sex work, from stripping and webcamming to prostitution and pornography (Aliya 2007). Sexual labor ranges along a continuum from less criminalized and stigmatized, like stripping, to more stigmatized and criminalized, like prostitution. My research concerns transactional sex, which is situated in a precarious legal position at the center of the continuum. Transactional sex may be defined as providing a sexual relationship in exchange for gifts and/or money. While prostitution involves a series of one-time transactions, transactional sex typically involves a more prolonged relationship between the client and sexual service provider. Interest in transactional sex—particularly the forms that blur the lines between criminalized and noncriminalized, exploitative and empowering sexual labor—has increased in recent years among researchers, non-governmental organizations, and law enforcement officials.

1.2.1 Hypergamy

The participants in my study self-identify as hypergamous. Hypergamy in this instance refers to a heterosexual partnership between a woman of lower status and a man of higher status. By identifying as hypergamous, research participants indicate their interest in finding a partner with higher socioeconomic status from whom they can gather resources. Participants in my study further categorize themselves as either sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, or high-value women, all of whom are situated at different locations along the continuum of stigma and criminalization, with sugar babies being more

stigmatized and criminalized, high-value women being less stigmatized and criminalized, and spoiled girlfriends situated in between. A sugar baby is a woman providing romantic companionship to an older man, known as a sugar daddy, in exchange for money and/or gifts. A spoiled girlfriend is a woman whose partner provides her with money and/or gifts as a condition of the relationship. A high-value woman may best be described as a woman seeking to improve herself and her life circumstances, or “level up,” with the objective of establishing a relationship with a “high-value man,” which has different definitions for different women.

Sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women share a variety of similarities and differences, shown in Table 1.1 below. For instance, they all engage or seek to engage in relationships in exchange for money and/or gifts. Additionally, they all may or may not engage in sex, although the implied potential for sex is always present in their relationships. While sugar babies and high-value women may or may not be monogamous, spoiled girlfriends are typically monogamous with their partners. Finally, sugar babies’ relationships are explicitly transactional, with the terms of the transaction often written down or discussed in explicit terms, while spoiled girlfriends and high-value women rarely explicitly discuss or write down the terms of their relationships, instead relying on euphemisms or unspoken understandings.

1.3 Current Study

The current study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the online behaviors of self-identified hypergamous women? (2) What are the similarities and differences among sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women? To answer these questions, I conducted a digital ethnography of sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and

high-value women on Tumblr. I combined survey data, in-depth interviews, and scraped social media data, and I conducted a mixed-methods textual analysis on collected Tumblr posts. Further, I conducted a mixed-methods textual analysis on scraped TikTok posts associated with sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women.

1.4 Chapter Summaries

In the chapters that follow, I put into conversation sociological theories regarding intimacy, sexual labor, and social inequalities; critically examine the academic literature on transactional sex; outline my research methodologies; describe my research findings; and explore the broader implications of my results.

In Chapter 2, I address the general lack of theorization in sociological research into intimacy and sexual labor in addition to the few robust theorizations that exist. I follow in Jamieson's (2011) footsteps by conceptualizing intimacy as repertoire of social practices that creates and sustains closeness between people. I incorporate Puar's (2012:57) notion of the assemblage, which is made up of "relations of patterns" into Jamieson's (2011) theorization of intimacy by conceptualizing intimacies and sexual labor as assemblages that create and sustain closeness between bodies and facilitate the exchange of sex for money and/or gifts, respectively. My research seeks to understand the makeup and trajectories of these assemblages as well as their relationship to social inequalities. To achieve this, I weave together Foucault's (1976) theory of biopower, Evans and Riley's (2014) notion of postfeminist sentiment, Bourdieu's (1984) class distinction framework, and Giddens' (1992) conceptualization of the transformation of intimacy.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of High-Value Women, Spoiled Girlfriends, and Sugar Babies.

| Characteristics | High-Value Women | Spoiled Girlfriends | Sugar Babies |
|----------------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Relationship | + / - | + | + |
| Monogamous | + / - | + | + / - |
| Sex | + / - | + | + / - |
| Money/Gifts | + | + | + |
| Explicit Transaction | - | - | + |

In Chapter 3, I uncover how divergent discourses surrounding similar forms of transactional sex regarding sugar arrangements in the United States and Europe, blessed relationships in Africa, and compensated dating in East Asia exemplify the ways that sexual transactions serve as affectively charged inflection points at which gendered, racialized, and classed forms of power collide. I argue that the discourses and affective strategies used by scholars to examine each of these configurations of transactional sex demonstrate the ways that webs of sex, gender, and money are used to bolster imperialist, patriarchal, racist hierarchies. I suggest that ethical academic storytelling must utilize intersectional frameworks to reckon with the multiple domains in which power circulates through gender, sexual, racial, and class dynamics. I attempt to demonstrate this intersectional approach to transactional sex in this project.

In Chapter 4, I outline my research methods, which are split into two parts based on the social networking sites being studied. Part one describes my digital ethnography of hypergamous women on Tumblr. As part of my digital ethnography, I gathered demographic data from my research participants, immersed myself in their Tumblr environment, spoke with them about their experiences, and analyzed their Tumblr posts. Part two explains my mixed-methods analysis of TikTok posts associated with hypergamy. I used Python to scrape data from the most popular posts associated with hashtags related to sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women. I coded the data qualitatively using textual analysis, summed the codes, and performed a chi-square test of independence to determine statistically significant differences between the three groups.

Chapters 5 and 6 report the results of my Tumblr and TikTok analyses, respectively. My digital ethnographic study of hypergamous women on Tumblr uncovers significant

overlap between sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women. All three groups are interested in upward socioeconomic mobility, pursue intimate relationships as a means for their desired class mobility, and share Tumblr posts that reflect postfeminist sentiment. However, there are distinctions between the three groups. These distinctions are clearest on TikTok. Specifically, I find that high-value women's posts promote more explicitly conservative gender politics than sugar babies' and spoiled girlfriends' posts, which are more associated with money and conspicuous consumption. Additionally, spoiled girlfriends' posts are more associated with relationships than sugar babies' posts, mirroring their differences in relationship styles. Still, all three groups' posts are heavily influenced by and indicative of postfeminist sentiment on both Tumblr and TikTok.

In Chapter 7, I summarize my research findings and explore their implications, particularly regarding class inequalities. I suggest that Bourdieu's (1984) theory of class distinction is useful for understanding the similarities and differences between sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women. I also expand upon Giddens' (1992) theory of the transformation of intimacy, explicating the unforeseen impacts of sexual, racial, and economic inequalities on intimate relationships and these impacts' political implications. I suggest that transactional sex informed by postfeminist sentiment may undermine democracy and increase inequality. However, a potential means of decreasing the influence of postfeminist sentiment on intimate relationships is to promote a politics of mutual care (Woodly et al. 2021), which is not incompatible with sex work, and in fact could help improve working conditions in the sex industry.

1.5 Significance of Current Study

My research attempts to correct previous undertheorization in the literature on sexual labor. Additionally, my project intervenes in the longstanding feminist debate over the role of economic transactions and logics within sexual relationships as well as the sociological and criminological debates over the construction of the public/private divide, the oppressive and empowering aspects of sexual labor, and the consequences of globalization and neoliberal economic restructuring for love, intimacy, and sexual labor.

CHAPTER 2. INTIMATE ASSEMBLAGES: *A THEORIZATION OF INTIMACIES, SEXUAL LABOR, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES*

2.1 Introduction

Both intimacy and sexual labor are undertheorized in sociology, often taken for granted as universally understood and self-evident concepts. In general, most sociologists' references to intimacy indicate a conceptualization based on romantic, kinship, and/or sexual relationships between people. Almost always, these conceptualizations assume that intimate relations occur in the "private sphere," although they may be recognized within the "public sphere" (Hochschild 2003; Illouz 2007). This juxtaposition between the private and public spheres is extended to individuals, who are conceptualized as having a private, presumed authentic, self as well as a public, presumably less authentic, self.

2.2 Intimacy

The fallacy of conceptualizations of intimacy as taking place within a private sphere that is separated from a public sphere is demonstrated by Zelizer (2005:1), who critically examines the "twin beliefs that intimacy corrupts the economy and the economy corrupts intimacy" and suggests that, in fact, intimacy and economy are often intertwined and sustain each other. She defines relations as intimate "to the extent that interactions within depend on particularized knowledge received, and attention provided by, at least one person—knowledge and attention that are not widely available to third parties" (Zelizer 2005:14). These relations exist along a continuum ranging from impersonal to intimate, with intimate relations ranging from damaging to sustaining, threatening to satisfying, and thin to thick. While intimate relations may vary in a number of ways, Zelizer (2005) disputes the common notion that intimate relations may meaningfully vary in their

authenticity or falsity. She also argues that intimate relations depend on varying degrees of mutual trust, although often asymmetrical. Additionally, she writes, intimate relations “generate their own forms of economic transfers” (Zelizer 2005:15), and “people constantly draw moral boundaries between proper and improper uses of intimacy” (Zelizer 2005:18).

For example, Zelizer (2005) elaborates three perspectives on the entanglement of intimacy and economy within the social sciences: the separate spheres/hostile worlds perspective, the nothing-but perspective, and the connected lives perspective. According to the separate spheres/hostile worlds perspective, it is important to maintain “distinct areas for economic activity and intimate relations” because the interaction of the two inevitably results in “contamination and disorder” (Zelizer 2005:20-21). This perspective is perhaps best exemplified by traditional structural functionalism. The nothing-but perspective contends that, “far from constituting an encounter between two contradictory principles, the mingling of economic activity and intimacy, properly seen, is nothing but another version of normal market activity, nothing but a form of cultural expression, or nothing but an exercise of power” (Zelizer 2005:21). Rational action theory exemplifies this perspective. Zelizer (2005) subscribes to the connected lives perspective, which suggests that intimacy and economy are often intertwined and sustain each other.

2.3 Sexual Labor

Similar to the overarching lack of conceptualization of intimacy by most sociologists, sexual labor is often left undertheorized. Most of the literature builds upon the foundation of Hochschild’s (2003) notions of emotional labor and care work. However, rather than conceptualizing market logics as penetrating the “private” sphere, most

sociologists who study sexual labor follow Zelizer (2005) in emphasizing the interpenetration of the “public” and “private” spheres, citing the rising demand for sexual services that mimic noncommercial sexual and romantic relationships (Blithe, Wolfe, and Mohr 2019; Boris and Parreñas 2010; Oksala 2016a; Sanders et al. 2018; Takeyama 2016; Weigel 2017; Weitzer 2010).

Bernstein (2007) provides one of the most comprehensive studies of sexual labor, tracing the connections between broad socioeconomic shifts associated with globalization and localized shifts in sex workers’ embodied experiences and identities. Ultimately, Bernstein (2007:108) argues that “contemporary sex workers are often situated in highly complex ways vis-à-vis axes of domination and subordination (both economically and sexually) and that the forms of oppression they experience within sex work may be less severe than those they experience elsewhere.” Bernstein (2007:179) stresses “the ethical necessity of distinguishing between markets in sexual labor, based on the social location and defining features of any given type of exchange.”

2.4 Current Research

In this project, I use Jamieson’s (2011) definition of intimacy as my point of departure. Jamieson (2011:1) defines intimacy as “the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality.” She defines intimate relationships as “a type of personal relationships that are subjectively experienced and may also be socially recognized as close” (Jamieson 2011:1). Closeness in this case “can be emotional and cognitive, with subjective experiences including a feeling of mutual love, being ‘of like mind’ and special to each other” (Jamieson 2011:1). Jamieson (2011:1) writes, “Closeness may also be physical, bodily intimacy, although an intimate relationship need not be sexual

and both bodily and sexual contact can occur without intimacy.” In other words, intimacy may be conceptualized as a socially felt and/or recognized sense of closeness in a relationship. Much as physical closeness may exist without intimacy (and vice versa), intimacy may exist without love (and vice versa). This definition provides terminology and frameworks that avoid the tendency of many sociologists to conflate intimacy, love, sexuality, and kinship with one another or to obfuscate the distinctions and relations between them. According to Jamieson (2011), love may overlap with intimacy, but love refers to an embodied feeling or emotion that may or may not be mutually felt, while intimacy refers to a repertoire of social practices that creates and sustains closeness between people. This emphasis on a repertoire of practices allows for cross-cultural comparisons of intimacies rather than privileging Western notions of sovereign subjectivities, monogamous heterosexual pairings, or nuclear family structures that are often naturalized in sociological conceptualizations of intimacy.

2.4.1 Intimacy and Sexual Labor as Assemblages

My definition of intimacy departs from Jamieson’s (2011) in that I conceptualize intimacies not just as repertoires of practices but rather as material, discursive, and affective assemblages that create and sustain closeness between bodies. Assemblages may be conceptualized as “relations of patterns,” and the notion of the assemblage privileges the patterns of relations that emerge in interactions rather than reifying these relations by giving them names and treating them as stable (Puar 2012:57). I also conceptualize sexual labor as an assemblage that facilitates the exchange of sex for money and/or gifts. While this definition includes legitimized sexual labor within legally recognized intimate relationships, it also includes criminalized forms of sexual exchange. By treating intimacy

and sexual labor as assemblages that are constantly in motion rather than stable concepts with inherent meaning, I hope to uncover the variety of ways that hegemonic power relations are perpetuated, resisted, and reinvented in relationships as well as the ways that different technologies, bodies, institutions, discourses, affects, and practices interact and intersect to create what may be called intimacy or sexual labor in a given relation.

2.4.2 Social Inequalities

Foucault's (1976) theory of biopower, Evans and Riley's (2014) notion of postfeminist sentiment, Bourdieu's (1984) class distinction framework, and Giddens' (1992) conceptualization of the transformation of intimacy form the theoretical foundation of my research, informing the ways I understand the relationships between intimacy, sexual labor, and social inequalities. Briefly, biopower may be defined as power strategies targeting a living population as a site of discipline and regulation (Foucault 2003). Postfeminist sentiment may be described as the merging of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities (Evans and Riley 2014). Bourdieu (2020) conceptualizes class relations as a sort of game in which the bourgeoisie try to maintain a static distance between themselves and the other classes, while members of the other classes attempt to improve their class positions. Finally, Giddens' (1992) theory traces the transformation of intimacy associated with historical shifts in gender relations. A summary of each theory follows.

2.4.3 Biopower and Biopolitics

Foucault (2003) distinguishes between two types of power: sovereign power, which is derived from supposed divine authority, and biopower, which is derived from the body. These forms of power are carried out by two overlapping technologies of power: disciplinary and regulatory. Disciplinary technologies of power center on the body and

serve to individualize people. This type of power is employed by institutions. Regulatory power, on the other hand, centers on life itself and attempts to control a population of people. This type of power is employed by states. Foucault (2003) argues that we live in a “normalizing society,” or a society in which the norms of discipline and regulation intersect. Biopolitics encompasses the power relations between individuals, populations, institutions, and states, in which institutions and states impose norms that discipline and regulate populations and individuals, while individuals and populations resist (or accept) this discipline and regulation. Foucault (1976) examines discourse as one of the primary sites in which power is exercised. For the purposes of this study, I examine postfeminist, neoliberal discourses to understand sexual, racial, and economic power relations.

2.4.4 Postfeminist Sentiment

Gill (2008) argues that both postfeminism and neoliberalism are central to understanding contemporary media culture. Gill (2007b:147) defines postfeminism as “a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes.” These themes include:

The notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill 2007b:149)

Additionally, Gill (2007b:159) writes, “No discussion of the postfeminist sensibility in media would be complete without considering irony and knowingness.” Postfeminist sensibilities are not necessarily anti-feminist sensibilities, as Gill (2007a:269) writes, “What makes contemporary media culture distinctively postfeminist, rather than pre-

feminist or anti-feminist, is precisely [an] entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas.”

Gill (2008) finds three primary connections between postfeminism and neoliberalism. First, both postfeminism and neoliberalism are characterized by the notion that individual choices and behaviors are not influenced by external social or political pressures or limitations (Gill 2008). Second, Gill (2008) asserts that both neoliberalism and postfeminism assume a rational, independent, self-surveilling subject. Third, Gill (2008) observes that women are expected to express more autonomy, practice more self-regulation, and work more toward self-transformation than are men. In short, both neoliberalism and postfeminism serve to place greater demands on women than on men.

To further understand the relations between postfeminism and neoliberalism, Evans and Riley (2014) develop the concept of postfeminist sentiment. Evans and Riley (2014:16) define postfeminist sentiment as “a fusion between neoliberal subjectivity and a feminist politics reimagined through the logic of consumerism.” For instance, Evans and Riley (2014:1) write that “sexiness” has become a commodity, which is sold to women using supposedly feminist “discourses of ‘choice’, ‘autonomy’, and ‘liberation.’” Oksala (2016b:124) notes that femininity, which, as Gill (2007a) points out, is often understood to be a bodily property, is now considered a means by which women may increase their “human capital.” In a neoliberal cultural context, “women are encouraged to work on their bodies and identities through consumerism” (Evans and Riley 2014:3). In other words, women are encouraged to engage in consumer practices that will “improve” their bodies and identities as a means of improving their class status.

2.4.5 Class Distinction

Bourdieu (2020) conceptualizes class relations as a sort of game in which the bourgeoisie try to maintain a static distance between themselves and the other classes, while members of the other classes attempt to improve their class positions. Bourdieu (2020) theorizes class relations as a dialectical relationship between field, habitus, and capital. Rather than independent concepts, field, habitus, and capital are co-constitutive of one another. Bourdieu (2020) defines a field as a social space governed by distinctive rules. Rather than forming a closed system, fields are necessarily open, porous, and fluid, yet they are still distinctive. My current research concerns the field of intimate relationships. Habitus is defined as “the internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails” (Bourdieu 1984:101). In other words, habitus is both the process and result of one’s socialization as distinguished by social class. For example, he argues that the bourgeoisie and the working class have different habitus evident in their lifestyle choices related to, for instance, consumer habits, mating choices, and occupational decisions as well as their embodied mannerisms, such as ways of walking, eating, and speaking. Each social class is associated with a different habitus, and this varies according to field. Finally, Bourdieu (2021:16) defines capital as “a form of power that is effective within a certain space,” or field. Broadly, Bourdieu (2021) distinguishes between economic capital and cultural capital. Economic capital refers to one’s income and wealth, while cultural capital refers to other resources one may possess, such as education, style, or prestige. The value of various forms of capital differs across fields. While this may seem unrelated to romantic and sexual relationships, Giddens (1992) demonstrates the dialectical relation between political economy and intimate relationships.

2.5 Conclusion

Theorizing intimacy and sexual labor as assemblages, I will follow Foucault's (1976) example by examining discourses related to postfeminist sentiment in sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's Tumblr and TikTok posts as a means of understanding sexual, racial, and economic power relations in intimate relationships. These discourses will inform my understanding of hypergamous women's class relations, utilizing Bourdieu's (2020) concepts of field, habitus, and capital. Furthering Giddens' (1992) theory on the transformation of intimacy, my findings will have implications for both the micro-level political economy of intimate relationships as well as macro-level political economy. Determining the makeup and trajectories of hypergamous assemblages will uncover how hegemonic power relations are being both challenged and perpetuated in intimate relationships.

In the next chapter, I critically review the literature on transactional sex, identifying scholars' discourses and affective strategies that bolster imperialist, patriarchal, racist hierarchies. Intersectional analyses provide examples of how research on transactional might move forward.

CHAPTER 3. DEBT, SEX, AND MONEY: *IMPERIALIST ACADEMIC DISCOURSES OF TRANSACTIONAL SEX*

3.1 Introduction

Interest in transactional sex has increased in recent years among researchers, nongovernmental organizations, and law enforcement officials. Divergent discourses surrounding similar forms of transactional sex in the United States and Europe, Africa, and East Asia exemplify the ways that sexual transactions serve as affectively charged inflection points at which gendered, racialized, and classed forms of power collide. In the United States and Europe¹, transactional sex increasingly takes the form of sugar arrangements, relationships in which sugar babies, typically young women, provide romantic companionship to sugar daddies, typically older men, in exchange for money and/or gifts. Discourses surrounding sugar arrangements in the United States and Europe often associate them with rising costs of higher education and difficulties of prostitution law enforcement, evoking paternalistic affects like pity and concern. In Africa², these types of sexual transactions are often referred to as blessed relationships and are discursively associated with HIV transmission and sexual exploitation, evoking alarmist affects like fear and anger. In East Asia³, similar sexual transactions known as compensated dating, in which schoolgirls go out on dates with older men in exchange for money and/or gifts, are discursively associated with child sexual exploitation and sexual precocity, evoking affects

¹ The European nations included in this review are Hungary, Serbia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

² The African nations included in this review are Botswana, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

³ The East Asian contexts included in this review are Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

like outrage and anxiety. The discourses and affective strategies used by scholars to examine each of these configurations of transactional sex demonstrate the ways that webs of sex, gender, and money are used to bolster imperialist, patriarchal, racist hierarchies.

3.2 Moral Panics About Transactional Sex

These three forms of transactional sex—sugar arrangements in the United States and Europe, blessed relationships in Africa, and compensated dating in East Asia—have set off various international moral panics that continue to inform local and international governmental policies in addition to the academic literature. In the United States, anti-sex trafficking organizations warn that sugar arrangements increasingly serve as cover for sex trafficking and suggest that law enforcement agencies shut down or at least monitor sugar dating sites (see, e.g., Spectre 2019). In Africa, the South African Health Minister suggests blessed relationships are an example of men exploiting “young women from poorer backgrounds. . . particularly those who had lost parents as a result of HIV and AIDS” (Lamble 2016). In Asia, compensated dating is regarded by the United Nations (de Boer-Buquicchio 2015) and the U.S. Department of State (2015) as a pervasive form of child prostitution and sexual exploitation, a source of conflict with the Japanese government, which maintains that compensated dating is not widespread (Anon 2015).

Despite these recent increases in concern about transactional sex, the practice has been relatively widespread and socially accepted throughout human history (Bernstein 2007). Therefore, the alternating panic and fascination generated by recent discourses of transactional sex are more indicative of cultural norms and values than of the sexual arrangements themselves (Bernstein 2007; Povinelli 2006; Zelizer 2005). Hemmings (2011) proposes that academic disciplines engage in storytelling with political implications

and that analyzing the affective resonance of academic narratives is key to reading the relationship between the epistemological and the ontological. Therefore, in this chapter, I deconstruct academic discourses surrounding sugar arrangements in the United States and Europe, blessed relationships in Africa, and compensated dating in East Asia as a means of uncovering the ways that hegemonic cultural norms surrounding sex, gender, and money serve to uphold imperialist, patriarchal, racist hierarchies.

3.3 Methods

To obtain the articles for this critical literature review, I searched the keywords “sugar daddy,” “sugar baby,” “blesser,” “blessee,” “enjo kosai,” “compensated dating,” “sugar dating,” and “sugar relationships” in the ProQuest and Nexis Uni databases, limiting results to those which were peer-reviewed and published between 2000 and 2022. This method returned 120 unique results, 85 of which were irrelevant. I then extracted relevant articles from the references of the 35 relevant articles, leading to a total of 59 articles: 16 related to sugar arrangements, 28 related to blessed relationships, and 15 related to compensated dating.

3.4 Theory

Although these academic articles originate in various countries around the globe, they reflect Western-influenced hegemonic perspectives that are perpetuated in a feedback loop between academic, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations. The affects—unseen, circulated, embodied, and felt forces, like emotions and feelings—produced by these articles contribute to their power to spark and maintain moral panics. Outlying examples of intersectional academic discourses—those that are multifaceted,

counterhegemonic, and address political power relations (May 2015)—provide a roadmap for challenging these dominant power structures in the literature. Utilizing intersectional frameworks when studying transactional sex allows authors to explore the interactions between institutional, cultural, and personal factors without making broad generalizations about sexual laborers or perpetuating hegemonic Western discourses that traffic in imperialist, patriarchal, racist stereotypes.

3.5 Sugar Arrangements

Studies of sugar arrangements in the United States and Europe often treat these sexual transactions as forms of deviance but also potential exploitation (Birkás et al. 2020; Deeks 2013; Flowers 2011; Gunnarsson and Strid 2021; Ipolyi et al. 2021; Kirkeby, Lehmilller, and Marks 2022; Láng et al. 2021; Miller 2011; Mixon 2019; Motyl 2013; Rakić 2020; Recio 2022) or as neoliberal identity construction (Nayar 2017; Scull 2020, 2022; Upadhyay 2021). Millions of young women (and some young men), along with millions of older men (and some older women), seek sugar arrangements online. Dozens of companies have cropped up to facilitate and profit from sugar arrangements by creating sugar dating sites and apps.

3.5.1 Sugar Arrangements as Deviance and/or Exploitation

Sugar arrangements are often discussed in the context of sexually deviant, often illegal, behavior. However, in the 1976 California Supreme Court case *Marvin v. Marvin*, the court decided that a sugar arrangement is not illegal unless sex is explicitly required by the arrangement. Still, some researchers argue that sugar-dating sites are at risk of prosecution on charges related to prostitution but are ultimately unlikely to face legal action

(Deeks 2013; Miller 2011; Motyl 2013). However, in April 2018, the United States Congress passed the *Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act* (FOSTA), which amended section 230 of the *Communications Decency Act of 1996* to remove interactive Internet platform providers' immunity from prosecution for users' illegal actions on the platforms (Wagner 2018). Additionally, FOSTA expanded legal liability from the knowing facilitation or promotion of "sex trafficking" to include "prostitution." As a result, sugar-dating sites are now at a significantly increased risk of prosecution.

Much of the research framing sugar arrangements as sexually deviant and potentially illegal highlights the connection between sugar arrangements and the increasing cost of college tuition, suggesting the potential exploitation of working-class college students (Deeks 2013; Miller 2011; Mixon 2019; Motyl 2013; Recio 2022). While sugar dating sites like *Seeking Arrangement* have advertised sugar arrangements as a means of paying for college, Upadhyay (2021) finds that only around one-third of sugar babies on *Seeking Arrangement* in their study's sample identified themselves as college students, though Mixon (2019) finds that large, expensive universities in large cities have the highest number of female college students registered with sugar dating sites. Recio (2022) finds that money is the primary motivation for college students entering into a sugar arrangement, though studies find that money is the primary motivation for non-college-attending sugar babies as well (Gunnarsson and Strid 2021; Scull 2022). Other motivations for women participating in sugar arrangements include a desire for excitement, companionship, increased confidence, sex, and mentorship (Gunnarsson and Strid 2021;

Recio 2022; Scull 2022). Therefore, it is unclear if sugar arrangements are more common or more exploitative among college students than among other populations.

As evidenced above, most of the research on sugar arrangements has treated them as criminal, deviant, potentially exploitative, and therefore in need of legal intervention. The discursive association of sugar arrangements with prostitution as well as increasing college tuition reflects ambivalent sexism and the societal distinction between “good” and “bad” women (Glick and Fiske 1996) or the racialized sexist distinction between “innocent white victims” and “fallen black girls” (Brooks 2021). In this instance, sugar babies are discursively constructed as “bad” unless they are being pushed toward sugar arrangements by high tuition costs, in which case they are constructed as victims who are ultimately “good.” In either case, legal intervention is recommended to prevent sugar arrangements, which are constructed as a form of prostitution in violation of the law. The affective valence of such discursive constructions varies according to whether the sugar baby is viewed as simply a prostitute, which evokes concern, or a victim, which elicits pity. The pitiable sugar baby calls to mind the stereotype of the Damsel in Distress, constructed as a white woman in need of masculinist protection from the state (Wanzo 2008). As Brooks (2021:515) points out, “the [law] protects so-called innocent prostitutes,” such as women pushed into sugar arrangements by high college tuition costs, “and not the ones constructed as guilty and unworthy of protection,” such as women who choose to participate in sugar arrangements for other reasons.

3.5.2 Sugar Arrangements as Neoliberal Identity Construction

In contrast to the scholarship treating sugar arrangements as prostitution, a handful of researchers (Nayar 2017; Scull 2020, 2022; Upadhyay 2021) frame sugar arrangements

as sexual transactions that “constitute a unique relational package with distinct sub-cultural and interpersonal meanings” (Scull 2020:138). Nayar (2017:337) finds that sugar arrangement participants embrace financial instrumental use of intimacy but also invoke “romantic discourses of chemistry, connection, and personal choice” to alleviate social stigma by representing their practice as a strategy for coping with neoliberal economic and social conditions. Similarly, Upadhyay (2021:782) finds that “sugar daters continue to distinguish themselves from sex workers due to different underlying processes” but determines that the differentiation between sugar arrangements and other forms of sexual labor is an attempt at class distinction more than a reflection of differing practices. Scull (2020:152), on the other hand, argues that sugar arrangements “are neither strictly intimate nor transactional but involve the symbiosis of both money and intimacy.”

Framing sugar arrangements as means of neoliberal identity construction discursively associates sugaring with middle-class socioeconomic mobility and prompts affects like curiosity and interest. By examining the rationales deployed by sugar babies, researchers conjure the stereotype of the Career Woman seeking to better herself through calculated instrumental action. While this stereotype is often met with ambivalence (Wade and Brewer 2006), in this context it is more neutral.

While depictions of sugar arrangements as means of neoliberal identity construction arouse more neutral affects conducive to knowledge production, they run the risk of eliding unequal power dynamics. For instance, Recio (2021:54) finds that the discursive construction of sugar arrangements through sugar-dating sites can be understood as a technology of heterosexual coercion that “reproduces a male-dominated heterosexuality in ‘sugar’ arrangements.” Similarly, Gunnarsson and Strid (2022:315)

suggest that sugar daddies provide allowances as “a means of controlling access to women’s erotically validating capacities.” Ultimately, discursive constructions of sugar arrangements in the American and European contexts reflect the ambivalence of the state regarding sexual transactions as prostitution on the one hand and potential sex trafficking on the other. When viewed as prostitution, sugar arrangements produce affects like concern as well as calls to put into place measures to prevent illegal activities. When framed as sexual exploitation, affects like pity can morph into outrage and may lead to calls for more extreme policy interventions criminalizing commercial sexual exchange. While these criminalization measures are promoted as protecting women, they often place sex workers and trafficking victims in greater danger and exacerbate the structural inequalities that facilitate sex trafficking in the first place (Brooks 2021). Additionally, the specter of sex trafficking is associated with racist and xenophobic tropes of foreign men of color “stealing” white American women (Doezema 2010).

3.6 Blessed Relationships

3.6.1 Blessed Relationships as Risky Sexual Behavior

In Africa, media attention has turned toward sexual transactions referred to as blessed relationships, which mirror sugar arrangements but use the terms blesser and blessee in place of sugar daddy and sugar baby, respectively. Participation in blessed relationships is often discursively framed as a sexually risky behavior increasing the chances of contracting an STI, specifically HIV, or developing an unwanted pregnancy (Gobind and Du Plessis 2015; Kuate-Defo 2004; Leclerc-Madlala 2008; Luke 2005; Mampane 2018; Mavhandu-Mudzusi 2019; Mojola 2014; Potgieter et al. 2012;

Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Stoebenau et al. 2011; Toska et al. 2015). One author describes blessees as “hypervulnerable” to infection because of low risk perception and a lowered ability to negotiate condom use due to age and economic disparities (Leclerc-Madlala 2008). Another author uses the phrase “susceptibility” to transactional sex as if it in itself were a health condition (Mampane 2018:2), while another cautions against allowing blessed relationships to “spread,” as if such relationships are a contagious disease (Kuate-Defo, 2004:34).

However, Wyrod et al. (2011) find that blessers in their research sample had similar HIV prevalence, incomes, and condom use as men in other types of relationships, while married men and those in steady partnerships had the lowest levels of condom use, indicating that they may play a greater role in spreading HIV to young women than blessers or men in short-term sexual relationships. These findings were mirrored in a study by Ott et al. (2011), and Harling et al. (2014) find no association between age-disparate relationships and HIV transmission. Hunter (2010) finds that condom use is often intertwined with ideas of love and that condom use is less common in love relationships than in instrumental relationships. Brouard and Crewe (2014) argue that attempts to stigmatize cross-generational relationships are poorly conceived for a multitude of reasons.

Nevertheless, South African health minister Aaron Motsoaledi specifically included economic measures for girls ages 15 to 24 in an anti-HIV campaign in an explicit attempt to undermine the prevalence of blessed relationships, which she suggested were an example of men exploiting “young women from poorer backgrounds. . . particularly those who had lost parents as a result of HIV and AIDS” (Lamble 2016). The women who participate in studies on this subject often push back against this framing, but study authors

tend to reframe this active critique of their own positions as false consciousness on the part of blessees. Hoss and Blokland (2018:315) instead suggest that a blessee's role in her relationship's sexual safety cannot be simply reduced "to that of a victim who is completely vulnerable nor to that of a social agent who is in full control irrespective of the unequal power dynamics." Selikow and Mbulaheni (2013:86) point out that "an 'either or' analysis that situates 'agency as opposed to power' or 'loved as opposed to money' is superficial" and obscures the nuances of blessed relationships.

Research that discusses blessed relationships as sites of HIV transmission discursively associates such relationships with ignorance, with one study describing blessees as "oblivious" (Gobind and Du Plessis 2015:6727). Such constructions and associations elicit affects such as frustration and fear, which then lead to blame. The stereotypes invoked by such discursive constructions include the Jezebel and the Buck. The controlling image of the Jezebel was constructed during the transatlantic slave trade to justify the economic exploitation and rape of Black women, who were discursively constructed as sexually promiscuous, uncivilized, and in need of discipline (Collins 2004). The controlling image of the Untamed Buck was used as justification for colonization and chattel slavery, contrasting the supposedly civilized sexuality of white colonizers with the supposedly untamed and animalistic sexuality of Black Africans (Collins 2004). These controlling images, rather than fading into history, have morphed over time to fit the needs of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In this case, the specters of the Jezebel and the Buck are evoked to frame blessers and blessees as the causes of a public health crisis caused by the much more difficult to confront realities of colonialism, poverty, and neoliberal capitalist policies (Danil 2020; Freedman and Poku 2005).

3.6.2 Blessed Relationships as Sexual Exploitation

Another framework within which blessed relationships are understood is that of sexual exploitation, either of blessers or blessees or both. Some researchers only describe blessers as exploitative, with Kuate-Defo (2004:25) describing blessed relationships as “a form of exploitation and coercion” and Bajaj (2009) conflating blessed relationships with teacher-student relationships. Frieslaar and Masango (2021) incorporate exploitation into the very definition of blessees, who they define as “the young women in the [blessed] relationships who experience trauma and shame because of the violence and abuse inflicted on them by the older male blessers.” Other researchers highlight mutual exploitation that they contend takes place in blessed relationships. For instance, Smith (2006) writes that “most men like to see themselves as masters of these extramarital [blessed] relationships,” but that blessees “bleed” blessers, “manipulating them for money, and even, ironically, for sex.” Thobejane et al. (2017:8727,8737) write that blessees attempt to get “as much financial reward from a man while successfully eluding sex,” while blessers “prefer these young girls because they are still vulnerable . . . they do whatever you demand.” Masvawure (2010) finds that both blessers and blessees use one another to “elevate their social status within their peer groups,” and Moodley and Ebrahim (2019) suggest that both blessers and blessees see one another as trophies.

Depictions of blessed relationships as exploitative discursively associate such relationships with greed and stimulate affects like anger. The stereotypes invoked by such depictions include the Welfare Queen and the Black Rapist. As racial power relations in the United States shifted from chattel slavery to Jim Crow to mass incarceration, the controlling images of the Jezebel and the Buck morphed into the Welfare Queen and the

Black Rapist. The Welfare Queen is discursively constructed as lazy, entitled, and undeserving of government aid, while the Black Rapist is regarded as naturally sexually violent (Collins 2004). Although these controlling images originated in the U.S. context, they have gained salience in Africa through processes of globalization in which stereotypes are divorced from their original context and used to justify the accumulation of power under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in the hands of the global elite at the expense of the marginalized. Researchers who suggest that blessers are the inevitable perpetrators of sexual exploitation as well as those who frame blessees as exploiting blessers perpetuate these classed, racialized, and gendered stereotypes.

In an analysis of discourses surrounding blessed relationships, Shefer, Clowes, and Vergnani (2012) note that participants pointed out that “the boundaries are seldom clear between transactional sexual relationships (generally set up as casual encounters) and what are considered as normative longer-term relationships.” Additionally, Shefer et al. (2012) notice the conspicuous absence of women's sexual pleasure or enjoyment from discourses surrounding blessed relationships. While there is little discussion of women as having any sexual motivations for participating in transactional sex, men are discussed as having little other than sexual motivations. Further, Shefer et al. (2012) express concern that “the body of work foregrounding the materiality of sexual relationships in African countries in particular may inadvertently be another form of racialised ‘othering’ of African sexualities.” Similarly, Dahl (2015) writes that the industry of orphan-focused HIV interventions in Botswana seeking to disrupt blessed relationships reflects Western donors’ “deep-seated anxieties about girls’ bodies, health, sexuality, and morality.” Ironically, in their attempts to lure girls away from blessers, organizational donors replicated the

relational dynamics of blessed relationships with aid recipients, who then used the money and gifts provided to them by donors to secure wealthier blessers (Dahl 2015). In Kenya, the connection between power dynamics in foreign aid and those in blessed relationships is expressed in their unique term for such sexual transactions: sponsorships (Shapiro and Nzioka 2015).

Discourses surrounding blessed relationships draw on controlling images such as the Jezebel and the Untamed Buck, the Welfare Queen and the Black Rapist, evoking affects like anger and fear. The Jezebel inspires affects like lust in white men, jealousy in white women, and hatred in both. White people have historically feared and denounced the Untamed Buck, using violence to transform him into a “tamed” worker. The Welfare Queen and the Black Rapist draw out affects like disgust, fear, and hostility in white people. These controlling images still hold purchase today, influencing the ways that Western governments and nongovernmental organizations relate to African communities.

Blessees are often discursively constructed as ignorant, sexually promiscuous, lazy, and greedy, while blessers are portrayed as predatory and naturally sexually violent. Rather than combat these controlling images, foreign aid groups often wield them in an attempt to scare potential blessees away from blessers, juxtaposing African women and girls’ sexual politics with a conservative politics of respectability (Dahl 2015). These sexual politics of respectability are “characterized by cleanliness of person and property, temperance, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity,” implying that African women and girls’ current sexual politics are characterized by dirtiness, excess, greed, rudeness, and sexual impurity (Collins 2004:71). By associating African sexual and economic relations with immorality, poverty, disease, and women’s disempowerment, Western governments and nongovernmental

organizations position themselves as sources of morality, wealth, health, and women's liberation, perpetuating imperialist and colonialist hierarchies and power relations.

3.7 Compensated Dating

A similar phenomenon in Asian countries elicits affects influenced by longstanding Orientalist stereotypes. Compensated dating refers to sexual transactions in which young women or girls, often teenagers, go out on dates with adult men in exchange for money and/or gifts. Although compensated dating does not necessarily entail sexual activities, these transactions are regarded by the United Nations (de Boer-Buquicchio 2015) and the U.S. Department of State (2015) as a pervasive form of child prostitution and sexual exploitation, while the Japanese government asserts that compensated dating is rare (Anon 2015). In fact, the cultural hysteria surrounding compensated dating in the 1990s has been described as a pseudo-phenomenon largely manufactured by the media (Kinsella 2014). Kinsella (2014:189) argues that compensated dating is a “peculiar collective sexual fantasy” entangled with the imperialist legacy of Korean and Japanese women and girls being used as “comfort women” in World War II, while Leheny (2006) suggests that the collective anxiety surrounding compensated dating exceeds the actual scope of the phenomenon and instead reflects economic and political anxieties. Nevertheless, compensated dating has played and continues to play a significant role in foreign and domestic policy decisions within and outside of Japan (Leheny 2006).

3.7.1 Compensated Dating as Child Sex Trafficking or Prostitution

Compensated dating is often framed as a form of child sex trafficking (Cheung et al. 2016; Li 2015; Li et al. 2018, 2019) or prostitution (Kim 2003; Lee and Shek 2013;

Song and Morash 2016) by scholars outside of Japan. By conflating child sex trafficking with adult prostitution, authors generate outrage and erase nuance. For instance, Li et al. (2015) compare compensated dating to child sexual exploitation even though their study includes participants up to 29 years old and does not assess sexual activity within compensated dating. Even conflating compensated dating with traditional prostitution obscures the fact that a significant proportion of compensated dating does not involve sexual intercourse (Lee and Shek 2013; Li 2015).

These articles discursively associate compensated dating with poverty and sexual exploitation, evoking affects like distress and disgust. These discursive constructions invoke the stereotypes of the Lotus Flower and the Invisible Threat. The Lotus Flower is a “self-sacrificing, servile” Asian woman portrayed as innocent yet still hypersexual, a “prostitute with a heart of gold” (Shimizu 2007), while the Invisible Threat was constructed during the Vietnam war to represent Asian men as invisible yet everywhere and always threatening Western values (Lee 1999). These stereotypes perpetuate the Orientalist myth that Asia is a particularly dangerous and sexually un-bounded place (Said 2003) and invoke the specter of the foreign sex trafficker (Doezema 2010).

3.7.2 Compensated Dating as Assertion of Autonomy

In contrast, some researchers commonly frame compensated dating as an assertion of autonomy by the girls and women who participate in it (Chu 2018; Chu and Laidler 2016; Ho 2003; Lam 2003; Mo et al. 2019; Ueno 2003). For instance, Lam (2003:354) suggests:

Middle and high school girls were mocking the adult world by engaging in *enjo kōsai*. When Japanese teenage girls borrow the term ‘*kōsai*’ [meaning socializing and entertaining] and re-attribute the meaning to ‘*enjo kōsai*’ to describe their own

economic activities and way of life, 'kōsai' turns into a parody of the adult world, an imitation of their father to the extreme.

Chu and Laidler (2016) argue:

What is new about CD is that many adolescents enter into it not out of poverty or coercion, but for a myriad of psychological and sociological reasons, such as the fulfillment of materialistic desires, sexual curiosity, the assertion of sexual autonomy, the need for recognition, and the transformation of intimacy in modern times.

Chu (2018:195) writes that compensated dating “serves as a way for women to make use of their new sexual autonomy to reflect their selves or to gain financial independence.”

Framing compensated dating as a means of asserting one's autonomy as a teenager and emerging adult discursively associates such activities with sexual precociousness and conjures affects like anxiety. These discursive constructions elicit the stereotypes of the Dragon Lady and the Oriental Deviant. The Dragon Lady is portrayed as sexually excessive, “desirable, deceitful, and dangerous” (Espiritu 2008:94), while the “Oriental” as deviant was used to signify Asian American domestic laborers as childlike yet sexually threatening (Lee 1999). Such portrayals perpetuate the hypersexualization of Asian women and girls. Additionally, these portrayals imply that Asian men who engage in compensated dating are infantile, sexually backward, and yet sexually predatory.

Discourses surrounding compensated dating draw upon gendered, racialized controlling images of lonely, sexually and socially awkward (or even backward) Asian men and diminutive and submissive, yet duplicitous and hypersexual, Asian girls and women (Espiritu 2008; Hwang and Parreñas 2021; Lee 1999; Shimizu 2007). Although unequal power dynamics exist in these transactions due to class, gender, and age inequalities, discourses surrounding compensated dating ignore the fact that, in this cultural context, paying for nonsexual social companionship is commonly practiced and accepted. By

portraying these transactions as exclusively sexual rather than broadly social and by misrepresenting the Asian public as widely supportive of child sexual exploitation, Western discourses on compensated dating like those put forward by the United Nations (de Boer-Buquicchio 2015) and the U.S. Department of State (2015) justify foreign intervention and place Western nations in a higher hierarchical position. More insidiously, depictions of compensated dating as representative of an essentially perverse Asian sexuality evoke disgust and suspicion among outside observers. These affects promote xenophobic, racist attitudes that regard Western cultural and moral values as superior to those found in Eastern nations. These attitudes, in turn, justify imperialist policies aimed at controlling Asian political and economic affairs as well as influencing Asian cultural and social affairs (Leheny 2006).

3.8 Intersectional Approaches to Transactional Sex

Often, sex work research is concerned with whether sex work is exploitative or empowering, a form of violence or a form of labor. Intersectional feminists have long suggested that single-axis logics such as these either/or approaches “can suppress contradictions and alternative possibilities” and “may also create conflict or enforce divisions where there may, in fact, be none” (May 2015:65; see also Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989). Therefore, single-axis logics should be replaced with matrix logics and a both/and approach, which “offers ways to evaluate a situation from multiple standpoints, creates room to identify shared logics while accounting for differences, and can be used to approach tensions or contradictions as having logics and implications of their own, rather than treating them primarily as problems to smooth over” (May 2015:65). It may be more fruitful to approach transactional sex research intersectionally, identifying multiple

circulations of power, demonstrating how they constellate, and addressing how their intersections maintain subordination and inequality and uphold power and privilege (May 2015).

This aligns with the research conducted by Gunnarsson and Strid (2022) and Recio (2021) regarding the sexual coercion that takes place within sugar arrangements; by Brouard and Crewe (2014), Dahl (2015), Fielding-Miller et al. (2016), Hoss and Blokland (2018), Hunter (2010), Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2019), Selikow and Mbulaheni (2013), and Shefer et al. (2012) regarding the multiple configurations, meanings, and outcomes of transactional sex in African contexts; and by Kinsella (2014) and Leheny (2006) regarding the multiple representations of and reactions to compensated dating in Asia. These authors' works share a sense of curiosity about and empathy for their research participants as well as a critical stance toward white supremacist capitalist patriarchal norms, values, and practices.

3.9 Conclusion

It is imperative that researchers who study transactional sex utilize intersectional frameworks that actively seek to challenge dominant power structures to avoid contributing to international moral panics that perpetuate hegemonic Western discourses that traffic in imperialist, patriarchal, racist stereotypes. Overall, the dominant ways in which various configurations of transactional sex are discursively represented in the academic literature promote the notion that Western culture endorses gender equity and ethical economic and legal systems, while non-Western cultures uphold gender inequality and unethical economic and legal systems. American and European women are regarded as either sexually and financially exploited or as sexually liberated and responsible enough to wield

their sexuality as a tool for financial and social empowerment, reflecting Western ambivalent sexism. Meanwhile, African women are portrayed as either sexually and economically subjugated or sexually and economically irresponsible, depending on their relationship with a Western nongovernmental organization and a politics of respectability. Finally, Asian women and girls are depicted as simultaneously sexually submissive and duplicitous, replicating the West's Orientalist fantasies about Asian people. These imperialist discourses erase the nuance and complexity of transactional sex, and the affective strategies deployed in these discourses discourage empathy and understanding in favor of judgment and distancing. Ultimately, ethical academic storytelling must reckon with the multiple domains in which power circulates through gender, sexual, racial, and class dynamics. Doing so requires the complication of single-axis logics and either/or thinking through matrix logics and both/and approaches that capture the ways subjects can be simultaneously exploited and empowered, oppressed and oppressive, dependent and independent, subjugated and dominant.

3.10 Current Research

My project attempts to incorporate matrix logics and both/and approaches to understand the multiplicity of sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's experiences. I employ digital ethnographic methods to accomplish this, which I outline in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4. DIGITAL DISCOURSES: *USING DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS TO STUDY TRANSACTIONAL SEX*

4.1 Tumblr

Digital ethnography denotes research design, data collection, and theory development as iterative, inductive, emergent processes always ongoing, and it necessitates multiple data collection strategies (Hine 2015; Markham and Baym 2009). Rather than conceptualizing digital practices and behaviors as separate from “real-life” ones, digital ethnography conceptualizes the internet as embedded within broader social contexts and as experienced in an embodied way by users (Hine 2015). Because digital technology is multiplicative and emergent, it requires interdisciplinary, emergent methods to study it (Hine 2015). I performed a digital ethnography of sugar babies’ Tumblr communities, gathering demographic data from my research participants, immersing myself in their social media environment, speaking with them about their experiences, and analyzing their social media posts. Once I collected all of my data, I performed a textual analysis with an eye toward postfeminist sentiment (Evans and Riley 2014).

4.1.1 Sample

The Tumblr community in this study is known in social network research as a “network of implicitly undirected ties,” which involves individuals who may not recognize ties with one another but are grouped together by a researcher based on certain criteria (Ackland and Zhu 2015:229). This type of network is largely hidden or invisible because the connection is formed by researchers based on “co-usage or co-occurrence” of tags or keywords rather than by the individuals involved (Ackland and Zhu 2015:230). In this case, the network, or community, being studied is tied together through co-usage of keywords

and tags relating to sugar arrangements. While previous studies of Tumblr networks of implicitly undirected ties have utilized Tumblr's Application Programming Interface (API) to extract the most popular posts on the site tagged with particular words or phrases, I had to utilize a different method. Tumblr's API stopped supporting the mass collection of sexual content from the site after its ban, and all of the tags related to sugar arrangements are marked as sexual content by Tumblr's algorithm.

I took a purposive convenience sample of 17 accounts on Tumblr using the keywords "sugaring," "sugar baby," "spoiled girlfriend," "spoiled gf," "high-value woman," and "hvw," excluding irrelevant accounts. Of the 17 study participants, 6 identified as sugar babies, 1 identified as both a sugar baby and a spoiled girlfriend, 3 identified as spoiled girlfriends, 2 identified as both spoiled girlfriends and high-value women, and 5 identified as high-value women. For the purposes of textual analysis, those with multiple identifications were counted only as spoiled girlfriends. Each study participant gave informed consent to complete a survey, 15 gave informed consent to collect data from their blogs, and 5 gave informed consent to complete an interview. The survey sample consisted of 4 participants who identified as sugar babies, 1 who identified as both a sugar baby and a spoiled girlfriend, 2 who identified as spoiled girlfriends, 2 who identified as both spoiled girlfriends and high-value women, and 5 who identified as high-value women. The interview sample consisted of 2 participants who identified as spoiled girlfriends and 3 who identified as high-value women. This sample size is consistent with comparable studies (Brett and Maslen 2021; Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2017; Haimson et al. 2021; Hart 2015). Although this methodology does not typically produce a sample that is

representative of the general population, this was not a deterrent to this type of exploratory, descriptive research.

4.1.2 Data Collection

To obtain the primary texts for my textual analysis, I used Tumblr's API, which allows the extraction of 20 posts at a time from a particular blog. My dataset consists of 300 posts from 15 blogs, 20 posts from each blog. This number of posts is roughly consistent with comparable studies (Seko and Lewis 2018; Sybert 2021), though some studies utilize more posts (Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2017; Kanai 2017; Pilipets and Paasonen 2020) and some utilize fewer (Jacobsen, Devor, and Hodge 2022; Vásquez and Creel 2017; Zeglin and Mitchell 2014).

To gain entry into the sugar baby community as an ethnographer, I set up a Tumblr account to establish my legitimacy as a researcher (Barratt and Maddox 2016). This account included a photo of myself, my name and institutional affiliation, a description of the study, and contact information for interested research participants. I used this account to establish contact with the owners of the Tumblr blogs in my sample and to follow them to immerse myself in their digital environment.

To incentivize participants, I compensated them each \$50 for completing the Qualtrics survey and interview: \$10 upon completing the survey and \$40 upon completing the interview. I offered research participants their choice of either text-based interviews, virtual audio interviews, or virtual video interviews using WhatsApp or Signal, both of which offer instantaneous text, audio, and video communication with end-to-end encryption to ensure security.

Through 2-hour-long semi-structured interviews, I collected data related to research participants' Tumblr usage, attitudes and experiences related to sugar arrangements, spoiled girlfriend arrangements, and/or high-value relationships, and future aspirations (see Appendix 1). Information related to Tumblr usage was collected using the questions: "How did you first get introduced to Tumblr?" "How did you find the accounts that you currently follow?" "What is your relationship like with your followers?" "Your mutuals [mutual followers]?" "How do you use Tumblr? For instance, how often, how long, for what purpose(s), what do you post?" "What do you like about Tumblr compared to other social networking sites, and why?" "What do you dislike, and why?" "How has your relationship with Tumblr changed over the years?" and "How has Tumblr's ban on sexual content affected you?"

Information related to participants' attitudes about sugar arrangements, spoiled girlfriend arrangements, and/or high-value relationships was collected using the questions: "What does hypergamy mean to you?" "How would you define a sugar arrangement/spoiled girlfriend arrangement/high-value relationship?" "How would you describe an 'ideal' sugar arrangement/spoiled girlfriend arrangement/high-value relationship?" "How do you differentiate between sugar arrangements/spoiled girlfriend arrangements/high-value relationships and other types of intimate relationships?" "How would you define a sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman?" "How would you describe an 'ideal' sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman?" "How would you define a sugar daddy/spoiling boyfriend/high-value man?" and "How would you describe an 'ideal' sugar daddy/spoiling boyfriend/high-value man?"

Information related to participants' experiences related to sugar arrangements, spoiled girlfriend arrangements, and/or high-value relationships was collected using the questions: "How did you start sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up?" "What motivated you to start sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up?" "How has your experience sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up changed over the years?" "Describe what you love about sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up." "Describe what you dislike about sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up." "How do you interact with other sugar babies/spoiled girlfriends/high-value women?" "How have your interactions with other sugar babies/spoiled girlfriends/high-value women changed over time?" "How do you interact with your sugar daddy(ies)/spoiling boyfriend(s)/high-value men?" "How have these interactions changed over time?" "Do you talk about sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up with your friends?" "If so, how do you talk about it with them?" "If not, why don't you talk about it with them?" "Do you talk about sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up with your family?" "If so, how do you talk about it with them?" and "If not, why don't you talk about it with them?"

Information about participants' future aspirations was collected using the questions "How do you imagine your love life in 10 years?" and "How do you imagine your work life in 10 years?" Finally, I asked, "What advice might you give to someone who is considering becoming a sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman?"

4.1.3 Measures

I collected demographic information including age, gender identity, racial/ethnic identity, sexual orientation, education, country of origin, country of residence, area of residence, employment status, annual employment-related income, relationship status

(apart from any sugar relationship), and people providing financial assistance (from people other than a sugar daddy). These demographic variables were used as descriptive statistics to enrich my understanding of participants and to guide my future research questions, rather than as independent variables for analysis. For all demographic variables, the option “prefer not to answer” was presented along with all other options. Age (see A in Appendix 2) was measured continuously, with participants asked to provide their age in years. Participants who reported being under 18 years of age would not have been permitted to continue the survey, although no participants reported being below 18 years of age. Gender identity (see G in Appendix 2) was measured nominally, with options including “cisgender woman,” “cisgender man,” “transgender woman,” “transgender man,” “nonbinary,” and “other (please specify).” Racial/ethnic identity (see R in Appendix 2) was measured nominally, with participants being given the option to select any number of the following that they felt describes them: “Asian,” “Black or African American,” “Latino/a,” “Native American,” “Pacific Islander,” “White or Caucasian,” and “other (please specify).” Sexual orientation (see SO in Appendix 2) was measured nominally, with options including “heterosexual,” “homosexual,” “bisexual,” and “other (please specify).”

Country of residence (see CR in Appendix 2) and country of origin (see CO in Appendix 2) were measured nominally using a drop-down menu from which respondents could choose any country. Immigration status was measured by counting those who reported differing country of residence and country of origin as immigrants and counting all others as non-immigrants. Area of residence (see AR in Appendix 2) was measured nominally using the categories “urban,” “suburban,” and “rural.” Education (see E in Appendix 2) was measured ordinally using a multiple-choice question regarding

respondents' highest level of education completed, with choices including "some high school," "high school diploma or GED," "some technical training," "technical certification," "some college," "associate degree," "bachelor's degree," "some graduate school," or "graduate degree." Employment status (see ES in Appendix 2), discounting transactional sexual labor, was measured nominally, with participants asked to select any number of the following that applied to them: "employed full time (40 or more hours per week)," "employed part time (up to 39 hours per week)," "unemployed and currently looking for work," "unemployed and not currently looking for work," "student," "retired," "homemaker," "self-employed," and "unable to work."

Annual employment-related income (see EI in Appendix 2), excluding income from transactional sex, was measured ordinally, with options including "Less than \$20,000," "\$20,000 to \$34,999," "\$35,000 to \$49,999," "\$50,000 to \$74,999," "\$75,000 to \$99,999," and "Over \$100,000." Financial assistance (see FA in Appendix 2), apart from assistance from sugar daddies, was measured nominally, with participants being given the option to select any of the following from which they receive financial assistance: "relative(s)," "friend(s)," "significant other(s)," "other (please specify)," or "no one." Participants were able to choose more than one option. Relationship status (see RS in Appendix 2) outside of the sugar relationship(s) was measured nominally, with options including "single and not dating," "single and dating," "in a committed monogamous relationship," "in a committed nonmonogamous relationship," "married or in a domestic partnership," or "other (please specify)."

I also collected information specific to sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and/or high-value women, including self-identity, relationship-related income, and future

aspirations. These variables were used as descriptive statistics to enrich my understanding of participants and to guide my future research questions, rather than as independent variables for analysis. Self-description (see SD in Appendix 2) was measured nominally, with participants being given the option to select any number of the following that they felt describe them: “sugar baby,” “spoiled girlfriend,” “high-value woman,” and/or “sex worker.” Monthly income from transactional sex—sugar arrangements, spoiled relationships, or high-value relationships—(see TI in Appendix 2) was measured continuously, with respondents being asked to enter their estimated monthly income in U.S. dollars. Future aspirations (see F in Appendix 2) was measured nominally, with participants being given the option to select any number of the following: “having a professional career,” “being a homemaker,” “being a stay-at-home mother,” “being a sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman,” “going to school,” or “other (please specify).”

4.1.4 Data Analysis

I analyzed Tumblr blog data qualitatively using inductive textual analysis, identifying themes as they emerged from the data (McKee 2003). Once themes began recurring and no new themes emerged, I coded the posts according to the following emergent themes: self-help, luxury, relationships, race, gender performance, manifestation, class distinction, bodily capital, and miscellaneous. I then summed the codes and performed a chi-square test of independence on each one to determine if there was a statistically significant association between sugar babies’, spoiled girlfriends’, and high-value women’s self-identifications and frequency of each type of post. For post types that were statistically significantly associated with self-identification, separate chi-square tests of independence were performed for sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value

women to determine the nature of the relationship. All of the variables in each chi-square test had expected frequencies greater than or equal to 5, following methodological recommendations (Anon 2008). I also performed a textual analysis on data collected through my interviews.

4.2 TikTok

4.2.1 Sample and Data Collection

On TikTok, I used the Python package Pyktok (Freelon and Bach 2022) to gather the top 15 videos (TikTok's API only allows the extraction of the top 15 videos) associated with the hashtags "sugarbabylife," "sugarbaby," "spoiledgirlfriend," "spoiledgf," "highvaluedwoman," and "highvaluedwomen," leading to a sample of 90 posts. Although this methodology does not typically produce a sample that is representative of the general population, this is not a deterrent to this type of exploratory, descriptive research.

4.2.2 Data Analysis

I analyzed the videos qualitatively using inductive textual analysis, identifying themes as they emerged from the data (McKee 2003). Once themes began recurring and no new themes emerged, I coded the posts according to the following emergent themes: relationships, advice, gender performance, conspicuous consumption, money, gender differences, and miscellaneous. I then summed the codes and performed a chi-square test of independence on each one to determine if there was a statistically significant association between sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's self-identifications and frequency of each type of post. For post types that were statistically significantly associated with self-identification, separate chi-square tests of independence were

performed for sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women to determine the nature of the relationship. All of the variables in each chi-square test had expected frequencies greater than or equal to 5, following methodological recommendations (Anon 2008).

4.3 Conclusion

In the next two chapters, I detail the results of my Tumblr digital ethnography and TikTok textual analysis.

CHAPTER 5. PRETTY PRIVILEGE: *SUGAR BABIES, SPOILED GIRLFRIENDS, AND HIGH-VALUE WOMEN ON TUMBLR*

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the results of my digital ethnography of the hypergamous community on Tumblr, including survey data, interview findings, and outcomes of a mixed-methods analysis of blog content. I find significant overlap between sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women, and, in fact, many women in my sample identify with more than one label. All three groups are interested in upward socioeconomic mobility, pursue intimate relationships as a means for their desired class mobility, and share posts that reflect postfeminist sentiment (described in detail in Chapter 2).

However, there are distinctions between the three groups. Sugar babies are differentiated by the more transactional and occupational connotations of their identities as well as their potential nonmonogamy and potentially nonsexual relationships. Spoiled girlfriends, meanwhile, are perceived as similar to sugar babies but distinguished by the less transactional nature of their relationships, which are more monogamous and presumed to involve sex. High-value women are more difficult to define, but most participants agree that they are distinguished by their emphasis on self-improvement.

All three groups use Tumblr to share advice about gender performance, relationships, and class distinction. This advice may be hegemonic or counterhegemonic depending on the politics of the blog user. Race is a salient theme of many of the blogs in my sample, as the majority of the sample are women of color, particularly Black women. Additionally, the women in my sample use Tumblr to share ideas and images related to luxury and to display and try to improve their bodily capital. Finally, some participants in

my sample share posts evoking ideas about manifestation and controlling one's own destiny.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will detail the results of my survey, outline the findings of my interviews, focusing on hypergamous women's boundary maintenance and intimate trajectories, and summarize the outcomes of my mixed-methods analyses of hypergamous women's Tumblr posts.

5.2 Tumblr Survey Results

The results of the survey distributed through Tumblr are shown in Table 5.1 below. The mean age of the survey participants is 27 years, and the median age is 25 years (SD = 8; range = 19 – 56). Sixteen survey participants (94.12%) identify as cisgender women, while one participant (5.88%) identifies as a transgender woman. The sample contains ten (58.82%) Black, African, or African American participants, eight (17.65%) White or Caucasian participants, two (11.76%) Asian participants, one (5.88%) multiracial participant, and one (5.88%) who prefers not to answer. The sample includes thirteen (76.47%) heterosexual participants, three (17.65%) bisexual participants, and one (5.88%) participant who prefers not to answer. One participant (5.88%) reports that her highest education completed is some high school, one (5.88%) reports completing her high school diploma or GED, one (5.88%) reports completing a technical certification, five (29.41%) report completing some college, one (5.88%) reports completing an Associate degree, five (29.41%) report completing a Bachelor's degree, two (11.76%) report completing some graduate school, and one (5.88%) reports completing a graduate degree. Six survey participants (35.29%) report their relationship status as single and dating, five participants (29.41%) report being single and not dating, three participants (17.65%) report being in a

Table 5.1 Characteristics of Survey Variables (N = 17)

| Variable | <i>n</i> | % |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Age | | |
| 18 – 21 years | 3 | 17.65 |
| 22 – 25 years | 6 | 35.29 |
| 26 – 30 years | 5 | 29.41 |
| 31 years or older | 3 | 17.65 |
| Gender Identity | | |
| Cisgender woman | 16 | 94.12 |
| Transgender woman | 1 | 5.88 |
| Racial/Ethnic Identity | | |
| Asian | 2 | 11.76 |
| Black, African, or African American | 10 | 58.82 |
| White or Caucasian | 3 | 17.65 |
| Multiracial | 1 | 5.88 |
| Prefer not to answer | 1 | 5.88 |
| Sexual Orientation | | |
| Heterosexual | 13 | 76.47 |
| Bisexual | 3 | 17.65 |
| Prefer not to answer | 1 | 5.88 |
| Education | | |
| Some high school | 1 | 5.88 |
| High school diploma or GED | 1 | 5.88 |
| Technical certification | 1 | 5.88 |
| Some college | 5 | 29.41 |
| Associate degree | 1 | 5.88 |
| Bachelor's degree | 5 | 29.41 |
| Some graduate school | 2 | 11.76 |
| Graduate degree | 1 | 5.88 |
| Country of Origin | | |
| United States of America | 9 | 52.94 |
| Canada | 2 | 11.76 |
| Kenya | 1 | 5.88 |
| Nigeria | 2 | 11.76 |
| Republic of Korea | 1 | 5.88 |
| South Africa | 2 | 11.76 |
| Country of Residence | | |
| United States of America | 12 | 70.59 |
| Canada | 2 | 11.76 |
| Kenya | 1 | 5.88 |
| Republic of Korea | 1 | 5.88 |
| South Africa | 1 | 5.88 |
| Immigration Status | | |
| Immigrant | 3 | 17.65 |
| Non-Immigrant | 14 | 82.35 |

(continued)

Table 5.1 (continued)

| Variable | <i>n</i> | % |
|-------------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Area of Residence | | |
| Rural | 1 | 5.88 |
| Suburban | 8 | 47.06 |
| Urban | 8 | 47.06 |
| Employment Status | | |
| Full-Time | 7 | 41.18 |
| Part-Time | 4 | 23.53 |
| Self-Employed | 4 | 23.53 |
| Student | 7 | 41.18 |
| Annual Employment-Related Income | | |
| Under \$20,000 | 3 | 17.65 |
| \$20,000 to \$34,999 | 2 | 11.76 |
| \$35,000 to \$49,999 | 5 | 29.41 |
| \$50,000 to \$74,999 | 4 | 23.53 |
| \$75,000 to \$99,999 | 2 | 11.76 |
| \$100,000 or more | 1 | 5.88 |
| Relationship Status | | |
| Single and not dating | 5 | 29.41 |
| Single and dating | 6 | 35.29 |
| In a committed monogamous relationship | 3 | 17.65 |
| In a committed nonmonogamous relationship | 1 | 5.88 |
| Married or in a domestic partnership | 2 | 11.76 |
| People Providing Financial Assistance | | |
| Significant other(s) | 5 | 29.41 |
| Relative(s) | 6 | 35.29 |
| Friend(s) | 2 | 11.76 |
| No one | 7 | 41.18 |
| Self-Description | | |
| Sugar baby | 3 | 17.65 |
| Spoiled girlfriend | 9 | 52.94 |
| High-Value woman | 11 | 64.71 |
| Sex worker | 2 | 11.76 |
| Monthly Income from Transactional Sex | | |
| \$999 or less | 3 | 17.65 |
| \$1,000 to \$1,999 | 2 | 11.76 |
| \$2,000 to \$2,999 | 2 | 11.76 |
| \$3,000 to \$4,999 | 2 | 11.76 |
| \$5,000 to \$9,999 | 3 | 17.65 |
| \$10,000 or above | 2 | 11.76 |
| Prefer not to answer | 3 | 17.65 |

(continued)

Table 5.1 (continued)

| Variable | <i>n</i> | % |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Future Aspirations | | |
| Being a sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman | 9 | 52.94 |
| Going to school | 2 | 11.76 |
| Having a professional career | 9 | 52.94 |
| Being a homemaker | 5 | 29.41 |
| Being a stay-at-home parent | 3 | 17.65 |
| Owning and running a business | 3 | 17.65 |

Note: The sum of some percentages is greater than 100 because participants were able to choose multiple answers for some questions.

committed monogamous relationship, two participants (11.76%) report being married or in a domestic partnership, and one participant (5.88%) reports being in a committed nonmonogamous relationship.

Nine participants (52.94%) report their country of origin is the United States of America, two (11.76%) report it is Canada, two (11.76%) report it is Nigeria, two (11.76%) report it is South Africa, one (5.88%) reports it is Kenya, and one (5.88%) reports it is the Republic of Korea. The country of residence is the United States of America for twelve participants (70.59%), Canada for two participants (11.76%), Kenya for one participant (5.88%), the Republic of Korea for one participant (5.88%), and South Africa for one participant (5.88%). Therefore, fourteen participants (82.35%) are non-immigrants and three (17.65%) are immigrants. Eight survey participants (47.06%) reside in an urban area, eight (47.06%) in a suburban area, and one (5.88%) in a rural area.

Seven participants (41.18%) are employed full time, seven (41.18%) are students, four (23.53%) are employed part time, and four (23.53%) are self-employed. Annual income excluding income from transactional sex is under \$20,000 for three participants (17.65%), between \$20,000 and \$34,999 for two participants (11.76%), between \$35,000 and \$49,999 for five participants (29.41%), between \$50,000 and \$74,999 for four participants (23.53%), between \$75,000 and \$99,999 for two participants (11.76%), and \$100,000 or more for one participant (5.88%). Seven participants (41.18%) report receiving financial assistance from no one, six (35.29%) report receiving financial assistance from relative(s), five (29.41%) report receiving financial assistance from significant other(s), and two (11.76%) report receiving financial assistance from friends.

Of the survey participants, eleven (64.71%) describe themselves as high-value women, nine (52.94%) describe themselves as spoiled girlfriends, three (17.65%) describe themselves as sugar babies, and two (11.76%) describe themselves as sex workers. The mean monthly income from transactional sex is \$5,287.50, and the median is \$2,750.00 ($SD = \$6,739.32$; range = \$200.00 – \$20,000.00), with three participants (17.65%) preferring not to answer. Reported future aspirations include being a sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman for nine participants (52.94%), having a professional career for nine participants (52.94%), being a homemaker for five participants (29.41%), being a stay-at-home parent for three participants (17.65%), owning and running a business for three participants (17.65%) and going to school for two participants (11.76%).

5.3 Tumblr Interview Results

Demographic information for interviewees is shown in Table 5.2 below. All interviewees also completed the survey above. Two interviewees identify as spoiled girlfriends, while three identify as high-value women. While none of the interviewees currently identified as sugar babies at the time of interviews, two of them previously identified as sugar babies. The mean age of the interviewees is 26 years ($SD = 3$; range = 22 – 28). Four interviewees identify as cisgender women, and one interviewee identifies as a transgender woman. Three interviewees identify as heterosexual, one prefers not to label her sexuality, and one identifies as bisexual. All of my interviewees identify as women of color, with two identifying as Black, one identifying as East Asian, and two identifying as multiracial. Three of the interviewees reside in the United States, one resides in Canada, and one resides in the Republic of Korea. None of the interviewees are immigrants.

Table 5.2 Interviewee Characteristics

| Pseudonym | Self-Identification | Age | Gender Identity | Sexual Orientation | Racial/Ethnic Identity | Country of Residence |
|-----------|---------------------|-----|-------------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Keira | Spoiled Girlfriend | 26 | Cisgender Woman | Heterosexual | Multiracial | United States of America |
| Charlotte | Spoiled Girlfriend | 22 | Cisgender Woman | Heterosexual | Black | Canada |
| Jamila | High-Value Woman | 24 | Cisgender Woman | Heterosexual | Multiracial | United States of America |
| Faye | High-Value Woman | 28 | Cisgender Woman | Prefer not to Answer | East Asian | Republic of Korea |
| Maya | High-Value Woman | 28 | Transgender Woman | Bisexual | Black | United States of America |

5.3.1 Hypergamy

Interviewees define hypergamy in varying ways. However, all of their definitions include upward socioeconomic mobility as an end goal. Keira defines hypergamy: “Hypergamy to me is a lifestyle choice in which a woman prioritizes dating or marrying men who specifically have the financial resources or power to maintain or improve her lifestyle.” Charlotte defines hypergamy as “mingling, dating and/or marrying someone with a higher income, knowledge than you.” Faye says, “To me it’s just a dictionary definition, like marrying someone of a higher socioeconomic standing.” Maya says, “Hypergamy to me means having a clear idea of the life one wishes to experience and having the skill and will to acquire it.” Unfortunately, I interviewed Jamila before deciding to include a question about hypergamy in the interviews, and she did not respond to my later attempts to ask her this question.

5.3.2 Boundary Maintenance

Interviewees use varying rationales to differentiate sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women. They often describe sugar babies as more occupational and transactional. For instance, Keria says, “I would say that being a sugar baby has become something that’s more of an occupation. There's a transaction there.”

Similarly, Charlotte says:

Being a sugar baby is transactional. Whatever you and your sugar daddy agreed to in terms of allowing meetings, what you give is what you get. For example, if I’m your sugar daddy, and I agree to see you three times a month in exchange for your time and company, I will give you an allowance of \$5,000 per month, gifts included.

Further, Faye explains, “Maybe it’s more straightforward, like, oh you know, I’ll pretend to be your lover for X amount of money a month, something like that.” Maya agrees:

Personally, I view sugar babies as people whose main goal is to gain a form of wealth from someone who understands and agrees that is the basis of their interaction with each other. This could be from interactions with one or more people. However, it’s set as a clearly defined exchange of energy between those people.

Jamila, on the other hand, sees all three identities as transactional and differentiates sugar babies based on their presumed nonmonogamy, saying, “A sugar baby is someone who sees multiple men for monetary gain.” Finally, Charlotte suggests that sugar babies do not necessarily have sex with their sugar daddies while spoiled girlfriends do have sex with their boyfriends:

If you’re a spoiled girlfriend, I just think of it as me dating the person I’m with like I would if I’m dating a square person. So at some point with the person you’re dating you would be physically intimate. With a sugar baby, you don’t have to sleep with a sugar daddy unless that’s what’s in your arrangement. It’s like a business deal to me—mutually beneficial.

Overall, interviewees distinguish sugar babies from spoiled girlfriends and high-value women based on their more explicitly transactional relationships, mirroring occupational labor, as well as their potential nonmonogamy and potentially nonsexual relationships with their sugar daddies.

Spoiled girlfriends are often differentiated from sugar babies based on their presumed monogamy and the less transactional, more mutually emotional nature of their relationships. For instance, Charlotte says:

Being a spoiled girlfriend is being in a real committed relationship with a man of means, so they get more benefits than just a sugar baby. It’s not as transactional. A woman is in a committed relationship with someone and happens to get spoiled with gifts and money in the process.

Similarly, Jamila says, a “spoiled girlfriend is someone who sees one man and gains money, items, etc., from that relationship.” Faye explains, “When you’re a spoiled girlfriend, you’re actually lovers, but they have to give you money still.” Finally, Maya argues, “Spoiled girlfriends are just that: girlfriends who have partners that cater to them in ways that they wouldn’t for anyone who isn’t their official girlfriend.” Keira, on the other hand, sees spoiled relationships as more mutual, stating, “I feel like you shouldn’t ask for anything that you yourself can’t give or provide.” She further explains:

I would say with my current relationship right now, what makes it ideal is the fact that I’m so respected and treated like a person, a human being with feelings. And I respect him. He’s not a cash cow or just a bank account. I view him as a human being, and within that relationship, one of the many ways that he shows that he loves and cares about me is just paying attention to things that I like.

In general, interviewees distinguish spoiled girlfriends from sugar babies and high-value women based on their sexual monogamy, increased emotional intimacy, and less explicit transactions.

Finally, high-value women are a much more amorphous concept. Charlotte explains:

The term ‘high-value woman’ is thrown around a lot, so its meaning is very vague and means something else to every person, so there isn’t a definite answer, but most people agree that a high-value woman is someone who takes care of herself, knows exactly what she wants in life, and will not settle for less.

Similarly, Jamila answers, “A high-value woman is someone who knows her value and who she is and acts accordingly in any type of relationship, takes pride in her appearance, etc.” Faye offers her perspective, saying:

As a high-value woman, I don’t really do any kind of arrangements or exclusive relationships. It’s about heightening my value where, therefore, men spend money on me. A high-value relationship has to have good connection and communication

and things, like any other relationship, but both people have to be driven. For me, a high-value relationship would mean that my partner is financially or socially established and prominent.

Maya, meanwhile, says:

I define a high-value woman as a woman who recognizes the responsibility of creating a life she genuinely enjoys living and ultimately depends on herself to provide that life. She understands what she wants out of life and why she wants it, and she focuses on ways to acquire and maintain that life at the least compromise to herself.

High-value women are the least clearly defined group, but interviewees agree that high-value women are those seeking self-improvement and “elevation” in all areas of their lives, including intimate relationships.

Still, interviewees describe sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women as being similar to or even overlapping with each other. For instance, Keira explains that all three share an “interest in having a luxurious lifestyle, or maybe even wanting to romanticize your life.” Charlotte explains, “I’ve been all three at some point, but I’d say I’m now a spoiled girlfriend. . . You can be a high-value woman and be a sugar baby or spoiled girlfriend.” Faye, who has been a sugar baby but now identifies as a high-value woman, explains, “The base premise of each is the same, it’s just a different flavor.”

5.3.3 Entry Points

Some participants describe past relationships that were unhealthy or even abusive. The end of these relationships spurred introspection that led them to hypergamy. For instance, Keira explains how she became a spoiled girlfriend after the end of a six-year relationship that was “very unhealthy and very unfulfilling”:

I spent two or three years by myself, just looking into who I was and what I was going to require for myself, outside of what I've seen growing up, outside of societal

norms and standards, and outside of what I felt like being with that person. . . So I decided I never wanted to be with anyone who was never willing to invest in me because I feel like if you're investing in someone, that's when you really love someone. . . So that became a requirement for me.

Apart from her own past relationship, Keira also describes the unhappiness she's witnessed in others' relationships. For instance, she says:

And when I looked more into what being a woman meant for me, ... I kind of took note of the fact that there's ... extremes with the types of women that I've seen in my life. You have women who get everything that they want in a physical sense, but it always comes at cheapening oneself, or you know, submitting to men or stroking the egos of men who they don't actually like or care for. And then there's women who were in relationships that may have been fulfilling at one point, but at the same time, a lot of them feel like while having a partner, they're facing a lot of things in life alone or doing a lot for themselves alone, while having a partner.

Keira further explicates the perceived gender inequality she has witnessed in others' relationships:

I know growing up, even just from a cultural standpoint, my mom was always very submissive and very much took care of everything having to do with the household and the children while also working, which I call that the second shift. So I'm doing everything that has to do with at home, but then I'm also going to work and doing everything that you do. The only difference is you come home, and you decide that you're tired and that your job ends there because you went to work and you made money. . . There's women who ... feel everything in the relationship should be 50/50, although the dynamic itself is not 50/50.

In response to this gender inequality, Keira explains the logic of spoiled relationships:

If I'm going to be with someone and pretty much run our household and our livelihood, I should be compensated for my time because if you hired someone else to do these roles, they would be paid for it. A housekeeper, a household manager, and nanny, they would all be paid and be making a certain amount of money. Meanwhile, there's women who do these things for free. They're barely told thank you. They're not being given a certain amount of money to just spend on themselves or indulging themselves at all.

Finally, Keira opines on the trend of hypergamy more generally, stating, "I feel like as women, we're in a very interesting renaissance of all these different takes on what a

relationship should look like right now, for it to be beneficial for the woman, because a lot of the time our relationships aren't."

Charlotte explains how she began leveling up, "I was 20 years old at the time, and I just got out of a very bad relationship, and I wanted more for myself. I searched on Google 'how can I become a better person,' and that's how I came across my first femininity and leveling up video during the lockdown in 2020." Faye describes the current state of intimate relationships, "I see way too many women who stay in a relationship that doesn't serve them or even sabotages them actively. I've been in that place myself many, many years ago." She then explains how she became a sugar baby:

Because I was on Tumblr since I was very young, at like 20 or whatever, I was cognizant of the Tumblr sugar community, but it wasn't until I was more like 22 or 23 when I had just gotten out of a relationship with a verbally abusive person, and I was just like, "Fuck this. If I have to deal with a man, I'm getting paid." So that's how I got involved in the sugar community, actually.

Faye explains how she went from sugaring to escorting to leveling up:

So I was a sugar baby, and then, at least where I lived, it had a pretty low return on investment, so I was just like, "Actually, I think like escorting would be easier for me." So I escorted for quite a bit, and then the pandemic kind of killed escorting for me. I was still making enough money to get by, but it was never something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I kind of used it as a means to gain capital to do things that I actually want. You know, dating a broke man was still unfathomable to me, so I was like, "I am going to level up," because, you know, in the kind of general gold-digging community, I was exposed to all that kind of content. So what I actually want to do is level up. That's how I started.

Many interviewees describe discontent in their relationships, either with themselves or others, leading them down the path of transactional sex, which they perceive as a more balanced and beneficial relationship.

Rather than comparing her relationship to those of others, Maya explains that she compared her class position to that of her peers:

I recognized that I wanted a better quality of life at a very young age, like in elementary school. As I began to experience other people and see my friends' ways of living, I noticed that I didn't necessarily live in poverty, but there were many things I was denied because it just wasn't something that could be afforded at the time. Many of my friends didn't have this same challenge when it came to items or experiences they wanted, and I saw the benefit of having them as my friends. This mentality stayed with me more or less as I began to mature.

She further explains:

I've always had a very diverse group of friends and not all of them came from financially stable backgrounds. However, one thing I've always had in common with all of my friends and acquaintances is that we could figure out how to do whatever it is we wanted. That could mean raising funds, going places, or even just finding ways to make time to do absolutely nothing. I've always been attracted to people who know what they want and how to get what they want.

She then connects her experiences leveling up to her experience undergoing gender transition:

As I began to transition, I think it was just another way of exercising this mindset. As a trans woman, you won't meet a ton of people really willing to just give you what you want or need to live in a way that is most comfortable to you. It is a very goal-oriented thing, and I think some people are naturally goal-oriented, myself included.

For Maya, leveling up is a means of achieving her goals, whether economic or not.

5.3.4 Change Over Time

Interviewees describe their experiences with hypergamy as an upward trajectory toward more happiness, fulfillment, and money. When asked how her experience as a spoiled girlfriend has changed over time, Keira says:

I would say with the relationship that I'm in now, it changed in the sense of it becoming even less about the willingness to buy material things and instead someone being willing to invest their time, their energy and their resources towards things that they know are going to make me happy or make me successful or make me feel fulfilled as a person.

Charlotte describes the differences she has experienced leveling up, “Within the past two years I have gotten more respect, more money, and more happiness than I ever have, and I’m sure there’s more to come in the future.” Maya describes how her experience leveling up has changed over time:

The results of my choices have larger impacts on my life, for example, who I allow to be my close friends or intimate partners. There are a lot of learning experiences as well, I’ve learned what kinds of actions get me better results and what actions set me back from my goals. I’ve learned what makes me more comfortable and what makes me completely uncomfortable. It’s a constant evolution of myself as I grow with the world and society and the way it operates.

Faye explains her trajectory from sugaring to escorting to leveling up, “It has changed my relationship with myself. . . I am happier now, and that’s from a combination of all of the other circumstances in my life, so I would say leveling up isn’t the thing that made me happier, but it definitely helped.” Faye further explains how her experiences have changed:

When I was a sugar baby, I kind of had to, you know, convince them to be my sugar daddy, and that whole thing was exhausting, which is why I switched to escorting where I just put something on my ads that is like, “this is what I offer for this.” . . . So, say you’re escorting, or whatever. It was always about pleasing the people that are paying me so that they would pay me. So it was more straightforward but more transactional, but now it’s really about liking each other as people first and foremost and having an understanding that we’re both driven people and them appreciating that. . . Leveling up, I’ve decided to transition to look more inwards, be more introspective, and really figure out who I want to be and in what ways could I be better?

A common denominator in interviewees’ experiences is an upward trajectory leading to more satisfaction in their relationships with others and their relationships with themselves.

5.3.5 Positives and Negatives

Interviewees report an appreciation for the ways that hypergamy makes them feel like their partner cares about them, the luxurious lifestyle it affords them, and the increased

self-worth it provides them. For instance, Keira explains what being a spoiled girlfriend means to her, “I would say I like that it makes me feel seen and paid attention to, in a certain way. Like in an unconventional sense, someone spoiling you is someone showing up for you.” Charlotte describes the luxurious lifestyle she is afforded as a high-value woman: “I get flowers weekly, I don’t pay any bills, I’ll be going on my first trip with my partner in the spring, all paid for by him, shopping trips.” Jamila, meanwhile, attests to the increased self-worth she experiences: “I like that I know my worth, have strong boundaries in place, take care of my appearance and have pride in it, it’s empowering, and it makes life a lot more enjoyable.” Similarly, Faye says, “Just being in the leveling up mindset really makes me more efficient with my time and efficient with my energy. I’m making progress that’s sometimes measurable or visible, ... which is like a reward.”

Interviewees express few downsides to hypergamy, but those expressed include men’s sense of entitlement and the proliferation of conflicting advice about leveling up. For instance, Keira relays, “Because a man buys you something or thinks that he did something for you, now he feels entitled to your time or feels like he can be controlling, or, you know, just overall control the situation or the dynamic, which is not true.” Charlotte assures me that she does not dislike anything about leveling up, but maintains, “It’s always important to have your own money, etc., just in case anything happens.”

Jamila and Faye dislike the proliferation of what they perceive to be misinformation about high-value women and leveling up. For example, Jamila explains:

Since people are really just posting their experiences that aren’t backed by fact and research (myself included sometimes) and what they found works, that’s what gets disseminated, and it’s very common for people to accept that knowledge without doing their own research before applying it, and it creates a sort of cycle of misinformation.

Faye agrees, “Obviously everyone is going to have different definitions of leveling up. Okay, that’s your perspective, which doesn't have to be like mine. That’s okay, but I do think that some people are straight up wrong.” For instance, Faye shares posts on her blog criticizing many high-value women’s conservative gender politics, particularly those that glorify the role of a traditional housewife and demonize women, and particularly mothers, with jobs outside the home.

5.3.6 Emotional Support

Many interviewees say that the support they provide for the men in their life is primarily emotional in nature. For instance, Keira explains what she provides in her spoiled relationship:

I would say that I’m really good with emotional support and giving [my partner] the space to not only acknowledge his feelings, but to validate those feelings, because sometimes with men, I find that life already has invalidated a lot of what they feel and experience, so at the very least, that's when I feel like the deepest ways as a woman that you could kind of help them to feel comfortable and secure in that way.

Faye also says that she primarily provides emotional support to the high-value men in her life:

I have been in therapy since I was 17, so at this point I’ve reverse-engineered psychiatry. So they get a lot of what would be therapy if I was clinically certified, and that's what they like. But, I don't know, I do think they would benefit from an actual certified therapist, but for a lot of stigma and stuff, they don't want to.

Keira and Faye’s experiences reflect the gendered division of emotional labor in both commercial and noncommercial intimate relationships.

5.3.7 Tumblr

Interviewees report valuing Tumblr's sense of authenticity, anonymity, and customization, which mirrors the findings of previous studies (Cho 2018; Hart 2015; Renninger 2015; Xiao 2013). For instance, Keira says, "I feel like to a certain degree people on Tumblr are a lot more authentic to themselves," as opposed to Instagram, on which she feels you have "an image to uphold." Charlotte values Tumblr's anonymity and says, "It protects a lot of the girls who talk about leveling up and hypergamy. It's a safe space." Maya enjoys Tumblr's allowance for customization, saying, "What I like the most about Tumblr is the sense of control compared to some other social sites. Because I know the type of content I enjoy consuming and interacting with, I can customize on a deeper level how much interaction I have with it on Tumblr as compared to something like Instagram."

There are downsides to Tumblr, however. For instance, Keira reports that the platform is not always user-friendly because of its frequent updates and changes. Charlotte points out that Tumblr's anonymity can be a double-edged sword, "Because you can be anonymous on Tumblr, people can take advantage of that and use it as an excuse to be rude and berate women who choose to follow this [hypergamous] lifestyle." Maya is frustrated with the influence of politics on Tumblr's decision-making processes. For instance, she says:

There was a period of time where Tumblr was very involved in deactivating accounts on the site they deemed to be promoting Nazi propaganda. . . This created a negative experience for many users, including myself, because whatever program or screening that was being used was obviously flawed. . . Also, Tumblr gained a lot of attention for censoring accounts that contain and promote what they consider adult content. Once again, there are noticeable flaws in how that content is determined.

These findings mirror those of previous studies into Tumblr's benefits and downsides for users (Cho 2018).

5.4 Tumblr Post Results

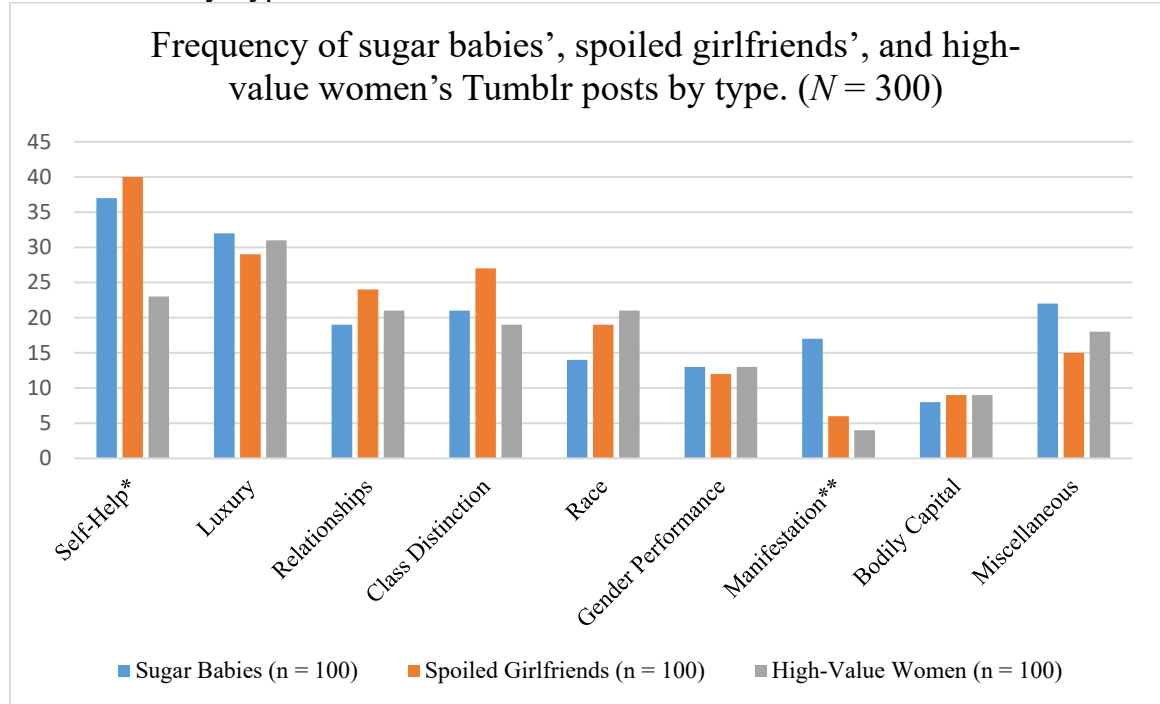
Results of the quantitative analyses of sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's Tumblr posts are shown in Table 5.3 and Figure 5.1 below. There are no significant associations between sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's self-identifications and their frequency of posts related to luxury, relationships, class distinction, race, gender performance, bodily capital, or miscellaneous. Sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's self-identifications are significantly associated with frequency of self-help (Pearson $\chi^2 = 7.410$; $p = .025$) and manifestation (Pearson $\chi^2 = 11.966$; $p = .003$) posts. High-value women are significantly less likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 7.208$; $p = .007$) to post about self-help than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends. Sugar babies are significantly more likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 11.722$; $p = .001$) to post about manifestation than spoiled girlfriends or high-value women, while high-value women are significantly less likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 4.579$; $p = .032$) to post about manifestation than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends.

Table 5.3 Sugar Babies', Spoiled Girlfriends', and High-Value Women's Tumblr Posts by Type.

| Post Type | <u>Sugar Babies</u> (<i>n</i> = 100) | | | <u>Spoiled Girlfriends</u> (<i>n</i> = 100) | | | <u>High-Value Women</u> (<i>n</i> = 100) | | | <u>Total</u> (<i>N</i> = 300) | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------|----------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------|----------------------------------------------|------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| | <i>f</i> | Pearson χ^2 | <i>p</i> | <i>f</i> | Pearson χ^2 | <i>p</i> | <i>f</i> | Pearson χ^2 | <i>p</i> | <i>f</i> | Pearson χ^2 | <i>p</i> |
| Self-Help | 37 | 0.908 | .341 | 40 | 3.000 | .083 | 23 | 7.208** | .007 | 100 | 7.410* | .025 |
| Luxury | 32 | 0.125 | .723 | 29 | 0.196 | .658 | 31 | 0.008 | .929 | 92 | 0.220 | .896 |
| Relationships | 19 | 0.487 | .485 | 24 | 0.636 | .425 | 21 | 0.010 | .921 | 64 | 0.755 | .686 |
| Class Distinction | 21 | 0.154 | .695 | 27 | 1.883 | .170 | 19 | 0.961 | .327 | 67 | 1.999 | .368 |
| Race | 14 | 1.626 | .202 | 19 | 0.102 | .750 | 21 | 0.915 | .339 | 54 | 1.762 | .414 |
| Gender Performance | 13 | 0.015 | .902 | 12 | 0.060 | .806 | 13 | 0.015 | .902 | 38 | 0.060 | .970 |
| Manifestation | 17 | 11.722** | .001 | 6 | 1.648 | .199 | 4 | 4.579* | .032 | 27 | 11.966** | .003 |
| Bodily Capital | 8 | 0.084 | .772 | 9 | 0.021 | .885 | 9 | 0.021 | .885 | 26 | 0.084 | .959 |
| Miscellaneous | 22 | 1.347 | .246 | 15 | 1.113 | .291 | 18 | 0.011 | .916 | 55 | 1.648 | .439 |

Note: ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. *f* = frequency. Sum of reported frequencies is greater than 280 because some posts fit multiple codes.

Figure 5.1 Frequency of Sugar Babies', Spoiled Girlfriends', and High-Value Women's Tumblr Posts by Type.



Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Qualitative results are detailed below. Quotes from blog posts are paraphrases or summaries to protect participants' digital privacy.

5.4.1 Self-Help

Many participants position themselves as experts in sugaring, having a spoiled relationship, and/or leveling up, and their followers submit questions to them seeking advice about clothing and makeup choices, relationships, and careers. Accordingly, participants offer advice on a wide variety of subjects. Often this advice places the burden of responsibility for success or failure on the individual. For instance, one spoiled girlfriend shares a post that reads, "Literally nobody cares if you fail to fulfill your potential and take your hopes and dreams to the grave. It's on YOU. It's on YOU to break the cycle of lethargy and apathy that's holding you hostage. It's not rocket science. Stop reading and take real action. It's all on YOU." The same user urges her followers to vocally repeat the following:

I am obsessed with being disciplined. I love fighting temptation and remaining focused on my goals. I love the satisfaction of achieving a goal through hyperfocus and self-control. I love that my discipline enables me to live beyond mediocrity, complacency, and misery. I am resilient, steadfast, strong, and capable.

She also writes, "Successful people sleep less than eight hours a night. They work weekends, wake up early, and don't take long vacations. You truly can't have your cake and eat it too. There will always be someone willing to work harder than you." Another spoiled girlfriend writes, "Many of you will never live your dream life, not because you aren't special or pretty, but because you did not believe in yourself or put in the necessary effort." This advice aligns with the ethos of hustle culture and the neoliberal pressure to maintain a high level of economic productivity.

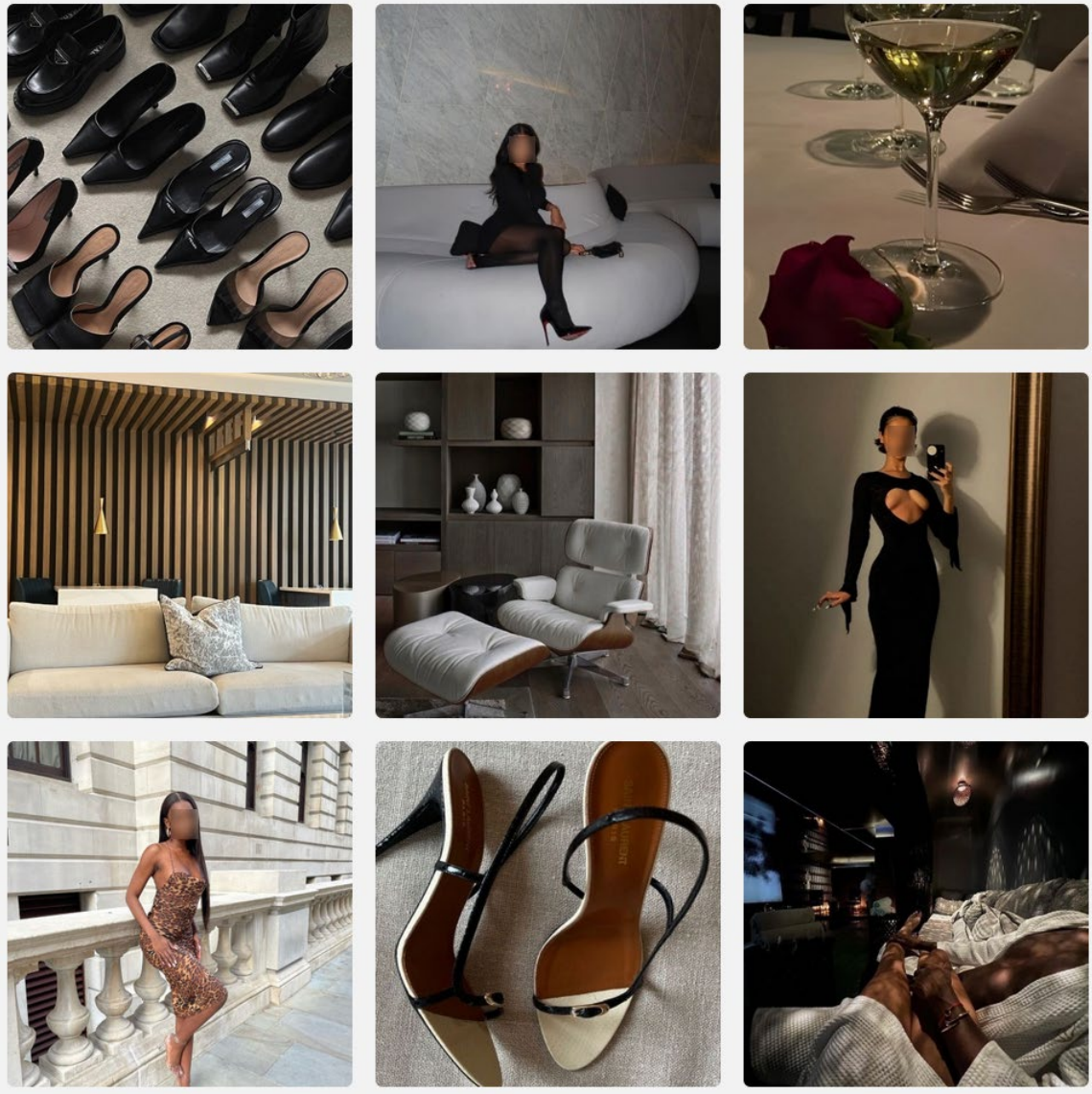
5.4.2 Luxury

In addition to self-help posts, many participants share images of and ideas about luxury. One high-value woman advocates for her followers to practice self-care, nourish their minds, intuition, and emotional intelligence, “refine” their bodies, and do other “sensual” activities to connect with the simple luxuries associated with “living well.” Other posts feature photos of exotic vacation destinations, designer clothing, and lavishly decorated interiors, as shown in the screenshot of a blog featured in Figure 5.2 (faces are blurred to protect subjects’ privacy).

5.4.3 Relationship Advice

Sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women also share practical advice with one another, encouraging firm boundaries in intimate relationships. For instance, one sugar baby receives a message from another sugar baby about a sugar daddy who was pressuring her to be physically intimate sooner than she was comfortable, and responds, “He obviously wants sex, and if you’re uncomfortable with that, set up boundaries. If he doesn’t respect them, drop him.” A high-value woman shares a screenshot of a tweet reading, “Allowing yourself to be constantly disrespected and denying your pain so you can keep the peace is not virtuous, it’s oppressive.” She also writes, “Don’t feel guilty for removing toxic people from your life, regardless of who they are. If they ignore your feelings, disregard your boundaries, and continue to harm you, they need to go.” In this way, hypergamous women protect themselves and one another from potential harm through encouragement and practical relationship advice.

Figure 5.2 Screenshot of a Hypergamous Woman's Blog.



5.4.4 Class Distinction

Other posts emphasize class distinction. For instance, a spoiled girlfriend writes, “Being vulnerable is low class. Elite, high-value people don’t overshare.” One post from a sugar baby reads, “Mind your appearance, dress elegantly, wear fragrance, and practice etiquette even if you’re spending the day at home by yourself. Class and sophistication aren’t just public performances, they’re a finer way of living in private as well.” Another sugar baby writes about the importance of posture, eye contact, and tone of voice in exuding confidence to “make life much easier.” Another sugar baby offers money management tips to help other sugar babies acquire “financial freedom.” Additionally, another sugar baby relates gender performance to class status:

Only lower-class women are brainwashed to be servile. Girls raised in lower-class families are programmed to be submissive to others perceived as having a higher class or social status, including men. Not that lower-class girls are better or worse, but the girls raised by upper-class families have an aura, firm boundaries, self-assurance, and charisma that come from being raised with an elite mindset. Boys treated them differently.

This sugar baby is sharing this story to encourage other sugar babies to mimic the confidence, or more accurately the habitus, of upper-class women.

One post by a high-value woman offers critical analysis of the differential class statuses of men and women as well as the class ideology of some self-described hypergamous women:

Some women believe that work sucks (they’re right in many ways) and that the “solution” is for women to be stay-at-home mothers or housewives because “all” you have to do is cook and clean. They venerate the man going out and making all the money—money that they presume will be given to them, money that they can’t independently access, money they view as compensation for successfully perpetuating archaic gender roles—meaning if they don’t meet the man’s standards, they don’t receive the money.

Another post shared by the same high-value woman reads:

The tradwife [traditional housewife] fantasy is primarily due to an aversion to hustle culture, but I think it's also due to antifeminist women fantasizing about different childhoods. They argue that their "feminist" mothers focused on careers, denigrated femininity, and pressured them to pursue professional careers. Their fantasy of what a childhood with a tradwife mother would look like is really just a fantasy of what a childhood of wealth and leisure would look like: slumber parties, dance lessons, aspiring to find a husband rather than a job, access to makeup and expensive clothes, baking, never getting dirty, etc. Antifeminists ignore that the basics of feminine socialization have less to do with social class and more to do with conditioning girls and women to please others, particularly men. Antifeminists grow up with feminine socialization, wishing they had more wealth and leisure, idealizing a feminine childhood, and then blame feminists for not getting it.

These posts indicate that, while some hypergamous women uncritically pursue class distinction, others actively criticize it and connect it with oppression.

5.4.5 Race

Interestingly, many of the women in my sample are women of color, mostly Black or multiracial. Many of them take care to share photos primarily featuring Black women and advice specifically for Black women about natural hair and wig tips, navigating racial matters in relationships, and expressing Black femininity in a society that associates femininity with whiteness. One Black sugar baby receives the question, "Do you think hypergamy should be discussed publicly by Black women? I don't think it's wise," and answers:

I don't think hypergamy should be discussed publicly by anyone of any race. Moving in silence is the key. As Black women, we will not be considered the face of hypergamy any time soon. There are still fewer hypergamous Black women than women of other races. Black women are still settling for less than they deserve in relationships, accepting 50/50 relationships and worse. That said, there is a movement happening with an increasing number of Black women practicing hypergamy. However, perceptions of Black women are held back by the "Strong Black Woman," "Mammy," and "Jezebel" stereotypes.

While this post demonstrates a critical awareness of racial politics in intimate relationships, including the stereotypes associated with Black women, other posts promote color-blind racism and other regressive ideologies. For instance, a multiracial spoiled girlfriend is asked a question about seeking a rich partner as a Black woman and responds, “Pro tip: don’t make your entire personality revolve around being Black. It pushes people away and gets very old.” In another post, she explains some “harsh truths” she believes in, including, “Using your race, gender, education, or whatever else to make yourself seem like a victim is the most unlikeable characteristic in a person. This is connected to body positivity. Being fat isn’t something to be proud of.”

5.4.6 Gender Performance

In addition to posts about race, many hypergamous women share posts about gender performance. For instance, a spoiled girlfriend shares ways to “embrace your femininity,” and writes, “If you look like a princess, you’ll be treated like a princess. If you look sloppy, you’ll be treated as such.” The same user writes about the differences between “feminine and masculine energy.” According to her, feminine energy involves “being,” while masculine energy involves “doing.” Having feminine energy means receiving from others, while having masculine energy involves “getting things done.” She elaborates on feminine energy, writing that “the feminine in all of us craves beauty, creativity, and sensuality.” She also asserts that everyone possesses a balance of masculine and feminine energy, but masculine energy is most valued by society. Additionally, she differentiates between “performative femininity” catering to the male gaze and “feminine energy.” Finally, she suggests that femininity is a resource that all women possess and can “use to network,

socialize, and upgrade their lives.” This analysis aligns with some feminist gender ideologies, as does the following post by a high-value woman, which reads:

Once you understand that most restrictive feminine gender roles come from the fact that: (1) It’s very important for men to be 100 percent sure that the child their partner is carrying is theirs, and (2) men resent the amount of influence their sexual attraction to women has on them, you’ll realize you can do whatever you want without feeling shame or guilt.

Another high-value woman shares a post criticizing the industry of influencers who dictate how women should behave, which reads:

If so many of these self-styled “soft life and femininity” experts were actually billionaires who never worked a day in their lives, they would not be heavily promoting their monetized content or trying to sell you their books and courses. They’re actually just preying on you and setting you up for failure, selling you delusions wrapped in a pretty bow and taking your money. They aren’t living “soft lives” on their husbands’ dime, they’re living on your dime and hiding it very well.

Therefore, while some posts uncritically share traditional ideals of feminine gender performance, others criticize the patriarchal and classist oppression perpetuated by gendered expectations.

5.4.7 Manifestation

Another common theme in the hypergamous community is manifestation, or envisioning the future one wants with the expectation that this future will become a reality. For instance, one sugar baby writes, “YOU determine your fate. The universe just reflects you. It is a version of you. It mirrors who you believe yourself to be. Change your self-image, and the universe will start treating you differently.” A high-value woman suggests, “A genuinely sensual woman naturally attracts beauty, positivity, opportunity, and nourishing relationships.” One spoiled girlfriend shares the mantra, “I am a spoiled princess. I have everything I need. I have stability, peace, comfort, and happiness. I am

grateful for the life the universe has given me.” These posts mix neoliberal ideology with wishful thinking, promoting the idea that if one changes their psychological disposition, their material circumstances will change as well.

5.4.8 Bodily Capital

All the women in my sample post information about beauty routines, many of which involve dozens of products and steps. One sugar baby stated that she spends an estimated \$3,000 to \$4,000 each month on beauty products and services like massages, facials, lash extensions, brow lamination, and laser hair removal. Another sugar baby shares an insight similar to the concept of habitus, stating, “It takes a stranger one-tenth of a second to determine your authoritativeness, trustworthiness, and likability based on how you look.” Another sugar baby writes, “Your appearance and dress matter. Acceptance of this can open valuable opportunities if you use your knowledge wisely. Style is a resource that any woman can draw upon to live her dream. It’s only logical to use it.” One spoiled girlfriend shares a post lamenting the “tragedy” of growing up in poverty believing you are “ugly” despite being “naturally beautiful” and then feeling like an “imposter” after acquiring money and learning beauty techniques. Ultimately, increasing one’s embodied cultural capital is of critical importance in the hypergamous community, and it is viewed as a means of both reflecting and achieving upward socioeconomic mobility.

Relatedly, many users refer to the concept of “pretty privilege.” For instance, one spoiled girlfriend writes:

Women with pretty privilege take risks. Something that seems like “doing too much” is actually dramatically enhancing your pretty privilege. Anyone can get lash extensions, stylish clothing, a beautiful bag, and a nice smile, but women with pretty privilege always take it a step further. However, your demeanor matters more than your appearance. It’s mentally draining to be hot.

Another spoiled girlfriend gives tips for how to “increase your pretty privilege.” In another post, she writes, “I love pretty privilege. Men try to give me money all the time.” Pretty privilege may be understood as another term for embodied cultural capital.

5.4.9 Boundary Maintenance

On certain occasions, participants provide insight into the differences and similarities of sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women. For instance, one user receives the question, “How is being a sugar baby empowering or uplifting? It seems like it promotes the status quo of men trying to control Black women,” and responds:

I would never encourage someone to be a sugar baby, but I have friends who seem to be happy with sugaring. It is one hundred percent exploitative, but I can't criticize a woman's choice to participate in it. That said, being a spoiled girlfriend is better than being a sugar baby, in my opinion.

Similarly, a sugar baby criticizes some spoiled girlfriends' and high-value women's goals, writing, “Rather than seeking empowerment in things with *real* value like education, wealth, and a fulfilling career, many women would rather chase mediocre men and delusional dreams about being housewives because working has ‘masculine energy.’”

Further, another sugar baby receives the message:

I'm tired of people talking about relationships. I'm tired of beautiful, smart, talented women wasting their youth and intellect on men. I'm tired of my family telling me to get a boyfriend when they're all miserable in their marriages. Having sex or being in a relationship is okay, but I feel like it often holds women back. It's sad. I want to respect women's choices, but some of you are letting ugly, broke men disrespect you. It's time to elevate, ladies. Choosing to be single and withhold sex is the feminist choice.

She responds:

I'm just as exhausted, love. Seeing how the successful woman archetype has been degraded by these useful idiots in exchange for vague concepts of “femininity” and

“feminine energy” has been extremely frustrating. In their desperation to become housewives to live a “soft life,” they don’t stop to think about how women can only gain equality through higher education and attaining positions of power. They would rather fall for the right-wing trap encouraging them to be ignorant, powerless, and dependent on men who abuse them. A lot of these women are going to have to learn the hard way that their lifestyle won’t pay off in the long run, and they will have nobody but themselves to blame for it.

These posts demonstrate the contested nature of the sugar baby, spoiled girlfriend, and high-value woman identities. While there is significant overlap between the three, some participants sharply differentiate themselves based on gender and class politics.

Another sugar baby differentiates between sugar babies and sex workers. In response to the question, “How do I get sugar daddies to stop asking me for sex?” she answers, “Not all sex work is bad or gross, but it’s not everyone’s bag, and it isn’t mine. Only two or three times have I just received a gift or been taken out on a date. Most sugar daddies just want an escort. You need to be assertive. Ask them, ‘Do I look like an escort? I said no.’” Relatedly, another sugar baby writes, “Ladies, if you’re getting money from a man who’s not your boyfriend, and your boyfriend is aware of this... Your boyfriend is your pimp. Your gross boyfriend is allowing you to be with other men and reaps the benefits of your labor. It’s embarrassing.”

One high-value woman explains what being high-value means to her: “It is crucial to define your standards and your boundaries. You should be extremely picky about your partners and have clear expectations for them. You should always vet a potential partner. Set your standards high and tolerate nothing less.” One spoiled girlfriend encourages solidarity between sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women, but also maintains that the differences between the three are important, writing, “We all have different paths and goals in life. Hypergamy is different for everyone depending on their

original financial and social status. If you want to be a spoiled girlfriend, sugar baby, or kept wife that's fine, but I don't support ignorance.”

5.5 Conclusion

Chi-square analyses revealed no significant associations between sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's self-identifications and their frequency of posts related to relationships, luxury, class distinction, race, gender performance, bodily capital, or miscellaneous. Sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's self-identifications are significantly associated, however, with frequency of self-help and manifestation posts. These findings suggest that sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women share concerns about and interest in relationships, luxury, class distinction, race, gender performance, and bodily capital, but diverge in relation to self-help and manifestation. In particular, sugar babies and high-value women diverge in relation to these topics, while spoiled girlfriends occupy what may be thought of as a middle ground between the two.

Interestingly, high-value women are significantly less likely than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends to post about self-help despite their emphasis on “leveling up.” However, it makes sense in the context of a high-value woman already having “leveled up” and feeling no need to consume or share self-help advice. This is supported by the statements made by interviewees that high-value women are those with “high value” who hold themselves in high regard. Additionally, sugar babies are significantly more likely to post about manifestation than spoiled girlfriends or high-value women, while high-value women are significantly less likely to post about manifestation than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends. This may be due to differences in gender politics and associated beliefs

regarding self-determination. For instance, sugar babies may have more distinctively postfeminist gender politics, while high-value women often have more conservative gender politics. Accordingly, sugar babies may be more likely to believe that they have ultimate control over their successes or failures via their own mindsets, while high-value women may see their fate as more directly tied to men than to their own beliefs or actions.

A commonly held notion about sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women suggests that they engage in hypergamy because they do not want to work. However, my results show that their behaviors are heavily influenced by hustle culture, which is demonstrated in the commonality of self-help posts on their Tumblr accounts. This emphasis on hustling to achieve one's goals is tempered by a shared emphasis on luxury and leisure, sending the message that one should hustle, but only in an attempt to earn a luxurious and leisurely lifestyle. The proliferation of relationship advice emphasizing clear boundaries and communication between partners suggests that hypergamous women value autonomy and respect within their intimate relationships. The common concern with class distinction in the hypergamous Tumblr community suggests that transactional sex is not just a survival strategy for impoverished women but also a strategy for upward socioeconomic mobility.

The salience of race reflects the racial diversity of this community as well as the community's consciousness of race, class, and gender as intertwined with one another. The proliferation of photos of primarily women of color in luxurious clothing, settings, and trappings on many of these blogs may be understood as part of a gendered and classed racial project (Omi and Winant 2015), seeking to alter perceptions of women of color, particularly Black women, and challenging social structures shaping the economy,

intimacy, and race. While the hegemonic status quo perpetuates and links whiteness and wealth through intraracial marriage among people of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, the hypergamous women in my sample seek to link nonwhiteness (often specifically Blackness) to wealth through non-marital intimate relationships between people of differing socioeconomic backgrounds.

While some hypergamous Tumblr users uncritically share traditional ideals of feminine gender performance, others criticize the patriarchal, racist, and classist oppression perpetuated by societal expectations. Manifestation is a common theme among sugar babies. Posts related to manifestation reflect the strength of these women's desires to succeed in their goals as well as the faith these women share in the effectiveness of neoliberal ideology that suggests changing one's mindset will change one's circumstances. Finally, many hypergamous women share posts about bodily capital, demonstrating the importance of this form of capital to their strategies for socioeconomic mobility.

In the following chapter, I report the results of my mixed-methods analysis of TikTok posts related to sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women, emphasizing similarities and differences between the three groups.

CHAPTER 6. FINANCED FEMININITY: SUGAR BABIES, SPOILED GIRLFRIENDS, AND HIGH-VALUE WOMEN ON TIKTOK

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented the results of my digital ethnography of hypergamous women on Tumblr. I found significant overlaps between sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women in addition to important distinctions. In this chapter, I detail the findings of my mixed-methods analyses of sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women' TikTok posts, which find more significant distinctions between the three groups. In particular, high-value women's posts promote more explicitly conservative gender politics than sugar babies' and spoiled girlfriends' posts, which are more associated with money and conspicuous consumption. Additionally, spoiled girlfriends' posts are more associated with relationships than sugar babies' posts, mirroring their differences in relationship styles. Still, all three groups' posts are heavily influenced by and indicative of postfeminist sentiment.

6.2 TikTok Posts

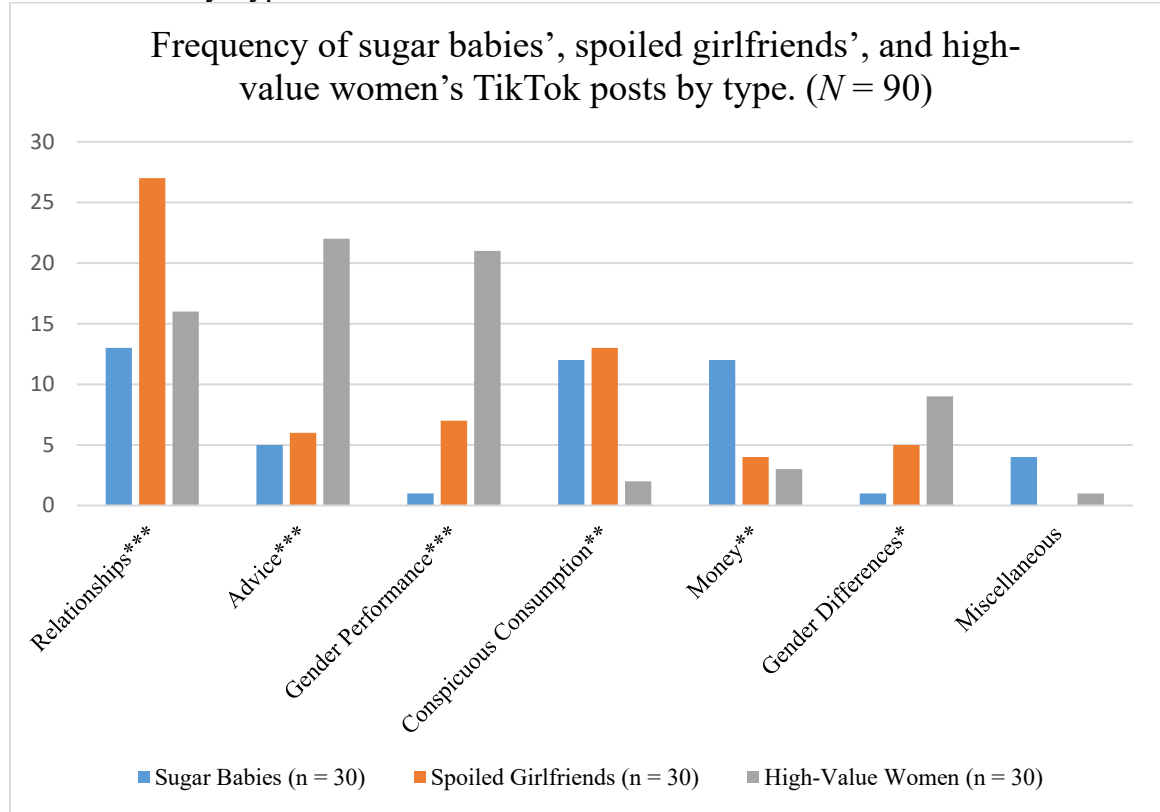
Results of the quantitative analyses of sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's TikTok posts are shown in Table 6.1 and Figure 6.1 below. There are no significant associations between sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's self-identifications and the frequency of miscellaneous posts, but there are significant associations for posts relating to relationships (Pearson $\chi^2 = 15.410$; $p < .001$), advice (Pearson $\chi^2 = 26.124$; $p < .001$), gender performance (Pearson $\chi^2 = 32.154$; $p < .001$), conspicuous consumption (Pearson $\chi^2 = 11.746$; $p = .003$), money (Pearson $\chi^2 = 9.741$; $p = .008$), and gender differences (Pearson $\chi^2 = 7.680$; $p = .021$).

Table 6.1 Sugar Babies', Spoiled Girlfriends', and High-Value Women's TikTok Posts by Type.

| Post Type | <u>Sugar Babies</u> (<i>n</i> = 30) | | | <u>Spoiled Girlfriends</u> (<i>n</i> = 30) | | | <u>High-Value Women</u> (<i>n</i> = 30) | | | <u>Total</u> (<i>N</i> = 90) | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------|----------|------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------|---------------------------------------------|------------------|----------|----------------------------------|------------------|----------|
| | <i>f</i> | Pearson χ^2 | <i>p</i> | <i>f</i> | Pearson χ^2 | <i>p</i> | <i>f</i> | Pearson χ^2 | <i>p</i> | <i>F</i> | Pearson χ^2 | <i>p</i> |
| Relationships | 13 | 6.230** | .009 | 27 | 14.772*** | < .001 | 16 | 1.513 | .219 | 56 | 15.410*** | < .001 |
| Advice | 5 | 7.751** | .005 | 6 | 5.383* | .020 | 22 | 26.053*** | < .001 | 33 | 26.124*** | < .001 |
| Gender Performance | 1 | 17.196*** | < .001 | 7 | 1.628 | .202 | 21 | 29.406*** | < .001 | 29 | 32.154*** | < .001 |
| Conspicuous Consumption | 12 | 2.143 | .143 | 13 | 3.810 | .051 | 2 | 11.667** | .001 | 27 | 11.746** | .003 |
| Money | 12 | 9.641** | .002 | 4 | 1.635 | .201 | 3 | 3.336 | .068 | 19 | 9.741** | .008 |
| Gender Differences | 1 | 5.760* | .016 | 5 | 0.000 | 1.000 | 9 | 5.760* | .016 | 15 | 7.680* | .021 |
| Miscellaneous | 4 | 5.188* | .023 | 0 | 2.647 | .104 | 1 | 0.424 | .515 | 5 | 5.506 | .064 |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. *f* = frequency. Sum of reported frequencies is greater than 90 because some posts fit multiple codes.

Figure 6.1 Frequency of Sugar Babies' Spoiled Girlfriends', and High-Value Women's TikTok Posts by Type.



Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Spoiled girlfriends' posts are more likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 14.772$; $p < .001$) to be about relationships than sugar babies' or high-value women's posts, while sugar babies' posts are significantly less likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 6.230$; $p = .009$) to be about relationships than spoiled girlfriends' or high-value women's posts. High-value women's posts are significantly more likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 26.053$; $p < .001$) to be about advice than sugar babies' or spoiled girlfriends' posts, while sugar babies' (Pearson $\chi^2 = 7.751$; $p = .005$) and spoiled girlfriends' (Pearson $\chi^2 = 5.383$; $p = .020$) posts are less likely to be about advice than high-value women's posts.

High-value women's posts are more likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 29.406$; $p < .001$) to be about gender performance than sugar babies' or spoiled girlfriends' posts, while sugar babies' posts are significantly less likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 17.196$; $p < .001$) to be about gender performance than spoiled girlfriends' or high-value women's posts. High-value women's posts are significantly less likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 11.667$; $p = .001$) to be about conspicuous consumption than sugar babies' or spoiled girlfriends' posts. Sugar babies' posts are significantly more likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 9.641$; $p = .002$) to be about money than spoiled girlfriends' or high-value women's posts. Finally, high-value women's posts are significantly more likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 5.760$; $p = .016$) to be about gender differences than sugar babies' or spoiled girlfriends' posts, while sugar babies' posts are significantly less likely (Pearson $\chi^2 = 5.760$; $p = .016$) to be about gender differences than spoiled girlfriends' or high-value women's posts.

6.2.1 Relationships

The most common theme on hypergamous TikTok is relationships. Users share advice and information about intimate relationships, often encouraging women to change their behaviors to conform to men's desires. For instance, one post features a high-value woman in a hijab putting on makeup and speaking into the camera, "If you want to have success in your dating life, and you are just sick and tired of the men that you are dating, and you want to attract a high-value man, here are the five things that you are not doing right now that you should be doing." First, she advises viewers to "cultivate your feminine energy" by tapping into their five senses, doing things like lighting a candle, taking a bath, getting a manicure/pedicure, getting a massage, or taking care of their hair or skin. Second, she advises viewers to "get creative" by learning to do things that they love like yoga or cooking. Third, she suggests that viewers "allow a man to lead." She clarifies, "We're not talking about leading which is controlling or manipulation, we're talking about leading in a healthy way." She further explains:

As a woman, you should let go of the need to feel to control everything and lead everything. This will allow a man—a high-value man—to cherish you more and honor you more, and in return, it's going to allow you to tap into that femininity. It's going to allow you to be more adored by him more than you can imagine.

Fourth, she emphasizes that viewers should "date provider men only." She dictates, "A woman in nature is meant to be a receiver, and a man in nature is meant to be a giver. . . I am all for women making their own money, being self-sufficient, . . . but that does not prevent a man from providing for you." She goes on to say, "As women, we have a biological need for a man to provide for us and take care of us, and it's really simple. Do not date men who do not have provider mindsets. Embrace that need, and only date these

type[s] of men because they do exist, you are just settling.” Fifth, she advises women to take care of their bodies so they can “look and feel your absolute best at all times.” She says, “Think about it. Why would a man invest in you if you don’t even invest in yourself?” This video reflects many aspects of postfeminist sentiment. For instance, the narrator employs feminist discourses of autonomy to promote anti-feminist ideas like natural sexual difference and men’s place as the “leaders” in intimate relationships. Her advice also aligns with the makeover paradigm, encouraging women to “invest” in their appearance in addition to changing their ways of thinking about relationships.

Another post features a high-value woman of color (classified based on appearance as well as the fact that she says in the video that she is from the Middle East and/or Africa) on the beach in a bikini speaking into the camera:

I cannot stress [enough] the importance of dating someone whose cultural background matches up to the type of man that you want. If you don’t want to do the 50/50 shit, then date someone who comes from a background where men are natural providers—Middle Eastern men, African men. These American men, they’re stingy, it’s part of the culture, like the 50/50 phenomenon is part of the culture.

Further reflecting postfeminist sentiment, this narrator uses feminist discourses of choice and empowerment to discourage the equal distribution of labor and resources in an intimate relationship, or “50/50 shit.” She also implicitly promotes the idea of natural sexual difference by referring to men who are “natural providers,” even taking it a step further by discussing “natural” differences between different nationalities and ethnicities. However, this essentialism is tempered by her reference to “culture” regarding American men and the so-called 50/50 phenomenon.

Several posts describe relationship dynamics in which the woman's life revolves around her partner's desires. For instance, one post features a sugar baby's narration over a video montage of scenes from her day:

Before I see [my sugar daddy], I always have to get a new set [of nails] of his choice—they're literally so cute anyways. Then I have to go to Starbucks, get him and his friends drinks, drop it off to him at work, and hang out with him for at least two hours, and that's that. Then he gives me \$500, and I do what I want for the rest of the day.

The caption of the video explains that she is expected to do this at least once a week but can do it more often if she wants more money. The comment about her weekly manicures reflects the postfeminist impetus toward consumerism and the dominance of the makeover paradigm, as she is required to pay for a new set of fake nails each week. This post also paints a portrait of a relationship that revolves around her sugar daddy's desires. However, she downplays the significance of this fact, instead highlighting that she can "do what I want for the rest of the day" after catering to her sugar daddy.

Another sugar baby post is overlaid with the text, "When he plans/pays for international vacations every other month, buys the most expensive champagne on the menu, and makes every decision for you so you don't have to think." The sugar baby in the video cheekily mouths along to a soundbite of Megan Fox saying, "He was like, 'You're going to be naked tonight,' and I was like, 'Whatever you say, daddy. Whatever daddy says.'" This post exemplifies the postfeminist shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, as the sugar baby takes pleasure in her sugar daddy's sexual demands. However, it also reflects the deployment of irony to distance oneself from any antifeminist ideas expressed, as her over-the-top physical mannerisms indicate a sense of levity.

As indicated above, hypergamous women's relationship posts often encourage conformity to men's expectations, whether through allowing men to "lead," altering one's appearance to fit men's tastes, or fulfilling men's sexual desires. In return, men are expected to "provide" financially. While the women in these posts are presumably having their economic desires fulfilled, it is unclear whether their other desires have purchase in their hypergamous relationships.

6.2.2 Advice

Many popular posts in the hypergamous TikTok community feature advice, often delivered via monologue by someone directly addressing the camera and including text in the video to highlight and reinforce their main points. This advice often reflects postfeminist sentiment. For instance, one post features a Hispanic spoiled girlfriend (classified based on her appearance and occasional use of Spanish) in glamorous hair, makeup, and jewelry wearing a floral corset and addressing the camera:

The lucky girl syndrome is where you just believe that you are the luckiest girl ever. . . You're just a lucky girl, and amazing things just happen to you. Ever since I adopted this syndrome, and I started being delusional, it started happening. . . I truly believe that if you believe that you're a lucky girl, it will happen to you too. . . So be delusional. Be delusional in believing that you are super super super hot, and you are super super super lucky, and only amazing things are going to happen in your life.

This post aligns with the postfeminist dominance of the makeover paradigm, in which women are expected to reinvent their looks and even their psychologies to fit societal demands. Further, this post reflects the postfeminist and neoliberal emphasis on individualism, choice, and empowerment, suggesting that people can change their material circumstances by simply changing their mindsets.

Similarly, another post features a high-value woman with slicked-back hair wearing a chic turtleneck sweater in a spacious interior with a large window looking out onto a swimming pool and a beautiful landscape speaking into the camera with what seems to be a European accent:

Never do this with men. Never complain, and never explain. When you complain all the time, you're never going to get what you want. The only way to get what you want from him is to literally ask him. When you explain yourself, you give away your power. Let your silence be your strength. A high-value woman will only speak when necessary.

This post aligns with the postfeminist, neoliberal tendency toward self-surveillance and discipline, encouraging women to self-censor to receive what they want. Further, this high-value woman suggests that withholding communication is a means of exercising power in an intimate relationship.

These posts are indicative of two common and distinct dispositions among hypergamous women on TikTok: wishful and pragmatic. Wishful dispositions demonstrate a somewhat carefree attitude towards hypergamy, while pragmatic dispositions demonstrate a more serious pursuit of hypergamy. The post encouraging women to “be delusional” reflects the wishful disposition characteristic of many of the sugar baby posts in my sample, while the post encouraging women to “only speak when necessary” reflects the pragmatic disposition typical of many of the high-value woman posts in my sample. Spoiled girlfriends often display a combination of wishful and pragmatic dispositions.

6.2.3 Gender Performance

Many posts, particularly those associated with high-value women, concern the “proper” performance of femininity. In these posts, femininity is often discussed as a bodily property, is tied up with consumerism, and is described as inherently opposed to

masculinity, reflecting postfeminist sentiment. For instance, one post features a high-value woman of color (classified based on her self-description) with glamorous hair and makeup speaking into the camera:

I've been living a soft life since before it was a trend, and I would be constantly judged for it, saying that I'm "lazy," "irresponsible," blah blah blah. The truth of the matter is that I have my non-negotiables. I have to have my weekly Pilates, my SoulCycle, my Barry's Bootcamp, my brunches with friends, dinner with friends, spa days. I make it an effort, especially as a woman of color. I hustle, but I make sure that I'm not overworked. Women aren't meant to be overworked. It cuts off from the natural flow of our femininity, so live that soft life, girl.

This post associates femininity with consumerism and promotes the idea of natural sexual differences, particularly the idea that women are not "meant" to be overworked, implying that men are "meant" to be overworked. She emphasizes her racial identity as a primary reason she pursues a "soft life." Her comments hint at the dominant ideal of femininity being associated with whiteness, wealth, and leisure, while women of color are often portrayed as more masculine and working-class. In response, she explicitly incorporates consumerism and leisure into her racialized and classed gender performance, or her "soft life."

Another post features a Black high-value woman (classified based on her appearance and use of hashtags specifically aimed at Black women) in glamorous hair and makeup painting her nails in a car and addressing her viewers:

You want to be masters of sensuality. . . Femininity is something that comes natural to *all* women. A lot of women claim that sensuality is something they were born with, when really it's something that you have to hone. . . We have class and sophistication when we speak. Speak in a softer tone, you know, be a little more, just smooth with it. No profanity. No yelling. Just talk soft. Almost whisper, sis.

This post is indicative of several elements of postfeminist sentiment, including the resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference, the tendency toward self-surveillance

and discipline, and the dominance of the makeover paradigm. The hashtags associated with this post targeting Black women lend a racial component to her advice. While she asserts that *all* women are naturally feminine, countering the dominant exclusion of Black women from femininity, she suggests that sensuality, which she conceptualizes as a trait that attracts men, is a learned trait. She associates sensuality with “class and sophistication,” encouraging women to speak in a soft tone of voice and avoid profanity and yelling as a means of improving their sensuality.

Posts about gender performance, particularly those associated with high-value women, often discuss femininity as a bodily property and consumerist practice inherently opposed to masculinity, reflecting postfeminist sentiment. Some posts related to gender performance explicitly counter the exclusion of women of color from the dominant understanding of femininity, which is traditionally associated with whiteness, wealth, and leisure, by encouraging women of color to put extra effort into their performances of femininity.

6.2.4 Conspicuous Consumption

Many videos associated with hypergamy feature a montage of shopping sprees, with the camera focusing on shopping bags, designer products, and interiors of expensive cars, always provided by men. These videos rarely feature the faces of the people involved, focusing instead on the items consumed, reflecting the consumerist imperative of postfeminist sentiment. For instance, one exemplary video captioned “day in the life of a spoiled gf [girlfriend]” features a chronological account of a spoiled girlfriend’s shopping spree with her boyfriend. It begins with iced coffees, a trip to the mall in his car with her in the passenger seat (a phenomenon known as being a “passenger princess”), a shot of the

Apple Store followed by a shot of two Apple shopping bags with AirPods Max, a shot of her hand picking out Kosas makeup followed by a shot of a Sephora shopping bag, a shot of a pleated plaid skirt and a knit cardigan followed by a shot of her holding an H&M bag, shots of the exterior and interior of a Brazilian steakhouse, and finally a shot of the day's "haul" spread out on display.

While the post above exemplifies the genre of conspicuous consumption posts, the items purchased reflect a middle-class lifestyle, not an upper-class one. This is common among spoiled girlfriends' posts, in particular, while sugar babies' conspicuous consumption posts tend to feature more high-end designer brands. This suggests that at least some women are identifying with hypergamy despite only mimicking the practices of the upper classes rather than achieving upper-class socioeconomic status. The performance of upper-class status may be just as important to hypergamous women as the actual material attainment of upper-class status.

6.2.5 Money

Posts concerned with money center the importance of transactional exchange in relationships, particularly the exchange of money from men to women. For instance, one post features a high-value woman of color (classified based on her self-description in another video) with glamorous hair and makeup speaking into the camera: "Successful men really do not care about how much money you make. They don't care because they don't need all of that. They value different things than women." By contrasting men with women, she suggests that women care about how much money a man makes because women "need" money, while men do not. Therefore, she suggests, men value "different things." Her comments reflect the postfeminist resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference as

well as the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, as she tells women to “remember that everything you do is for yourself and not for a man” but also tells them not to be “bum bitch[es].”

Another post features a Hispanic spoiled girlfriend (classified based on appearance and occasional use of Spanish) in glamorous makeup, hair, and jewelry responding to a video of a woman crying about a man who said she was the only one he referred to as “babycakes” by saying:

I am very grateful that I’ve never been through these situations, but I feel like that’s because I will only feel that a man cares about me and loves me [if] he’s paying my rent. If you guys hear her in this video, [she says,] “if he says... says... says... says...” Okay, but what is he doing, sweetie? Why are you believing everything he *says*? . . . When all you do is require words from a man, that’s all he’s going to give you because words are free. He can tell you one thing, and he can tell another thousand girls that same thing, but when you require a man to invest, it will be a lot harder for him to do the same for other girls. Trust me, he’s not going to want to risk [losing] what he’s investing in.

In this post, the spoiled girlfriend suggests that men show their love by providing financially for women. To her, words are cheap because they are literally free, while financial investments indicate and facilitate romantic attachment.

Other posts feature women reveling in spending men’s money. For instance, one post features a sugar baby lying on a bed typing on a laptop, dancing and singing along to a melody with the lyrics “men are stupid, and I don’t respect them.” The video is overlaid with the text “me booking a vacation paid for entirely by men online who I’ve never met and never will.” Another post features a sugar baby wearing multiple layers of designer clothing and carrying a humorous number of designer bags and is overlaid with the text “When they tell me I should work or find a hobby instead of spending all my boyfriend’s money.” She mouths along to an audio clip of a British woman laughing and saying, “Don’t

be ridiculous.” In these posts, spending men’s money is a means of exerting power. In particular, it is implied that these women are using sexuality to take advantage of men financially. Overall, money posts reinforce the idea that intimate relationships should be comprised of men with greater resources providing those resources to their female partners, whether out of love or naiveté.

6.2.6 Gender Differences

Several posts highlight supposedly inherent biological differences between men and women, reflecting the postfeminist resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference. For example, a post by a spoiled girlfriend features a montage of clips showing items her boyfriend has purchased for her with a voiceover saying, “Whenever I feel guilty about my boyfriend spending money on me, I remember one day I will have to expand the lower part of my body six inches, if not more, to fit a baby out of it for him, and then I just don’t feel bad anymore.” In this post, giving birth is framed as an obligation of women to men. By the same token, spending money is framed as an obligation of men to women. Further, this post reflects the commodification of sexual difference, as the boyfriend is said to be spending money on the girlfriend herself rather than on gifts for her.

A similar post features another spoiled girlfriend in simple hair and makeup emphatically addressing the camera:

I want you ladies to wake the hell up. If he’s not paying for you while you’re dating, who’s going to pay for shit while you’re pregnant?! Is he going to be asking you to work while you’re eight months pregnant, or are you going to find yourself a man who spoils you and keeps you young?

This post in particular reflects the neoliberal idea that state intervention is not warranted, ignoring the possibility of federal or even employer-provided paid parental leave. The same user posts another video saying:

“There are many men who would love to spoil me and would fight for the chance to pay for my stuff.” That’s what you need to affirm. I will *never* open a door for myself, call or text myself first, plan dates for myself, pump gas when a man is around, drive a car if a man is around, be the one to flag down the waiter. I have no problem doing my part, but I will never do his job for him. Acting like a guy is not my core competency. I was not born to be a protector and a provider. I was born to make a house a home. Men make the living, and women make life worth living. Many men would fight for the opportunity to pay for my stuff and spoil me and take care of me financially, whether I have the money or not. I will never open my wallet if a man is around.

Again, this user promotes the idea of natural sexual difference, asserting that men are “born to be a protector and a provider” and that women are “born to make a house a home.”

Interestingly, one outlying post associated with spoiled girlfriends made by a user with the word “dyke” in their username features the interior of a hotel room filled with balloons, covered in rose petals, with shopping bags and flower bouquets covering the bed, and is overlaid with the caption “POV [Point of View]: She said she’s never been spoiled before [rainbow emoji].” The caption beneath the video, which I will paraphrase to preserve the user’s privacy, directs women to “stop messing with these little boys and get you a stud.” Stud is a term used in the queer community to refer to Black and Latinx masculine-identifying lesbians, although white masculine-identifying lesbians have also started referring to themselves using this term on TikTok, which is a point of contention in the community (Chesson 2021). The user who made this post wields the postfeminist notion of natural sexual difference to challenge the cisheteronormativity inherent in many spoiled girlfriend posts. Typically, posts concerning gender differences emphasize men’s

roles as “providers” who give money and other resources to women who are valued for their sexual capacities, reproductive or otherwise.

6.3 Conclusion

Chi-square analyses of sugar babies’, spoiled girlfriends’, and high-value women’s TikTok posts found significant associations between hypergamous women’s self-identifications and posts concerned with relationships, advice, gender performance, conspicuous consumption, money, and gender differences. Spoiled girlfriends are more likely to post about relationships than sugar babies or high-value women, while sugar babies are significantly less likely to post about relationships than spoiled girlfriends or high-value women. This may reflect the fact that spoiled girlfriends are in relationships by definition, while sugar babies may be less associated with long-term relationships. High-value women are significantly more likely to post about advice than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends, while sugar babies and spoiled girlfriends are less likely to post about advice than high-value women. This may be due to the higher number of influencers, particularly self-styled relationship experts, posting with hashtags related to high-value women, while sugar babies’ and spoiled girlfriends’ posts are often less advice-driven. High-value women are also more likely to post about gender performance than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends, while sugar babies are significantly less likely to post about gender performance than spoiled girlfriends or high-value women. High-value women’s posts on TikTok are frequently concerned with “correct” expressions of femininity, while sugar babies posts’ are less concerned with gender expression in favor of money.

High-value women are significantly less likely to post about conspicuous consumption than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends. This can be explained by the high

number of advice posts associated with high-value women. These posts are more likely to be about advice regarding gender expression and relationships than about the material items acquired through said relationships. Sugar babies' posts are significantly more likely to be about money than spoiled girlfriends' or high-value women's. This may be explained by the fact that sugar arrangements are more explicitly transactional than spoiled girlfriend or high-value relationships. Finally, high-value women are significantly more likely to post about gender differences than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends while sugar babies are significantly less likely to post about gender differences than spoiled girlfriends or high-value women. This may be explained by the more conservative gender ideology underpinning high-value relationships as opposed to the more postfeminist ideology underpinning sugar arrangements and spoiled relationships.

Sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women use TikTok to share advice about relationships and gender performance and to share moments of their lives with the public. Their relationship advice often encourages women to conform to patriarchal norms and embrace supposedly natural differences between men's and women's relationship roles, perpetuating postfeminist sentiment and the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas in contemporary media culture. Many posts, particularly those associated with high-value women, concern the performance of femininity, which is often discussed as a bodily property, is tied up with consumerism, and is described as inherently opposed to masculinity, reflecting postfeminist sentiment. Several posts, particularly from sugar babies and spoiled girlfriends, feature conspicuous consumption and/or concern money, indicating the importance of consumerism to these groups' identities and gender performances. Finally, gender differences are a common theme among posts associated

with sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women. These differences are often portrayed as biologically determined and are used to promote traditional gender roles, particularly among high-value women.

In the next chapter, I summarize my findings and outline their broader political implications related to intimate relationships, economic inequalities, and sexual labor.

CHAPTER 7. CLASSIC AND PLASTIC: HYPERGAMOUS WOMEN'S ONLINE PRACTICES AND CLASS UNDERSTANDINGS

7.1 Summary of Findings

My research questions for the present study included, “What are the online behaviors of self-identified hypergamous women?” and “What are the similarities and differences among sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women?” I found that hypergamous communities use social media to share advice, often about relationships and gender performance. Postfeminist sentiment is common among sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women, but there are significant distinctions between the three groups. For instance, sugar babies are perceived as workers engaging in more explicitly transactional relationships that may be monogamous or nonmonogamous, sexual or nonsexual. Spoiled girlfriends, meanwhile, are distinguished from sugar babies by the less transactional nature of their relationships, which are more often monogamous and presumed to involve sex. High-value women are more difficult to define, but most participants agree that they are distinguished from sugar babies and spoiled girlfriends by their emphasis on self-improvement. Additionally, high-value women's gender politics are often more conservative than those associated with sugar babies and spoiled girlfriends.

There are further distinctions between sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women's behaviors on Tumblr and on TikTok. Overall, there is more overlap between the three groups on Tumblr than on TikTok. This may be ascribed to Tumblr's infrastructure encouraging affinity between groups and TikTok's algorithm encouraging differentiation between groups. Similarly, hypergamous women's posts on Tumblr are mostly intended for one another's consumption, while the posts associated with hypergamous women on TikTok are often intended for the general public's consumption.

This may reflect Tumblr's emphasis on anonymity and community building and TikTok's contrasting emphasis on publicity and increasing posts' view counts. Additionally, TikTok features more overt attempts by influencers to make money, while Tumblr is somewhat notorious for its lack of commercial utility, leading to a lower number of financially motivated influencers on the site.

On Tumblr, sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women share advice about gender performance, relationships, and class distinction. Race is a salient theme among hypergamous women on Tumblr, many of whom are women of color. Additionally, hypergamous women use Tumblr to share ideas and images related to luxury and to display and try to improve their bodily capital. Finally, some hypergamous women on Tumblr share posts evoking ideas about manifestation and controlling one's own destiny, reflecting a belief in neoliberal self-determinism. On TikTok, high-value women's posts promote more explicitly conservative gender politics than sugar babies' and spoiled girlfriends' posts, which are more associated with money and conspicuous consumption. Additionally, spoiled girlfriends' posts are more associated with relationships than sugar babies' posts, mirroring their differences in relationship styles.

Interestingly, I found that high-value women on Tumblr are less likely to post self-help advice than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends, but the opposite holds true on TikTok, where high-value women are more likely to post advice than sugar babies or spoiled girlfriends. This relates back to the larger number of financially motivated influencers on TikTok than on Tumblr, particularly for women posting with hashtags related to high-value women. Further, while hypergamous women's relationship advice on Tumblr often

encourages the establishment and maintenance of strong boundaries, the advice on TikTok typically encourages women to conform to men's desires.

7.2 Class Distinction

Ultimately, sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women all share a desire for upward socioeconomic mobility along with an intention to achieve it through intimate relationships. Their actions may be best understood using Bourdieu's (1984) theory of class distinction, particularly his concepts of field, habitus, and capital. While Bourdieu (1984) suggests that habitus and the value of various forms of capital shift over time to maintain a static distance between classes, transactional sex may provide an avenue for class mobility in an otherwise closed social system. However, it is possible that stigma and habitus successfully maintain distance between sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women and the upper classes into which they attempt to assimilate, regardless of how hard they may try to change.

Sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women may be differentiated according to their differing theories and praxis regarding social class. The relationship between hypergamous women's post types, class understandings, and strategies for upward socioeconomic mobility is shown in Table 7.1 below. Sugar babies post about money and conspicuous consumption, showing that they conceptualize social class as defined by income and markers of wealth. Consequently, they engage in more explicitly transactional relationships and may not limit themselves to a single partner. Spoiled girlfriends' posts, on the other hand, emphasize relationships and conspicuous consumption, suggesting that they conceptualize social class as defined by social connections and material goods.

Table 7.1 Sugar babies', spoiled girlfriends', and high-value women's post types and associated class understandings and mobility strategies.

| Identity | Post Type | Class Understanding | Mobility Strategy |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Sugar Baby | Money, Conspicuous Consumption | Income, Wealth | Nonmonogamy, Explicit Transactions |
| Spoiled Girlfriend | Relationships, Conspicuous Consumption | Social Connections, Material Goods | Monogamy, Gifts |
| High-Value Woman | Advice, Gender Performance | Habitus | Gendered and Classed Embodiment |

Correspondingly, they pursue long-term relationships and value gifts from significant others. Meanwhile, high-value women's emphasis on advice and gender performance on TikTok, in addition to the fact that they are less likely to post about conspicuous consumption—which may be a form of capital with little value among the upper echelons of society—indicates that they conceptualize social class as denoted by habitus. Accordingly, they offer advice on how to change one's gendered and classed embodiment.

7.3 Transformation of Intimacy

Giddens (1992) predicted the waning importance of economic exchange in relationships as egalitarianism increased, but he failed to account for continuing inequalities based on socioeconomic class. Confluent love is associated with what Giddens (1992:2) refers to as the “pure relationship,” “a relationship of sexual and emotional equality.” However, this pure relationship contains a “structural contradiction” in the fact that it is based on commitment, which is based on trust, which is developed through vulnerability, but because long-term commitment is not a guarantee, committing oneself to another involves risking an enormous amount of pain in the case of the relationship's dissolution. In many ways, hypergamy is a means of protecting oneself from the instability of confluent love, which is dependent upon a culture of mutual care that is increasingly absent in neoliberal societies. Instead of inevitably increasing democratization of “private” and “public” life, plastic sexuality enables individuals to attach sex and intimacy to any political ideal, including postfeminist sentiment, which arguably undermines democracy and increases inequality.

7.4 Politics of Care

Ultimately, transactional sex demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the line between criminalized and noncriminalized sexual labor. Previous research has shown that criminalization and online censorship of sexual labor increases stigma associated with negative health outcomes, violence, and inequality (Blunt, Wolf, and Lauren 2020; Chamberlain 2019; Musto et al. 2021; Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light 2019). My research suggests that a potential means of decreasing the influence of neoliberalism and postfeminism on intimate relationships is to promote a politics of mutual care (Woodly et al. 2021), which is not incompatible with sexual labor, and in fact can improve working conditions in the sex industry. A politics of care “aims to unmake racial capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, the carceral state, and the colonial present,” and “involves conceptualizing and practicing care as an inherently interdependent survival strategy, a foundation for political organizing, and a politics for building a world in which all people can live and thrive” (Woodly et al. 2021:891).

In practice, a politics of care can take many forms, such as “ACT UP organizing around HIV/AIDS, the Black Panther Free Breakfast for Children Program, Zapatista practices of community self-organization, and Palestinian food distribution programs under Israeli settler colonialism” (Woodly et al. 2021:893). In many ways, sexual laborers are currently at the forefront of practicing a politics of care. For instance, Red Canary Song is a grassroots organization led by Asian sexual laborers promoting migrant justice transnationally through labor organizing, mutual aid, and legal advocacy. Project SAFE and HIPS are community organizations in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., respectively, offering harm reduction support for drug users and sex workers. Additionally, National Ugly Mugs is a UK-based organization creating safety tools and support services

to protect sex workers from violence. Women with a Vision is an organization in New Orleans engaging in harm reduction, health promotion, and the fight for reproductive justice. Countless sex worker-led organizations are currently working to offer clean needle exchanges, free condoms and STI testing, and other safety services for marginalized groups.

Rather than distancing oneself from sexual labor through boundary maintenance and an embrace of postfeminist, neoliberal values, transactional sex participants like sugar babies, spoiled girlfriends, and high-value women might be better served by joining forces with other sexual laborers to advocate and care for one another. Precarity is one of the defining aspects of our current moment, and it presents an opportunity for political solidarity across difference. A mutual sense of precarity is currently activating people around the United States who are engaging in walkouts and marches to advocate for gun regulation, raise awareness of climate change, support LGBTQ people, and promote anti-racism. While precarity can be an isolating force, it can be a uniting one as well.

Instead of responding to postfeminist, neoliberal configurations of intimacy by fighting for increased policing of sex work or embracing postfeminism and neoliberalism in our own lives, we might instead organize with our lower- and middle-class peers, including sex workers, to collectively demand political action to address race, class, and gender inequalities at a structural level and to offer mutual support to one another to lessen the negative impact of neoliberal policies. This would likely have the latent function of decreasing inequalities in intimate relationships as well.

7.5 Future Research

There are many potential directions for future research in this area. While this study focused on text-based discourses of transactional sex, the data gathered include rich visual and affective information that is ripe for analysis in the near future. Further on, I plan to explore the relationship between transactional sex, postfeminist sentiment, sexual attitudes, relationship power dynamics, stigma, and mental health outcomes. A longitudinal study on the long-term occupational, health, and class trajectories of women who participate in transactional sex would be invaluable in determining the long-term consequences of transactional sex for women. The findings of these studies will have implications for policies addressing transactional sex.

7.6 Significance

My project contributes to the sociological and criminological debates over the construction of the public/private divide, the oppressive and empowering aspects of sexual labor, and the consequences of globalization and neoliberal economic restructuring on love, intimacy, and sexual labor. For instance, my research suggests that some women are actively seeking unequal relationships in lieu of egalitarian ones, potentially perpetuating gender inequality. Additionally, my results suggest that many young women are seeking the financial benefits associated with hypergamous marriages without the accompanying commitment. This research also shows that the blurred lines between commercial and noncommercial sex are not just a result of increased emotional labor in commercial sex work, as previous research has shown (Huff 2011; Milrod and Monto 2017; Sanders 2008), but also a consequence of increasingly explicit economic exchange in ostensibly noncommercial sexual relationships. This may partly be a result of the social media

imperative to monetize every aspect of the self as people feel the pressure of increasing economic precarity, shedding light on some of the ways that people are coping with the breakdown of the social safety net and internalizing neoliberal ideology. Further, my research demonstrates that transactional sex is more than a means of simple survival for many women who use it as a strategy to achieve upward socioeconomic mobility.

Finally, hypergamous communities are part of a larger trend of neoliberal, postfeminist ideologies spreading through social media and shaping intimate relationships. I contend that economic, political, and social precarity are key drivers of this trend. While precarity can be an isolating force, it can be a uniting force as well, allowing the formation of political coalitions across differences. A mutual sense of precarity is currently activating people around the United States who are fighting for a better future. Join them.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

First, I'll ask for some demographic information.

1. What is your age, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, and country of residence?

Now, I'll ask you some questions about social media use.

2. How did you first get introduced to Tumblr?
 - a. How would you describe your blog?
 - b. How did you find the blogs that you currently follow?
 - c. What is your relationship like with your followers? What's it like with your mutuals?
 - d. How do you use Tumblr? For instance, how often, how long, for what purpose(s), what do you post?
 - e. What do you like about Tumblr compared to other social networking sites, and why? What do you dislike, and why?
3. How has your relationship with Tumblr changed over the years?
 - a. How has Tumblr's ban on sexual content affected you, if at all?

Next, I'll ask you questions about being a sugar baby, spoiled girlfriend, and/or high-value woman.

4. Do you identify primarily as a sugar baby, spoiled girlfriend, or high-value woman?
 - a. What do you see as the differences between the three?
 - b. What do you see as the similarities between the three?
5. What does the word "hypergamy" mean to you?
6. How would you define a sugar arrangement/spoiled girlfriend arrangement/high-value relationship?
 - a. How would you describe an "ideal" sugar arrangement/spoiled girlfriend arrangement/high-value relationship?
7. How do you differentiate between sugar arrangements/spoiled girlfriend arrangements/high-value relationships and other types of intimate relationships?
8. How would you define a sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman?
 - a. How would you describe an "ideal" sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman?
9. How would you define a sugar daddy/spoiling boyfriend/high-value man?
 - a. How would you describe an "ideal" sugar daddy/spoiling boyfriend/high-value man?
10. How did you start sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up? What motivated you to start?

- a. How has your experience sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up changed over the years?
 - b. Describe what you like about sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up.
 - c. Describe what you dislike about sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up.
11. How do you interact with other sugar babies/spoiled girlfriends/high-value women?
- a. How have your interactions with other sugar babies/spoiled girlfriends/high-value women changed over time?
12. How do you interact with your sugar daddy/spoiling boyfriend/high-value man?
- a. How have these interactions changed over time?
 - b. What kind of support do you receive from your sugar daddy/spoiling boyfriend/high-value man?
 - c. What kind of support do you provide to your sugar daddy/spoiling boyfriend/high-value man?
13. Do you talk about sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up with your friends?
- a. If so, how do you talk about it with them?
 - b. If not, why don't you talk about it with them?
14. Do you talk about sugaring/getting spoiled/leveling up with your family?
- a. If so, how do you talk about it with them?
 - b. If not, why don't you talk about it with them?
15. How do you imagine your love life in 10 years?
16. How do you imagine your work life in 10 years?
17. What advice might you give to someone who is considering becoming a sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman?

APPENDIX 2. QUESTIONNAIRE

In the following section you will be asked to provide demographic information about yourself.

Please remember that all answers will remain anonymous. Feel free to skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

A. What is your age in years?

[Fill-in-the-blank]

G. What is your gender identity?

- Cisgender Woman
- Cisgender Man
- Transgender Woman
- Transgender Man
- Nonbinary
- Other (Please specify)
- Prefer not to answer

R. Which of the following racial/ethnic categories do you feel describes you? (Please select all that apply.)

- Asian
- Black or African American
- Latino/a
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- White or Caucasian
- Other (Please specify)
- Prefer not to answer

SO. What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Other (Please specify)
- Prefer not to answer

CR. What is your country of residence?

[Drop-down menu]

CO. What is your country of origin?

[Drop-down menu]

AR. Which of the following best describes your area of residence?

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural
- Prefer not to answer

E. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Some high school
- High school diploma or GED
- Some technical training
- Technical certification
- Some college
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Some graduate school
- Graduate degree
- Prefer not to answer

ES. Which of the following best describes your current employment status? (Do not count sexual labor for the purposes of this question. Please select all that apply.)

- Employed full time (40 or more hours per week)
- Employed part time (up to 39 hours per week)
- Unemployed and currently looking for work
- Unemployed and not currently looking for work
- Student
- Retired
- Homemaker
- Self-employed
- Unable to work
- Prefer not to answer

EI. Which of the following is closest to your individual annual income? (Do not count income from sugar daddy(ies), boyfriend(s), or high-value men for the purposes of this question.)

- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 to \$34,999
- \$35,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999

- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more
- Prefer not to answer

RS. Which of the following best describes your romantic relationship status? (Do not include your sugar relationship.)

- Single and not dating
- Single and dating
- In a committed monogamous relationship
- In a committed nonmonogamous relationship
- Married or in a domestic partnership
- Other (Please specify.)
- Prefer not to answer

In the following section you will be asked to provide information about your sugar arrangement/spoiled relationship/high-value relationship. Please remember that all answers will remain anonymous. Feel free to skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

SD. Which of the following best describes you? (Please select all that apply.)

- Sugar baby
- Spoiled girlfriend
- High-value woman
- Sex worker

TI. What is your estimated monthly income earned through sugar arrangements/being a spoiled girlfriend/being a high-value woman?

#[Fill-in-the-blank]

F. From which of the following do you receive financial assistance? Do not include your sugar daddy(ies)/ boyfriend(s)/ high-value man (men). (Please select all that apply).

- Relative(s)
- Friend(s)
- Significant other(s)
- Other (Please specify)
- No one
- Prefer not to answer

FA. What do you picture yourself doing ten years from now? (Please select all that apply.)

- Having a professional career
- Being a homemaker
- Being a stay-at-home parent
- Being a sugar baby/spoiled girlfriend/high-value woman
- Going to school
- Other (Please specify)
- Prefer not to answer

This concludes the survey. Thank you for your participation. To receive your Amazon gift card, please click “Next” and enter your email address. This information *will not* be associated with your answers provided above.

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Educational Institutions Attended and Degrees Already Awarded

- 2019 Master of Arts, Sociology, University of Kentucky.
- 2017 Bachelor of Arts, Sociology, Women's Studies, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Professional Positions Held

- 2020 – 2023 Graduate Instructor, Department of Sociology, University of Kentucky
- 2017 – 2019 Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Sociology, University of Kentucky

Scholastic and Professional Honors

- 2022 Wilkinson Award for Outstanding Paper in Work, Medical, and Social Inequalities, Department of Sociology, University of Kentucky
- 2022 P.E.O. Scholar Award, Kentucky Nominee, P.E.O. International
- 2021 Outstanding TA Award, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Kentucky
- 2021 Graduate Academic Excellence Scholarship, Student Government Association, University of Kentucky
- 2020 Howard Beers Award, Department of Sociology, University of Kentucky

Professional Publications

- Davis, Rachel E., and Claire Renzetti. 2022. "Is Religious Self-Regulation a Risk or Protective Factor for Men's Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration?" *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37(11-12):NP9981–NP10006. doi:10.1177/0886260520985497.
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