

**The Sweet and Sour in Sugar Baby Relationships:
Social Expectations, Emotion Work and Stigma
Management**

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Abstract

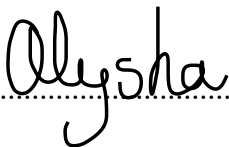
This thesis is a qualitative research project exploring ‘sugar relationships’ involving university students. In recent years, rates of sugaring have increased dramatically among young female university students. Although sugaring—a form of commoditised intimate relationship, often mediated through technology—is becoming an increasingly popular part of university life (for some students), it remains largely invisible and under-researched. Key points addressed in this thesis are the comparisons of sugar relationships to sex work, how sugaring affect financially struggling students and their agency in such arrangements, to what extent do participants need to engage in forms of ‘emotion work’ to present themselves as idealised partners, and how might the ‘hidden’ nature of these relationships further stigmatise and isolate participants from other kinds of mutually beneficial relationships. This research will fill a gap in literature by investigating how stigma is experienced, managed and reinterpreted by those within the community, and how sugar members rationalise their dating behaviours. It will shed further light on the effects of stigmatisation on how both sugar babies and daddies embody their roles in transactional relationships, while also segregating themselves from conventional modes of courtship and the sex industry.

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material that have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at this or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

Signed:

Date:15.10.2019.....

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For the past year, I have conducted an ethnographic research project examining sugar relationships. Sugar relationships are arrangements in which an older and financially secure person provides mentorship and/or financial assistance to a younger counterpart in exchange for their company. This companionship can range from long to short term, and can be platonic or sexual in nature (which has led many to perceive ‘sugaring’ as a euphemism for prostitution). The sugaring phenomenon, in recent years, has increased dramatically among young female tertiary level students. Sugaring—a form of commoditised intimate relationships, often mediated through technology—is becoming an increasingly popular part of university life (for some students). However, it remains largely invisible and under-researched.

To address the lacunas that current papers have not unpacked, the research questions orienting this study are:

- 1) Is sugaring a kind of sex work, and if so, what are the implications of framing it as such?
- 2) How does sugaring affect financially struggling students, and more specifically, what sort of agency do they exercise in these arrangements?
- 3) Do these students experience stigma due to these relationships, and if so, how does this alter how members experience and express their personal narratives about sugar relationships?
- 4) Given that these relationships are inherently commodified and age-discordant, to what extent do participants need to engage in forms of ‘emotion work’ to present

themselves as idealised partners? How might these forms of emotion work differ from those reported in more traditional sex-work contexts?

- 5) How might the ‘hidden’ nature of these relationships further stigmatise and isolate participants from other kinds of mutually beneficial relationships?

These questions highlight some of the complexities of life within this quickly expanding community that have been overlooked.

Although there has been limited academic research with data collected directly from community participation, a small group of scholars including Miller (2012), Kuate-Defo (2004) and Zimmerman (2015) have argued that sugar babies join these communities to fulfil their superficial financial desires, without having to work towards them in a traditional sense. However, Cordero (2015) and Daly (2017) have argued that perhaps sugaring should be understood as more than merely a method of obtaining material goods. Rather, sugaring is more complicated when the current consumerist climate and socialisation of people is considered, and how this reorientates the modern standard of living. Additionally, their research indicates that the ideal, honest and no-pressure relationships that sugaring claims to offer is somewhat inaccurate. Many babies admit to trying to fulfil the ideal of the ‘sexy student’; the amount of effort involved in this ‘performance’ suggests that the ‘sexy student’ trope does not portray the ‘true’, honest and direct self on which sugar websites pride themselves (Cordero 2015, p. 37, Daly 2017, p. 90).

This research will fill a gap in literature by investigating how stigma is experienced, managed and reinterpreted by those within the community, the toll emotional labour has on student sugar babies, and how sugar members rationalise their dating behaviours. It will shed further light on the effect of stigmatisation on how both sugar babies and

daddies embody their roles in transactional relationships, while also segregating themselves from conventional modes of courtship and the sex industry.

1.1 Background

Due to the globalisation of communication, advances in technology have drastically reshaped the nature of modern relationships, forcing dating culture to adapt to this rapidly changing environment. By 2000, in the United States alone, over US\$500 million was spent on ‘computer-mediated dating’ (CMD), making it the most purchased content industry on the internet, second only to pornography (Kholos and Childers 2011, p. 218). Online dating is also quite popular, as it gives users individual control over their presentation of self (Lawson and Leck 2006). To cater to this ever-expanding demand for immediate results in the search for companionship, companies have developed sites to meet the specific requirements of their users. Many search-specific CMDs have emerged to fill this specific need in the market: Jdate, which specialises in connecting Jewish singles; Veggly, which facilitates link-ups between vegetarians and vegans; Ashley Madison, which pairs married individuals interested in extramarital affairs; Grinder and Her, designed to cater to same-sex and queer meet-ups; and Dig, an application aimed at connecting ‘dog people’. Although these sites are all tailored to the specific and often unique traits of their users, they also utilise many overlapping search criteria, such as location, gender, interests, age and so on.

The relationships offered through SeekingArrangement are called sugar relationships, due to the ‘sweet benefits’ that can be gained from such pairings. A typical heterosexual sugar relationship comprises a sugar baby (usually a young, attractive woman, seeking financial assistance or mentorship in a professional field) and a sugar daddy (an older, experienced and financially established man, willing to compensate babies for their

companionship through allowances, mentorship, gifts, trips or financial compensation). Sex is not always a requirement of these arrangements; however, it is common among babies and daddies.

SeekingArrangement, one of the most popular sugar dating websites in the world, is an alternative dating site that follows this formula, offering ‘mutually beneficial relationships’ in which both parties can openly and directly state their needs and wants, facilitating effortless and efficient connections (SeekingArrangement 2019b). The site was created in 2006 by Brandon Wade, and is currently active in 139 countries, in 10 languages (SeekingArrangement 2018b, SeekingArrangement 2019b, Matthews 2019). The site appears to be growing in popularity. In 2014, the site had just over 3.6 million users; as of 2019, it reported a user base of more than 20 million members (Cordero 2015, p. 3). Wade designed the site based on his own difficulties with conventional courtship practices. Describing himself as successful but a shy MIT nerd who was unlucky in attracting women, he credited his mother with the inspiration to create SeekingArrangement. From a young age, she urged him to focus on his work and study, stating that once he became successful, he could use his success and generosity to attract a partner (Chung 2016). At the time of writing, Wade’s net worth was estimated at US\$35 million (TheRichest 2019).

In contemporary Western culture, there appears to be an ever-present emphasis on the importance of propriety, wealth and materialism, supported by the media and fuelled by an increasingly consumerist society. The sugar community is a response to this ‘new materialist’ emphasis, bridging the gap between the desire for a lavish lifestyle, and the very real limitations of middle-class budgets and lives (Kuate-Defo 2004, p. 15). Despite this, the sugar dating phenomenon is not new, or even particularly unique. Material and

financial exchange in romantic relationships has long existed, and contemporary ‘sugar relationships’, brokered through online sites like SeekingArrangement, should be understood as merely their newest guise.

Students in particular appear to increasingly be involved in sugaring. In Australia, the average cost of living for university students has risen to almost AUS\$40,000 a year (Playdon 2018). According to SeekingArrangement, 52,000 new sugar babies signed up in Australia in 2018, not only to cover university fees, but also to help defray rental costs in metropolitan cities, which average around AUS\$2,300 a month. In fact, Sydney currently boasts the second-highest average rental rates in the world. With Australian sugar babies averaging monthly incomes of around AUS\$3,000, this cost is substantial, given demanding student schedules, study periods and limited employment opportunities (SeekingArrangement 2019c). Additionally, AUS\$3,000 a month is almost double the amount a student could earn through part-time work, based on the national minimum wage (Department of Industry Innovation and Science 2019).

As sugar relationships appear rooted in economic exchange, many people doubt the authenticity of such pairings. How, they ask, can a genuine connection be shared between two people when the relationship is based on compensation for ‘companionship’? This concern, while certainly legitimate, raises complicated questions on both the legality and morality of sugaring, whether manipulation and exploitation occur, and the nature of the social transformations underpinning this shift in intimacy and relationships.

In the last five years, sugar dating has been a popular and controversial topic in popular media. Programs such as *Dr. Phil*, *60 Minutes*, *Viceland*, *CNN* and the *BBC*, and countless magazine, newspaper and online articles have featured interviews or stories

about the sugar world, often conveying implicit disapproval. The main objection seems to centre on a perceived connection between sugaring and prostitution. This critical media attention has promoted a popular bias against sugar arrangements, leading sugar babies and daddies to become increasingly private about their participation in sugar relationships and sites. Many site members are hesitant or unwilling to discuss their involvement for fear of stigmatisation.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Historical Precedents

Historically, mutually beneficial intergenerational relationships—in which an older man offers his assets, status or material assistance in exchange for the commitment and companionship of a younger woman—were present and accepted in many societies. Such arrangements have been documented in all kinds of romantic relationships, from courtship to marriage, where men and women would negotiate terms around finances, stability and intimacy in romantic pursuits (Nelson 1993, Motyl 2012).

The geisha is a classic example of what might now be referred to as a sugar relationship. In Japan in the 1800–1900s, select young women were trained as concubines or courtesans for older, wealthy and high-ranking men (Henriot 2001). It was not uncommon for these men to be married or committed to other women. In exchange, the geisha would receive some level of education—which was uncommon for women of the era—and could rise to a high level of esteem within their communities. Many geisha were recognised as possessing a higher social status than common prostitutes, and their services were not merely limited to sexual acts, but also entertainment and social companionship (Coller 2007, p. 106).

In the Middle Ages, marriage was widely understood as an institution that was organised by kin groups, thought to protect and strategically allocate assets. Many noble families maintained their status, power, wealth and privileged social positions through arranged 'strategic' marriages through which inheritance was assured (Steensel 2012, p. 248). Considerable age differences between brides and their husbands were not unusual. This ensured that the redistribution of power and wealth would be mutually beneficial for both members and the extended families involved (Bardzell 2004, p. 1).

Marx (1867) even argued that bourgeois marriage was merely an extension of business, in which people stayed together not in the pursuit of love, but for financial reasons, calling this a kind of commodity fetishism. Engels argued that women were prone to exploitation, and often sacrificed themselves for the financial security of marriage:

[monogamous marriage] was not in any way the fruit of individual sex love, with which it had nothing whatever to do; marriages remained as before marriages of convenience. It was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions—on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. (Engels 1884, p. 65).

Arranged marriages, dowries, bride prices and many aspects of conventional relationships have long been predicated on a model of implicit reciprocal emotional and financial exchange. However, this often occurs on a spectrum. It can be as complex as strategic kinship marriage arrangements—such as that found among the Makuna, a native Amazonian people that form alliances of clans through marriage, bride capture and 'gift marriages' (Århem 2010, pp. 48-52) —or as basic as exchanging a goodnight kiss after a date pays the bill at dinner. Gift exchange is likely the concept most similar to Western notions of the 'traditional relationship'. Gift marriages among the Makuna have parallels to arranged marriages in noble families, in which women are offered to allied local clans to ensure exchange arrangements in the future. This 'transaction'

ultimately leads to reciprocity between generations, creating recognised and acknowledged debt relations between joined groups.

Based on these examples, it is difficult to argue that sugar relationships are a new phenomenon. Rather, they are simply part of a long history of intimate exchange systems. This would suggest that the concept of sugaring merely follows the structured trajectory of these collaboratively exploitative arrangements, shaped for a modern audience through CMDs.

Although the exact origins of sugar relationships may be difficult to pinpoint, it is clear that similarly structured relationships have long existed across cultures and time. Indeed, it has been speculated that Adolph Spreckels marriage to Alma de Bretteville, a socialite of the early 1900s who was 24 years Adolph's junior, was the first 'sugar relationship' (Gobind and Plessis 2015). Spreckels, a tycoon, made most of his fortune in the sugar industry, leading to the term 'sugar daddy' (Selinger-Morris 2016). The title began as an affectionate name used by his wife, but it soon became a pejorative term used to perpetuate stereotypes about relationships with intergenerational gaps and asymmetrical wealth differences (Potocki 2009). By the late 1920s, sugar relationships began to inspire films like *The Easiest Way* (1931), *Sugar Daddies* (1927) and *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), all of which depicted sugar daddies as rich, old, magnate types, and sugar babies as beautiful, but superficial, femme fatales (Nelson 1993).

This caricature of sugar babies and daddies has not changed much over the past 80 years. As recently as 2018, films like *The New Romantic* reflect the nuances of sugar relationships, addressing the curiosity, motivations and stigma experienced by those in sugar relationships (but without highly sexualising the community, or relying on these inaccurate stereotypes). Given the manifest cultural and historical ubiquity of mutually

beneficial relationships, from this point, relationships outside of sugar arrangements will be referred to as conventional, rather than traditional, relationships.

1.2.2 Emotion Work

A key lens through which my time in the field will be viewed will be the kinds of additional work sugar babies take on to maintain their arrangements with daddies. To better understand this, I will use Hochschild's (1983) theories on 'emotional labor' as a framework. Emotional labor, according to Hochschild, is defined as 'the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display'. Simply put, it is the process of managing one's true feelings and actions to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job, or convincingly presenting a socially valued presentation of self (Hochschild 1983, p. 7).

It is important to note that there is a difference between emotional labour and emotional work, which may be partially responsible for some of the conflicting views about the authenticity of sugar relationships. Emotional labour refers to relationships situated in a paid labour context and typically conducted in the public sphere. Such as, courtship in more conventional settings would not fall into this category. Although these relationships also often require emotional work, the stakes and motivations are different; therefore, the individual is not exposed to the same kinds of pressures as those who engage in emotional labour. Emotional labour within the sex industry appears additionally demanding, as unlike careers in which goods or services are provided, it relies on consistent emotional commitment.

This kind of emotional labour has often been described as another layer of effort, with many in the sex industry experiencing this. A 2005 UK study on sex workers found that participants undertook various emotional management strategies to manufacture

identities, which doubled as a self-preservation mechanism (Sanders 2005). This emotional management was deployed for several reasons, with the key purpose being to attract and maintain clients, and manage stress management due to the often tumultuous nature of sex work. Suppressing their actual feelings can lead to many sex workers experiencing a kind of emotional dissonance or exhaustion (Parvez 2006). However, it has also been argued that emotional labour can be an advantage in sex work. For example, the emotional management required of sex workers can also be interpreted as a way of achieving a level of professionalism in the field, supporting the legitimacy of sex work (Meulen 2012, Chapkis 1997).

Impression management is a key tool used in emotional labour. Impression management can be understood as the ways people 'perform' through regulating and controlling the information they share in social interactions, ultimately shaping the way they are perceived by others (Goffman 1956). This requires the performer to be highly disciplined and circumspect, while simultaneously demonstrating self-control. As Goffman termed it, a good performer must be able to 'suppress his emotional responses to his private problems. He can suppress his spontaneous feelings in order to give the appearance of sticking to the affective line, the expressive status quo' (1956, 138). Goffman also argued that the personas people perform are not typically crafted by the individual themselves. Rather, they are constructed based on external moral rules into which they have been socialised (Goffman 1955).

I will analyse my interactions in the field through the theories of Hochschild (1983) and Goffman (1955) to understand how emotions are managed within sugar relationships, along with how this 'work' shapes intimacy in these arrangements. However, aspects I am particularly interested in unpacking are the kinds of personas babies and daddies

perform, and the aspects of their society that shape these personas, as articulated by Goffman. I believe it is important to note the kinds of personas sugar members embody (along with where and why these traits arise), as it will shed more light on how members understand stigma in the sugar world, and how they attempt to manage it. Goffman claimed:

that underneath their differences in culture, people everywhere are the same. If persons have a universal human nature, they themselves are not to be looked to for an explanation of it. One must look rather to the fact that societies everywhere must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters. (Goffman 1955, p. 231)

Additionally, I will unpack Hochschild's understanding of 'deep acting' (Hochschild 1983, p. 33). Hochschild illustrated this with the example of an air stewardess who suppresses her irritation after a passenger is rude to her. Deep acting is understood as a real feeling that has been self-induced. Thus, the stewardess in this context would suppress her negative feelings and continue her act of helpfulness and professionalism. Simply put, deep acting requires the individual to consistently and consciously alter their internal feelings to align with an expectation, in order to more convincingly – and more readily – engage in emotional labour and the social presentation it demands. Conversely, surface acting is when someone only exhibits the social presentation without actually altering their true feelings. Hochschild (1983) argued that deep acting is inherently exploitative, as it allows for emotional dissonance and disconnects people from their actual feelings. I aim to investigate whether this theory also applies to sugar relationships, as in current literature on the community; many sugar babies express real emotional connections to their daddies. This may also shed more light on if sugaring can be categorised as sex work, as sex workers typically employ surface acting rather than deep acting (Dutton 2004).

1.2.3 Legality of Sugaring

Much of the current literature on sugar relationships reflects a very transactional kind of arrangement, in which babies treat their interactions with daddies as a kind of career—professional girlfriends if you will. This has been socially criticised often and raises valid concerns around the potential legal liabilities to which babies and daddies expose themselves. Over the last 50 years, many courts have not categorised sexual acts as necessarily sex work, as long as other tangible or non-tangible effects are also exchanged, such as companionship or gifts (Motyl 2012, p. 930). Further, legislation such as the *Communication Decency Act*—specifically Section 230—protects speech over the internet. This means that sites such as SeekingArrangement cannot be held liable for members’ conduct on the site, essentially providing immunity to the creators, regardless of the site’s reputation for misconduct.

Although legislation like this is used by many sugar dating sites to negate legal responsibility, it does not completely protect members’ actions. If it can be proven that the intent of joining these sites or communities is purely for financial gain, both daddies and babies could be vulnerable to legal action. Under Section 251.2 of the *Model Penal Code* (1962), prostitution is defined as participating in ‘sexual activity as a business’. Sugar babies that engage in sexual acts can, therefore, evade legal repercussions, as long as they also offer social companionship alongside physical intimacy. Many in the sugar community refer to this as the ‘girlfriend experience’, which is considered a combination of sex work and the commercialisation of emotional intimacy (Sanders 2008, pp. 412-413). Sugar relationships are difficult to prosecute because the *Model Penal Code* would first have to prove that a baby’s allowance could be deemed a ‘sexual activity as a business’. This would also require a court to prove a baby’s intent was

purely economic gain, making penalising sugar babies and daddies nearly impossible (Miller 2012, The American Law Institute 1962).

On a social level, relationships in which sex is exchanged for resources – including finances or material items – are not always considered sex work. When this idea is further examined, it is also clear that on some level, most romantic relationships involve exchanges with expectations of return. This could be as simple a transaction as embracing someone in thanks for buying flowers on a first date. However, examples such as this do not carry the same kind of stigma, despite the exchange of monetary value for physical intimacy. To not express gratitude to some extent would be perceived as rude or ungrateful, and the act of a hug also indicates receptiveness and appreciation for the gesture. Building on this observation, it could be argued that slowly increasing a gift's worth over time—not necessarily financially, but also in meaning—could result in an increased level of intimacy. In the sugar community, this structures process is accelerated, as members often engage in or discuss sex not long after initial communications.

Exchange has always been present in relationships and is arguably the basis of all social interactions, deployed as a tool to regulate social cohesion (Cohen 2012, p. 231). The term 'gift' does not exclusively refer to a tangible item, but should be understood in a more nuanced sense, and include impalpable experiences such as services, gestures and companionship. Reciprocity is necessary for maintaining harmonious social relationships, as without it, unbalanced power structures can arise. For example, if a gift receiver does not give a reciprocal gift, they may experience sentiments of moral debt from the gift giver, and leave themselves open to social criticisms—not just from the initial giver, but also the wider community. This can result in the receiver becoming

dependent or ‘owing’ some kind of debt to the giver, leaving them with a sense of inferiority (Kolm 2008, p. 63). In cultures operating under this framework, the notion of the selfless gift is merely an illusion to make the giving of a gift appear altruistic, while in reality, gifts are provided to improve the gift giver’s status or popularity in their given community (Browne and Milgram 2009, p. 168). To navigate these expectations around gift exchange, it is primarily important to understand the hierarchies of the social currency being traded, and how to avoid creating moral and social debts (Kolm 2006, p. 19).

Sugar babies’ version of dating is different to more conventional modes because they claim they do not face this issue, or at least not to the same extent. Due to the upfront nature of sugar relationships, in which expectations and wants are disclosed before any exchange or meeting takes place, sugar babies and daddies supposedly avoid any unspoken etiquettes of gift exchange, ultimately negating the sensation of any mutual moral debts. This is achieved by both parties being clear about their desires and expectations when selecting partners, removing any unspoken attachments to exchanges commonly observed in more conventional styles of courtship. This structure reinforces the notion that in more conventional kinds of dating, many exchanges are implicitly selfish, deceptive and plagued with false illusions of what potential partners can offer or are seeking. Sugar dating sites address a kind of insincerity in marriages, while in comparison, sugar relationships—and by extension, sex workers—are honest and demonstrate a level of integrity in their exchanges (Zimmermann 2015). This is unlike ‘romantic love’, which tends to be littered with hypocrisies (Prasad 1999, Nayar 2017). Again, Engels highlighted that ‘marriage itself remained, as before, the legally recognized form, the official cloak of prostitution’ (Engels 1914, p. 56).

Further building on social ideas of intimacy for exchange, according to youths in the inner city of Hartford Connecticut, when an object is exchanged for some form of intimacy, it is widely understood as a general form of economic support or exchange of services (Singer et al. 2006, p. 2015). Motyl (2012) also heavily implied that sugar babies have full autonomy over their choice to be a part of a sugar community and the arrangements in which they engage. He based this on the implication that babies make conscious decisions about the specifics of arrangements, and have free will to opt out when their needs are not met. Arguably, Motyl's analysis is a straw man, as it neglects to address the unique pressures that many young, female students face in today's socio-economic climate, how this affects their motivations to join and remain part of the sugar community, and other details about these arrangements.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Constant self-reflection is essential for understanding and critiquing any kind of societal phenomenon, and ensuring that the research is not skewed from self-serving ideas and values. Although emic ethnographies can reveal dominant ideologies in our own culture, it is important for researchers to recognise that there are no universal truths outside those ideologies. Rather, there is ‘a field of competing narrative about what is good, true, and possible in social life’ (Tinker 1991, p. 55). This highlights that the purpose of critical research is to allow for a thorough understanding of perceived social realities within a certain cultural context. I intend to constantly reflect on this fact to ensure that personal biases are limited, giving the most authentic representation of the sugar community as possible. With this in mind, I will outline the methodologies utilised to collect the qualitative, emic data from the field.

First, it was key to establish the location of this field and how I could obtain access to this highly private group. Much like the few studies that have observed sugar relationships, this study also faced many challenges in terms of locating and maintaining participant engagement. This will be explored in greater detail in Section 3.1 (Cordero 2015, Roberts et al. 2010, Daly 2017, Sinacore et al. 2015). To recruit sugar babies and daddies, I primarily used sugar forums like LetsTalkSugar, Twitter and r/sugardating Reddit groups. These platforms facilitated sugar members to voice their questions, concerns and experiences, while also allowing for connectedness among international members. LetsTalkSugar catered more to sugar babies, covering trending topics such as sex, relationships, advice and safety, while Reddit proved more popular among daddies, where areas such as sex, money, scamming, and advice were common subject threads. These platforms proved not only a primary source for locating informants, but also a

great opportunity for textual analysis of principal and current sugar dating issues between new and more experienced members. It also demonstrated a surprisingly encouraging sense of community—although sites often were exclusive to babies *or* daddies—in which members supported one another. I found this very intriguing among babies, specifically those who wrote about financial struggles. Many other babies offered advice, support, and never appeared to be withholding information. My initial assumption about these sites was that the pursuit of self-preservation and the need for financial security would create a level of savage competition between babies. This was not the case.

Textual analysis of these platforms gave a highly insightful understanding of sugaring, as many were not hindered by fear of judgment, shielded through their use of pseudonyms to protect their identities (Dobson 2014). For the purposes of textual analysis, forums also allowed for a more complex insight into the shared experiences and concerns between members, in a layout similar to a communal diary, open to the public. These forums were useful platforms for connecting with babies and daddies on an international level, spreading my research outreach to not only other states in Australia, but to the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Germany, Canada and the United States.

2.1 Participants

Snowball sampling was also used to obtain participants for this study (TenHouten 1992, p. 26). According to SeekingArrangement statistics in 2018, Macquarie University was ranked the third-largest hotspot in the country for student sugar babies. I asked several classmates and managed to find a couple of key informants on campus, who introduced me to other babies and their daddies, widening my participant pool. This method proved

successful in the sense that when introduced to other sugar members *through* a sugar member, I appeared more credible in the eyes of participants. However, time-wise, it was not the most efficient mode of building rapport with a large body of informants. Other issues with snowball sampling were that shared biases could seep into the data, so this method was limited when possible.

I was able to speak with over 100 sugar members during this project. However, due to the sensitive and private nature of the topics in my semi-structured interviews (along with informants' concerns about being discovered by co-workers, employers, spouses, family or peers) many did not want their experiences and stories documented – regardless of assurances of anonymity. Some participant hesitations derived from the fact that some daddies were married and many babies lived in student dorms or at home with family. They were anxious about being discovered, 'outed', or categorised as sex workers by those they felt did not understand the nuances of sugaring (Shaver 2005, Goffman 1963). So, at the time of writing, I had 10 babies and 10 daddies who served as key informants. These participants were the source of all the data collected from the field.

As most users on SeekingArrangement are listed as heterosexual, this research project will be framed from a heterosexual sugar community perspective. Although sugar mammas (the female version of a sugar daddy), MSM (men who have sex with men) and homosexual sugar relationships exist, they are significantly fewer in number than heterosexual arrangements, making these couples much harder to find and speak with. Additionally, this study will focus on sugar babies who are students. Thus, the prerequisites for this study are that informants must be in a heterosexual arrangement, in which older men seek relationships through sugar dating sites with younger, female

students. The rationale for the focus on student sugar babies in particular is to develop a more focused understanding of the overarching social constructs around intergenerational relationships, along with their impact on students' behaviour and ideals around romantic relationships. Finally, I also wanted to address how student sugar babies experience agency, given the financial and social power difference between them and their sugar daddies.

2.2 Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and spanned between 60 and 120 minutes, allowing for informants to speak in an open and unconstrained manner. The flexibility of this style of interview allows informants to spontaneously express their stories and opinions without the restrictions of closed-ended and rigid interview formats. Follow-up questions were used to clarify ideas and concepts discussed in interviews, and were adapted to other interviews as the research continued. By speaking with participants rather than communicating through writing, I was able to maintain the interview process itself, attending to micro-social expressions such as laughter, hesitation, sighs, pauses and verbal stutters that express non-verbal nuances and subtleties (Polkinghorne 2005, Wiles et al. 2005).

Another key category of inquiry was motivation, specifically the factors that prompted individuals to seek this kind of arrangement, along with their thoughts on the sugar community prior to joining and whether this changed once they acclimated to the group. Understanding member's circumstances worked as an initial launching point to establish their motivations, which highlighted the financial pressures of babies, and daddies' curiosities about the community and fantasy fulfilment. Once motivations were

understood, it opened deeper questions pertaining to social structures, agency and the ‘authenticity’ in sugar dating relationships and conventional courtship.

To make sense of the data collected, it was critical to analyse it against its current social context and how this was influenced by historical examples of mutually exploitative romantic relationships. This is important as it highlights the practical and functional purpose of romantic unions, and how this creates stability in social constructs. Current media that circulates and perpetuates social ideas about sugaring, along with how sites like SeekingArrangement market themselves to users, will also need to be incorporated into this investigation. For this reason, discourse should be understood as ‘the ways in which narratives are patterned in both public and private conversation in reference to existing systems of power as they operate through cultural categories such as race, gender or socioeconomic positions’ (as cited by Webber in Lindlof & Taylor, Tinker 1991, p. 180). To best interpret this data, constant reflection on these themes will aid in clarifying where meanings come from and how they affect sugar members, their relationships and why the stigma around the group exists today.

2.3 Sugar Baby Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity	Job title	Relationship status	Education level	Current debt (avg)	Time in sugar community
Rachel	23	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Part-time retail	Single	Bachelor degree	AUS\$16,000	8 months
Jenna	22	Bisexual	Asian	Unemployed	Single	Master's degree	GBP\$13,000	6 years
Becca	56	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Transcriptionist	Widowed	Diploma	CA\$0	4 months
Jessica	23	Bisexual	Caucasian	Part-time nanny	In a relationship	Bachelor degree	US\$70,000	1 year 3 months
Norah	28	Bisexual	Caucasian	Unemployed	In a relationship	Diploma	AUS\$20,000	1 year
Jenny	26	Heterosexual	African American	Unemployed	Single	Bachelor degree	US\$45,000	5 months
Liz	22	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Unemployed	Single	Bachelor degree	US\$55,000	2 years
Josie	19	Bisexual	Pacific Islander	Unemployed	Single	Bachelor degree	NZ\$80,000	9 months
Anna	20	Homosexual	Caucasian	Unemployed	In a relationship	Bachelor degree	AUS\$15,000	1 year and 6 months
Elaine	22	Heterosexual	Asian	Unemployed	Single	Master's degree	AUS\$20,000	1 year

2.4 Sugar Daddy Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity	Job title	Relationship status	Education level	Net worth (as listed on SeekingArrangment)	Time in sugar community
Richard	51	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Consultant	Single	PhD	AUS\$1 million	8 years
Mike	47	Heterosexual	Asian	Business owner	Married	Bachelor degree	US\$1.2 million	11 years
Roger	36	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Entrepreneur	Widowed	College dropout	GBP\$750,000	5 years
Daniel	63	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Retired	Divorced	Bachelor degree	US\$3 million	8 years
Julien	52	Heterosexual	Asian	Architect	Widowed	Master's degree	GBP\$1 million	4 years
Chris	56	Heterosexual	Caucasian	CEO	Married	Bachelor degree	AUS\$2.5 million	6.5 years
John	49	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Business owner	Divorced	High school diploma	NZ\$1 million	7 years
George	51	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Engineer	Single	PhD	AUS\$950,000	10 years
Jerry	42	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Accountant	Married	Bachelor degree	AUS\$650,000	4 years
Newman	39	Heterosexual	Caucasian	Artist	Single	High school diploma	US\$800,000	2 years

Chapter 3: Discussion

3.1 Becoming a Sugar Member

When I began this study, I found it key to make a sugar baby account to reveal firsthand how new babies navigated the site's layout, and how they interact with veteran members. Further, this was an effective way to source daddy informants. However, to remain transparent with my research goals, and to ensure I was not coercing daddy informants, I listed on my profile that I was a postgraduate student hoping to learn more about the sugar world. This resulted in daddies reporting my page to the websites moderators, as they deemed I was on the site for the wrong reasons; perhaps they were concerned they would be 'outed', which led to me being removed from the site nine times. With the daddies I was able to interview, I ran into additional issues. Initially, interviews were done in person. Before meeting, I made it clear that no arrangement or romantic relationship would be possible, as it would affect the data collected and be unprofessional. However, this did not always hinder daddies from attempting to negotiate an arrangement. I even experienced a few instances in which daddies became frustrated that I would not consider an arrangement, and after our interview decided to opt out of the research and redact all the information I had gathered from our conversation. On one occasion, a daddy bought me a gift and became irritable when I could not accept it. In not accepting a gift or daddy's advances, it made many concerned about my intentions, how I would portray the information I gathered, and if perhaps I was a scammer, looking to blackmail daddies. These initial incidents began to shape my understanding of the nature of sugar arrangements, and the lengths members would go to to ensure their involvement in the community was kept private.

When signing up to SeekingArrangement, almost all informants expressed a curiosity, yet also a sense of ambiguity about what the community would be like, what they could realistically gain from sugar dating, and whether this mode of courtship was a suitable fit for them. As described by Newman, who had been a member for a little over 2 years:

I think I first heard about it as a pop-up somewhere when I was online. I was curious but also cautious about what it would be like ... what would we talk about? What was I allowed to do? Is being with a much younger woman really all it's cracked up to be? It was all very intriguing.

Elaine described first hearing about sugaring on *Dr. Phil*. Initially, she was 'grossed out', as the lifestyle was framed in a manner that made sugaring appear 'seedy and dirty':

After seeing it on television, I started talking about it at school with some friends, and found out a few of them had actually tried it before ... At first I was a little shocked [be]cause they hadn't told me, but the more and more I heard about it from people doing it at school, and I saw how it fixed so many money issues they were having, it just made sense, and I said why not?

Most babies explained that they joined out of a need for quick finances, along with wanting to be able to live at a level of financial freedom that would enable the kinds of lifestyles they observed social media influencers living. Daddies were more driven by intrigue about the legitimacy and professionalism of the site, enticed by marketing campaigns that promoted dating young, fun, smart, exciting and attractive women, most importantly, with no drama. The benefits SeekingArrangement claim possible for daddies is that their odds of finding a young, beautiful, but also educated woman are statistically favourable. It claimed that for every daddy on the site, there are four babies, that the lifestyle allowed daddies to redefine the expectations of a 'perfect relationship', and that sugaring is the ideal form of dating due to its upfront and honest structure, matching men with women who can meet their terms (SeekingArrangement 2019b).

SeekingArrangement clearly indicated the kinds of babies the company attempts to attract. If a new baby signs up using a student email—verifying that they are currently enrolled in university/college—they are immediately upgraded from a standard profile to a premium account. This upgrade allows babies to secure more traffic and attention to their profiles, along with having no cap on how many messages they can receive or send a day, thereby increasing their chances of finding a daddy. This is a very conscious marketing ploy by SeekingArrangement, as it continuously seeks babies that are educated and fall within the typical age bracket of students (18–25 years of age). Based on daddy informant’s testimonies, it also appears that babies between the ages of 18 and 25 are whom daddies are those most interested in dating.

Further supporting this, in 2015, one of SeekingArrangement’s marketing campaigns was called ‘Sugar Baby University’. This was explicitly designed to recruit more women in this demographic. The site publicized how sugaring not only could better a student’s financial situation while she studied, but could also build networks that would ultimately help her in the workforce (SeekingArrangement 2018a). As of 2019, SeekingArrangement’s Sugar Baby University declared to have 177,500 Australian students and 4.2 million students worldwide, stating that these women were choosing this site to offset student debts and ‘secure a better future’ (SeekingArrangement 2019c, Bahadur 2013). This strategic marketing recognises the financial situation of many young women, which could be interpreted as exploitative. However, it could also be argued that SeekingArrangement has merely noticed a gap in the market: wealthy, older men wanted young, educated women, and young, educated women were seeking financial independence. Thus, SeekingArrangement was merely fostering these mutually beneficial relationships.

Early in the data collection stage, babies expressed that the relationships SeekingArrangement offered were mutually beneficial rather than exploitative, as both parties need something that the other possesses. ‘I’ve never felt like I didn’t have an active role in my arrangements’, Anna claimed. ‘I can dictate my terms just as freely as my daddies.’ This interpretation of sugaring demonstrates that the negotiation of terms is mutual, which is another key point on which sugar dating sites pride themselves. SeekingArrangement claims that most babies can find their ideal arrangement within five days of signing up. The purported key benefits of becoming a baby are that they can find success through mentors, with established men offering valuable guidance for long-term stability in addition, women can date experienced gentlemen who do not play emotional games, all while being pampered and financially taken care of (SeekingArrangement 2019a).

Another telling feature of SeekingArrangement’s site format is their layout of public and private photographs. Each user has a main profile picture, but can also maintain an album of private pictures, which are locked and cannot be opened without the permission of the user. Most babies’ profile pictures include either a full-body picture, or an uncensored face picture. Their private pictures usually include more sultry or suggestive images. These images can only be opened if a baby gives access to a daddy, or if a daddy sends a request to see the photographs. This feature is also available for daddies, but it is implemented differently. Many daddies’ profile pictures do not include their faces, and if they did, these are often censored or cropped. Instead, profile pictures tend to be taken from the neck down (clothed), blurred or black-barred photographs that obscure their identities, or images of their luxurious lifestyle (i.e., mansions, yachts, helicopters, cars or simply an image of a current bank slip with their bank balance

displayed). Their private images are often much more revealing, showing daddies' faces, and thus disclosing their true identities.

Many of the babies in this study explained that they were on the site for primarily economic reasons. However, they also expressed a sense of hopefulness when it came to the possibility of finding love. An interesting example that both babies and daddies brought up was the film *Pretty Woman* as an example of the capitalist fairytale they were trying to replicate in their sugar arrangements. This 1990s film depicted a powerful businessman that pays a woman to spend a week with him, providing her with designer clothes, five-star penthouse hotel rooms and luxurious dinners. By the end of the film – despite the age gap and differing economic backgrounds – the two fall in love. The final scenes include a fairytale sequence, in which the lead characters emulate a princess in a tower being saved by a knight on a white horse—or in this case, a white limousine—wielding his umbrella as a sword. However, for many babies this fairytale never came to fruition. Many experienced a much cruder – even crass – side of the men on sugar dating sites that they were not accustomed to. Some were asked for explicit pictures and videos or one-night stands after only a couple of messages had been exchanged. Those who did not leave the site had to adjust their expectations and approach sugaring more realistically. Babies expressed that to really make the most out of sugaring, you had to disregard romanticised notions about daddies being rich, handsome, gentlemen, who wanted to spoil them. Instead, they highlighted the importance of 'realism' – viewing their arrangements more like transactions. Babies also expressed feeling misled when initially joining SeekingArrangement, based on how the site suggested what daddies would be like through the models on the site. Jessica stated:

You never really get to date some young attractive guy and they'll pay you for it. Like you'll never find someone on the site that looks like the guy on the

main page. If you looked like that and had money, you probably wouldn't need Seeking[Arrangement]. You need to be realistic about the kind of guys on there.

Some babies, however, did express a preference for the upfront nature of daddies:

I prefer it all being out in the open. All men think like that anyways, at least I know what I'm getting in a sugar daddy. Women who think that men aren't like that are kidding themselves, and usually don't last very long on sugar dating sites. (Norah)

Despite this, both babies and daddies expressed a desire to find long-term stable arrangements that would meet both their financial and emotional needs. Many found that short-term arrangements were too time-consuming, and the process of starting new arrangements was tedious and fatiguing. When I asked babies about their thoughts on finding enduring love with a daddy, many were not opposed to the idea, but did not think it was possible. Anna stated:

Sure, wouldn't we all love to fall in love with a rich, generous guy. But from my experience, most daddies are already taken, and I'm not a home-wrecker, like, I wouldn't want to break up a family.

When asked the same question, Mike, who had been sugar dating for 11 years, explained that in the past he had fallen in love with a baby that he had been involved with for several years, but that only complicated matters. In order to prevent this from happening again, Mike ends arrangements in which he feels he, or the baby, is becoming too emotionally invested. 'You need to be careful, especially when you've had a thing going with a baby for a long time ... love makes it complicated and then it just become so stressful'.

Additionally, it appears that daddies are also aware of the romanticised notions held by many babies. Jerry explained:

Too many babies on the site think they are going to meet some billionaire, most guys that are already that wealthy probably already have someone, because they're already in that place of status and visibility ... most girls need a much more pragmatic approach, and acknowledge that a guy that makes 250 grand a year can still give them some really nice things, and opportunities ... as long as they are willing to be fair and give me what I want too.

After reviewing many profiles on SeekingArrangement, it appears that most daddies hold a standard account, with only very few flaunting 'diamond-level' membership. A diamond member daddy has an annual income of \$1 million or more. Although all sugar daddy members must pay a membership fee—starting at US\$49.95 per month—diamond daddies pay US\$1,200 monthly. Interestingly, I also discovered that only diamond members need to verify their net worth by providing a tax return from the past year. After doing a textual and thematic analysis of LetsTalkSugar's chat board, on which babies discuss and seek advice on their sugar experiences, I found a chat purely dedicated to discussing diamond daddies. Babies expressed a desire for a diamond daddy but often found it difficult to find and maintain one, as daddies in this position know they are perceived as a commodity. The key reason for the strong demand for diamond daddies is that the title indicates to babies that they are guaranteed a daddy of a certain economic status; they would not be wasting time on a 'Splenda' or 'salt' daddy.

These types of daddies form a tier of the kinds of daddies that babies prefer and seek. Diamond daddies are at the top of the list, as they not only list high incomes, they had also must prove their earnings. The next level in the tier is premium account holders. The requirements for these kinds of daddies varies, but they are described as the typical daddy; they earn good money, but pay a higher rate to be on the site than standard account holders (although it is heavily debated on sugar forums how much they pay), but they do not have to prove their earnings. Standard account holders are next, as these users pay the minimum rate for an account. Veteran babies often avoid these accounts

when possible for a variety of reasons. First, these account holders do not have to prove their income. Second, they pay little to join, which some believed indicates a scammer, ‘catfish’, or a cheap man. Following this are Splenda daddies. This clever title describes men who want to be a sugar daddy, but do not have the funds to meet the title. One baby on the chat board described Splenda daddies as ‘really sweet guys, but Splenda is no substitute for real sugar’. Finally, there are salt daddies. Salt daddies are at the bottom of the list; as they are men that do not have the means or wealth to provide for a baby, yet pose as if they do. These daddies are avoided, as they waste babies’ time, and are notorious for scamming babies into sexual acts without upholding their end of the arrangement (Joey 2016).

The initial steps of communication reported varied slightly, but typically, daddies tend to reach out to babies first. Minimal small talk is exchanged, if any, before terms and conditions are discussed. Details of arrangements, specifically sexual negotiations, are usually saved for in-person meetings. After a few reciprocal questions and pleasantries are exchanged—to gauge chemistry or compatibility—a first meeting is organised.

George explained:

You typically want to meet in a place that is classy but also inconspicuous, so you don’t draw attention from the wrong, judgy kind of people ... like an upscale cocktail bar, but the kind with dim enough lighting that you won’t be recognised, and take a few years off [laughter].

From the initiation of communication, most babies and daddies appear to be upfront about their requirements and what they are willing to offer in exchange. When asked how she felt about the frankness of laying out terms of arrangements, Josie remarked:

In the beginning I use to waste so much time with pleasantries and flirting ... but I figured out that you actually lose more daddies with that approach ... I kind of prefer it now, there’s no bullshit, just hey, here’s what I want and this

is what I will do. [Are] you in or out? Not like guys I've dated in the past that promise you the world, but it was all just a line.

Seemingly, diverging from the more conventional style of courtship—in which coy, subtle, coquettish and demure behaviour is deployed—sugar members enjoy a sense of power in their freedom from conforming to expectations around courtship.

Based on the data gathered, it appears that babies' desire sugar relationships that are financially stable, consistent and long-term. Monogamy is not typically expected, and sex is not always wanted, but can be negotiated. Daddies want ongoing commitment from babies, yet also want a 'no-strings attached' feeling to arrangements. Sex is often ideally part of arrangements. Daddies also typically want young, beautiful, and educated women, so they get a more real 'girl-next-door' experience.

Although the foundations of sugar relationships are rooted in honesty – which SeekingArrangement claims results in more authentic connections – users in this study admitted to occasional hesitance about being completely truthful in some areas. For new members, many felt tentative revealing too much about themselves. They were concerned that it may make them vulnerable to exposure as a sugar member, resulting in stigma or blackmail, and were uneasy about their activities being linked to sex work. More simply, some were anxious about the emotional distress that comes with rejection. While simplicity and authenticity are key claims of sugar dating sites, both babies and daddies navigate complicated emotional waters in their sugar experiences.

3.2 Embodying the Fantasy

Essentially, all but two informants in this study communicated that they had presented a 'false' version of themselves when in arrangements, despite sugar dating sites' claims about the genuineness and authenticity of this mode of courtship. The experiences of

‘performance’ in sugar relationships appear to be highly gendered; babies and daddies’ arrangements were still subject to the same patriarchal structures and gender roles observed in conventional heterosexual interactions, but babies had the additional pressure of having to maintain the persona’s they were ‘selling’.

Looming financial pressures often accompany study, such as having minimal professional skills (which limits employment opportunities), time pressures due to demanding university and study timetables, and the costs and debt associated with tuition, textbooks, and student accommodation. Thus, all babies admitted to finding sugaring the ideal solution. The ability to choose their own hours, accept and deny any arrangement that does not meet their needs or comfort levels, potentially gain networking opportunities, and the seemingly candid attitude towards sugaring, appear too good to resist. The reality of sugaring is that babies must be able to enact very specific roles or risk losing their daddy’s favour, and by extension, their financial and mentoring support. Jessica asserted, ‘You have to make them feel special or they won’t continue to see you’. After asking Jessica to expand on this, she explained, that in her experience, ‘men on that site are know-it-alls and want to feel like they are calling the shots ... it’s my job to be the idea of the woman they are looking for’. Babies seemed highly aware that they had to utilise impression management in arrangements, but they were also cognisant that that this was not unique to sugar dating. Norah explained:

There’s a performance level with every relationship that we have, be it sexual or professional ... You put your make-up on so you can go to your 9–5 and look presentable and play the part, and then you put other make-up on so you can go out and go to the club. Your work person and club persona shouldn’t be the same ... There is theatrics in every sort of relationship we build.

Intrigued by this, I asked babies about this ideal woman they were trying to emulate.

Becca explained that she often let daddies take the lead, allowing them to reveal what they wanted in a woman, which would then shape the persona she would take on in the arrangement. Becca described herself as sometimes argumentative and an independent woman who is typically very vocal about her opinions. However, she often had to restrain herself, and be cautious of what she revealed about her personal life when with daddies: 'I don't want to appear smarter than a man, so I hold back a little, to make them feel that they've got the dominant role'. This is despite the fact that the daddies she liaises with are aware that she is well educated. Regarding her personal life, Becca revealed that she also took anti-depressants due to emotional distress she experienced after the passing of her husband. Without her medication, she could become irritable and lack self-regulation. When on a trip with a daddy for several days, Becca neglected to take her medication and began to feel the effects, having to consciously filter out any undesirable behaviour:

I didn't want to be irritable with him. I'm not his wife. That's not why I'm there. I'm not there to give him grief ... there was definitely pressure, like I had to be careful that I don't get upset or let it show. I always want to appear not upset, I have to be conscious of it and compose myself.

Similarly, Jenna stated that she typically did considerable research and reconnaissance on the daddies who contacted her, or those in whom she was interested. Based on the details on their profiles, she would mould herself to meet their 'sexpectations'. According to her, this was a key in determining how, and who, you need to portray when with daddies. Thus vetting was also used to determine whether someone was a legitimate sugar daddy, or a salt or Splenda daddy. After establishing that a daddy has the resources to meet her needs, Jenna considers the daddy's requirements based on his profile biography, his 'about me' section, and his seeking tags, searching for any signs she deemed to be red flags (such as 'extreme' sexual fetishes, contradictions in wants,

potential scammers or ‘too-good-to-be-true’ daddies). Once she had an impression of the daddy’s ideal woman, Jenna shaped herself to fit:

They pretty much tell you what they want, and it’s a matter of adjustments. In terms of personality, some want you to be a cute little bean, submissive you know? While some want strong dominant women.

Jenna carefully deployed mock weakness when playing a submissive role, stating that this tool needed to be used when appropriate, or she risked appearing manipulative and lose the favour of a daddy. In Jenna’s experience, most daddies only ever want an extreme version of a baby either an extremely dominant, or submissive persona – and that having to perform these polarising fantasies with different daddies can be highly fatiguing (and often bled into life outside sugaring). This intentional separation between the sugar world and babies’ ‘real lives’ was a recurring theme, with babies often addressing the struggles of living two lives, and how it taxes them both emotionally and academically.

Rachel spoke in depth of this toll on her life outside the sugar world. She found the main difference between her real dating life and her baby persona was the inability to share emotional baggage:

The time you spend together [with sugar daddies] you don’t talk about your lifestyle. Like if I’m having a sad day, I’d usually call my partner to talk about it. I would never call someone I’m in an arrangement with.

Rachel explained:

The sugar world is transactional ... when I’m with people from the sugar world I kind of put on a front like I’m trying to be who they want me to be ... I don’t feel like myself ... it’s a staged person.

In her experience of sugar dating, Rachel related that fantasy was the main purpose of sugaring, and that she felt her role as a baby was to:

Help them [daddies] relive their youth, so you play into that role of a young woman interested in older men ... they love to fit you in a box. Young, smart, beautiful ... you are the damsel in distress, and in a way, kind of help them fulfil the fantasy they want for themselves ... as the knight.

Rachel eventually decided to take a temporary break from sugaring, as she struggled to keep her baby persona 'switched on 24/7', especially when on trips with daddies. Eventually, this continuous acting began to affect and distort how she acted in general in her life outside sugaring. She admitted that she felt it was changing her into a cruder person, and could feel her sugar persona seeping into her personal dating life.

Liz also experienced this difficulty with juggling her life outside the sugar world:

Sometimes it can feel difficult to remember what kind of person I am. There were points where I was spending almost every day either meeting up with a daddy or speaking with them over the phone. It even cost me a guy I was actually interested in because I wasn't acting like me anymore ... Admittedly it began to get in the way of my studying, which really broke my heart because that's the only reason I got into sugar dating to start off with. Since then, I've learnt that I need to take periodic breaks just to make sure that I don't lose sight of what I really want ... the lifestyle can become addictive.

These stories seem to reflect that, for babies, there is a clear power structure that pressures them into adopting a certain role. The most frequent persona babies had to embody was a blend between an intelligent, beautiful woman in need of guidance and support, but also open to 'a good time' while not being overtly sexual. Babies are motivated to embody these personas because if they break this illusion, they risk a return to financial turmoil. This dynamic raises many issues in terms of manipulation, where babies could be vulnerable to exploitation by their daddies, who are aware of their financial situations. This potential for manipulation reveals that sugaring may not be as liberating for students as it claims. This kind of feigned performance also reflects Hochschild's (1983) understanding of emotional labor, as sugar babies have to put aside their true feelings, ideas, and to an extent, selves to meet the emotional requirements of

sugaring as ‘drama-free’ relationships. With consideration to this, I was interested in how this false persona is experienced by daddies, and if they also ever felt they had to present a false self to maintain their relationships with babies.

At times, daddies demonstrated a lack of recognition or awareness that babies were not being their genuine selves. Richard explained that, unlike on more socially acceptable dating sites, women express having high expectations for emotional support. Sites like SeekingArrangement are appealing because babies are assumed to be emotionally stable and only want financial support and a ‘good time’. He asserted that the kinds of women on sugar dating sites are ‘happier to be kept women ... they love it. They are much more willing to be submissive, they love the power dynamic. Whereas women my age think that’s pretty disgusting’. Richard explained that most women will not admit that they enjoy these gendered roles, as our society shuns the dependent female, and this is why most women have such resentment towards sugar babies. He claimed that the reason women outside the sugar community were so divisive towards babies was jealousy rather than abhorrence. When asked if he ever felt that any of the babies he socialised with were performing to impress or meet his needs, Richard claimed that it was often very easy to detect such an act. Giveaway traits include being overly agreeable, lacking the ability to converse, and at times displaying ‘bratty’ behaviour.

Like Richard, almost all daddies in this study praised how the babies they had interacted with genuinely enjoyed, and even ‘fetishised’ being with older men. Daniel stated:

They just love older men; it’s almost like they have a predilection for the silver fox. I hear so many of my babies complain about how guys their own age play games, don’t know what they’re doing, with their lives and in the bedroom [laughter], and generally don’t have the money to provide them with the things they want ... They want experienced gentlemen, not boys.

Curiously, when comparing this to babies' revelations, 8 out of 10 informants said that they had zero physical attraction to the older men on sugar dating sites. If it were not for the financial aspect of arrangements they would not be physically interested in dating them. However, when courting a daddy, babies always express how sexually attractive they found mature men.

Daddies also appeared—at least to some extent—to not present their true authentic selves when dating babies. However, unlike babies, it is not a performance that is for the benefits of babies, but for the daddies themselves. The obvious power structures between sugar members—in which the financial support provided by daddies is interpreted as an inherent part of arrangements—gives daddies a sense of purpose and validation as 'successful men'. John offered:

It is a bit of an ego boost I'll admit ... I've always known I've been successful, it's obvious based on how I've built my business and made my money, but in some ways I've never felt *really* successful, until I could show what I could provide *because* of that success ... Dating babies, being with a young, sexy, and intelligent woman that really likes to hear about my success, kind of proves that, hey I've made it ... I live the fantasy that all men want.

When asked if outside sugar dating daddies were as generous with their finances, Chris stated:

Honestly, I wouldn't be able to live my life the way I want if I spoiled my wife the same way I spoil my babies. I always make sure my wife and kids are taken care of ... I would say it comes down to appreciation. My family is used to a certain standard of life, so they expect me to provide ... Babies are just more grateful for whatever I do for them. Not to say I don't love my wife, I love her very much, I just love the version of me that dating a young woman brings out.

These sentiments reflect daddies' desire to be recognised for their contributions to relationships and to feel needed. Multiple daddies expressed that their sugar dating activities were in some way a charitable and philanthropic endeavour. They believe that they substantially change the lives of their chosen babies, and that their baby's

appreciation makes them feel masculine, respected, and successful. It appears that this lack of self-esteem or recognition of success is a key driver for many daddies choosing sugar dating over more conventional avenues of romantic relationships. Further, many daddies appear to seek sugar relationships not merely for the sexual thrill, but also for emotional fulfilment in how they view themselves, which often serves to reinforce their sense of masculinity.

Despite this acting from both babies and daddies, both groups expressed a level of connection and intimacy that they deemed real. Babies stated that most of the time they were not physically attracted to daddies, but admitted that they were emotionally attracted to them. ‘Sapiosexual’ was a term often used by both babies and daddies to describe their relationships, claiming that they found intelligence more erotic than physical traits:

It starts off much more like wow, he’s so charming, rather than what a hottie. Sure you grow to care, and even love your daddy in some ways ... It’s hard not to fall in love with the lifestyle, and when you spend so much time with a person, talking about the same kinds of stuff you talk about when you’re in a regular relationship, you bond ... you definitely, like, connect mentally, and sometimes it’s so intense, like the physical [attraction] side doesn’t seem so important anymore. Sure if I were in a bar or something I wouldn’t give a guy that looked like the guys on SA [SeekingArrangement] a minute of my time ... most of them aren’t the George Clooney kind of older man ... but Seeking[Arrangement] like entices you with the money, but you actually get to meet some really interesting men, that are so smart and accomplished, and really willing to help you out. Like I’ve clicked with some men on the site that I have something real with. (Elaine)

When further questioned if all interactions with daddies were contractual or commoditised in some way, Elaine explained:

Definitely not. Like sure a lot about the relationship is transactional, sure, but we do stuff for each other just because we want to. Not everything comes down to discussing dollars and cents. I think that would ruin it.

Several other baby informants also voiced similar thoughts. So, for babies, it appears as if some level of altruism is experienced in their sugar relationships. This indicates that although many babies became sugar members for compensation, that not every aspect of sugar relationships were commoditized, and true emotional connections are possible in sugar arrangements.

These statements prompted reflection on the genuineness of sugar arrangements. Although both parties claim to not present their true selves, they did express true feelings and connections with those they were in arrangements with. If this was true, based on Hochschild's (1983) interpretation of deep acting, how could sugar relationships be viewed as inherently emotionally exploitative? Babies openly admitted that they too began to feel genuine emotional feelings for daddies after time. This may then suggest that babies do not create a false consciousness in their arrangements. Rather, they make reflexive decisions while also negotiating their available choices. This demonstrates a kind of personal agency in the face of precarity and economic necessity. If this is true, was there perhaps too strong a fixation of this idea of 'complete authenticity' in romantic relationships, and could this ultimately hindered the facilitation of genuine connections? If so, what are the implications?

3.3 Why Not Hire a Hooker?

There appears to be a narrow emotional tight rope that babies in particular have to walk when entering sugar arrangements. Babies must be able to demonstrate the 'real girl' experience, and establish some level of authentic emotional investment, while simultaneously performing the act of the fun, sexy, financially struggling student. But crucially, this performance must not include the undesirable aspects that accompany

being an economically burdened student. They must demonstrate vulnerability, but only to an extent that does not appear desperate or insincere.

For daddies, there appears to be the same kind of burden, only it takes the form of the protection of their privacy. Most daddy informants expressed a desire to not only have a sexual relationship with babies, but to also have an emotional connection. However, achieving this appears complicated when the level of secrecy, and the extent to which daddies go to conceal their personal lives is considered. This poses an important question: how do babies and daddies manage to have genuine emotional connections when they must limit themselves emotionally? For many participants, the lack of emotional entanglement was a key enticement to sugar dating. However, members' actions indicate that they were actively seeking honest, emotional connections. According to Daniel, this is because members seek something much deeper than mere physical intimacy; and that this is an aspect that the general public cannot acknowledge.

It's the mental bond you make with the girls [babies] that makes them different from an escort, you know? Escorts and hookers, you pay, they come to your hotel room, you have sex, and they leave, and that's it. With a sugar baby you can talk, real intellectual conversations too, and they pay attention. They actually care and are interested in what you have to say; because you have all this world experience and wealth of knowledge that they want ... So many people don't understand the bond you make with a baby. They all think it's about ageing men with big wallets just wanting to have sex with a beautiful, young thing. Although that's amazing, it just doesn't compete with the feeling you have when you know there's something more there.

Building on this, Julien stated that when women on sugar dating sites offered him explicit photographs or video calls in exchange for money, he reported their profiles to have them removed from the site:

There's an unlimited amount of free porn on the internet, so why would I want to pay for more of it? This is not what sugar dating is about or what the [sugar] dating sites are for ... This is the issue why so many think it's prostitution, and girls that think sugar dating is escorting are the ones really taking advantage of

the system. There needs to be more than that she can offer to entice me into seeing and supporting her.

Roger, a widowed entrepreneur, explained his interest in sugar arrangements:

I didn't go on there to meet a woman to sleep with. I went on there because I just couldn't go on dates. I had a hole in my soul, so I suppose I went on there for dates but also to have conversations with people ... I was suffering and I just wanted to meet some quirky sorts of people.

Roger also admitted to never having slept with any women on sugar dating sites, despite being a member for five years. He made this conscious decision because of the dynamic of the sugar relationships. Sleeping with a young woman who spent time with him primarily for financial assistance would feel exploitative and 'borderline abusive'.

Anna, a baby that never has sex with daddies, stated:

Not being intimate with daddies, in my experience at least, really allows you to connect with a man on a deeper level, and a lot of the time what daddies want is an emotional connection that they aren't getting, why else would they want to date sugar babies? Think about it. They would get a hooker or something if just sex were what they were after ... Sure you get guys that are like, I just want sex, but you get people like that on Tinder too ... Sex is a relationships thing, not just a sugaring thing. People seem to forget that.

Both babies and daddies appear to resent the notion that many hold about sugaring, in which superficial aesthetics are prized over emotional and intellectual merit. This appears to suggest that babies also share the same sentiment as daddies, regarding the need for emotional connection in arrangements. Several informants claimed that they would, and have, ended arrangements in which there was no emotional chemistry. However, babies appear to feel greater pressure to ensure that daddies enjoy the experience they 'purchase', due to the financial nature of their arrangements. Both parties' level of emotional investment seems to be hindered by members' lives outside sugaring, restricting their ability to wholly and completely be themselves with one another.

3.4 Sexual Agency and the Symbolic Condom

The babies and daddies that seek out and have sex with other sugar members have to manage a variety of issues. Again, the power structure of sugar relationships is considered. I wanted to understand how babies negotiated and navigated sexual acts, and in particular, how much agency they have in regard to condom use.

In New South Wales, sex work in brothels is legal. Many workers insist on condom use, with most customers agreeing, as they are aware of the volume of sexual interaction in which sex workers partake (Australian Government 2017, Pinto et al. 1990). However many daddies are under the impression that babies are significantly ‘cleaner’ and healthier. Newman stated:

Sugar babies are cleaner then prostitutes, that’s why I seek their company over hookers among other reasons ... saying that though, I would never force a baby to have sex with me without protection if that’s not what she wanted, that’s not grounds for me to stop seeing her, but if they are willing, and we trust each other, then sure, why not ... But trusting a baby enough to have sex without protection for me would take some time ... For example, with my current three babies, I only have sex with one without protection, and we have been together for over two and a half years.

Chris voiced similar sentiments:

I would never want one of the ladies I was seeing thinking that they had to sleep with me without protection ... I consider myself a gentleman. In fact, even if they ask, I usually insist on one [condom] ... If I was to get something [sexually transmitted infection] and god forbid pass it on to my wife, I would be finished.

Seemingly, it appears that there would be no repercussions for babies who request that condoms be used in their arrangements; 7 out of 10 baby informants stated that they insisted protection be used in sexual acts. When asked if they ever felt pressured to be intimate without a condom, many babies asserted that this was where they drew the line:

There are so many daddies out there that would be willing to sleep with me with a condom. The sex will still be good. Daddies that ask for sex without condoms or try to bribe you with more money or gifts for sex without one are just seedy guys and I don't waste my time with them. (Norah)

Rachel echoed this:

Sex with a daddy without a condom is just too risky. You just don't know how many other sugar babies or whatever women they are seeing. Usually when you are first chatting with a daddy online you can establish if they want to have sex without a condom, and I usually just tell them I'm not interested anymore, and I'm out the door. Like I won't even give them my time after that to talk to them ... It's completely off limits.

There appears to be a code of conduct around condom use for both babies and daddies. Reasons include health concerns, birth control, hiding infidelity from spouses, potentially limiting a baby's ability to be intimate with other daddies or outside sugaring, and general comfort levels. Negotiations do not seem to be present despite babies being heavily reliant on daddies financially, with many confident that they would be able to find alternative arrangements that meet their requests.

Interestingly, this aspect of sugaring does not appear to be about the use of condoms themselves, but rather, what a condom represents, and how this consequently shapes the legitimacy of romantic relationships. A lack of a condom represents fidelity. A condom could be interpreted as a marker for the commitment, stability, legitimacy and long-term investment of a relationship. Sex with a condom, then communicates a more guarded approach to the act, as sex with an 'unknown' person could be potentially dangerous. For babies, condom use could be interpreted symbolically, as a way to separate their personal intimate relationships from the transactional nature of sugar arrangements. The presence of a condom in a sugar arrangement may have functions that go beyond protection of physical health and birth control; it seems to erect an emotional divide that

reinforces their commitment to partners outside sugaring and limits true intimacy to their ‘real’ relationships (Warr and Pyett 1999, Murphy 2015).

For daddies, the idea of cleanliness was symbolically important. Although daddies believed sugar babies to be ‘cleaner’ than traditional sex workers, they often still insisted on condom use. Cleanliness again appears to play into daddies’ fantasies about babies: a fantasy in which the young, sexy schoolgirl archetype also embodies a kind of sexual innocence, naivety and purity. In creating this distinction between babies as more wholesome, they reinforce a psychological distinction between babies and sex workers. This point will be explored further in section 3.6. This example demonstrates how sugar members attempt to define themselves against what they are not, as a way of distancing themselves from the stigma of sex work.

3.5 Babies Sexual Autonomy and Feminism

Sugar relationships are often discussed in a fashion that only acknowledges daddies that are in search of sexual gratification. Society is influenced and dominated by this idea of the male gaze, perpetuating the notion that there is something primal in how men view women, and how women should present themselves to be desired by men. This has prompted consideration of the female gaze, its description and its existence. It could be speculated that a pure female gaze is not possible, as in the Western cultural context, women cannot help but internalise the male gaze, viewing sexuality and themselves through men’s eyes. To obtain a better interpretation of this in the sugar world, I asked daddies to define the kinds of sexual appetites they sought in a baby:

I think I want what most men want. Arm candy that looks sexy and elegant, but not a whore ... when it comes to sex I don’t like babies that are too, lack of a better word, aggressive. It’s off-putting. It makes it feel like you’ve got a hooker, that just wants to get it over with and get paid ... Obviously I want

them to enjoy it, which I think most of them do, but if a girl was really forward I would probably send them home. (Julien)

When asked if this was a frequent occurrence in his experience of sugar dating, Julien added:

Luckily no. But that's just most women isn't it [laughter] ... women don't think like that. You know, men, we're animals [laughter], we can't control ourselves when we're around a beautiful woman. Girls are more reserved.

Jerry shared similar ideas:

Babies, and I suppose women in general, think security and comfort when they are initially looking for a partner. As a man, I can say we think differently, it's about sex. We crave the physical thrill of being with a young, beautiful and intelligent woman ... Men's needs are just more sexual-based than women. I don't want to sound sexist, but that's a main reason why sugar dating sites even exist. It's for men that want sex but also a connection. Women don't need sex so much but need money and guidance ... Sugar babies are definitely more open to the idea of no-strings-attached sex, or sex on the first date, unlike most women, but they are not at all sluts.

These sentiments demonstrate the conflicting expectations of daddies, in which sugar babies need to be simultaneously more sexually liberated than the everyday woman, yet still abide by societal norms of 'classy' and sexy, but never 'slutty'. Speaking with babies on this topic, however, revealed that this idea of women being less sexually driven than men was simply untrue.

Becca's current arrangement is with a 'senior' daddy who, of late, has been less virile:

Sex is really important in sugar relationships, and life in general ... The sex is great but he is under tremendous amounts of stress from work right now, and the sex part is lacking. He's 61. It's harder when they get older, you know? I've actually probably spent more nights with him where there was no sex than there was with sex. I like the companionship but I am [sexually] frustrated [laughter]. When he's stressed, I don't push it, even though I'd kind of like to, but I'm hesitant. He's old-fashioned and likes the submissive kind of woman, so I have to kind of step back and be the supportive girlfriend type when he's like that ... My experience with men is, don't say a word because it's a sensitive issue, and men don't like women that forward about sex. But then

there's the physical side of me, going oh my god it's driving me crazy. It's a bit of a tug of war.

Rachel also discussed being rejected by daddies in the past:

I consider myself a pretty sexual person, and I'm very comfortable in my own body. I've also been always [sexually] curious about an older man, to see what it would be like with a more mature and experienced guy. However, in the beginning, I'd have to reel it back a bit because it would scare off some daddies [laughter] ... I'm not like a freak in the bedroom or anything, but I enjoy sex, and not afraid to show it. I've learnt that daddies don't really like that though. It might be a generational thing or something, but they like you to be, like just more like seductive, but not overly sexual.

When asked how long she usually had to wait before having sex with a daddy, Rachel responded:

Oh if it's agreed upon beforehand, it [sex] can happen on the first date. Like I said I like sex, and the money really helps me out with my bills, but it's just how you approach it. You can't be all over a daddy, you need to make him feel like he has to work for it, but not work too hard, if that makes sense.

Again, it appears that babies must control themselves to ensure they meet the specific sexual criteria of daddies. For some of the sexual sugar babies, it appears that sugaring not only aids their economic situations, but also feeds into the kinds of sexual desires they seek to fulfil. Sugaring can be understood as a way for some young women to fulfil their sexual fantasies, allowing them to express their sexuality without the risk of being deemed 'slutty' (since the sex is a 'contractual' part of their arrangement). This notion undermines the claim that women are innately less interested in sex and physical pleasure than men (for whom sex is assumed to be a natural drive that must be suppressed). The reality of female sexual desire can create anxiety for daddies:

Men never want to know that women can own their sexuality, that we have the same fantasies and temptations they do. If only they knew ... I suppose they have to protect themselves, because if they are out here dating me, their wife could be out with the pool boy. (Rachel)

This statement implies that these complex human impulses around sexuality are experienced universally. However, daddies block awareness of this erotic femininity, as it can be experienced as threatening. Further, in accepting that women can be as sexually receptive as men, they might have to admit that their wives are also capable of the same level of sexual agency (with its accompanying threat of infidelity). In suppressing the idea of a female gaze and by extension, sugar babies' 'hedonistic' desires, men are able to construct stable narratives, reinforcing their masculinities and maintaining the idea of women as docile and passive bodies.

A South Australian study found that many sex workers felt that much of public discourse mirrored traditional beliefs, which is why the idea of intimacy in sex work is perceived as immoral and a threat to conventional romantic relationship structures (in which sex is interpreted as an act of love) (Murphy 2015). This aspect of sugaring also highlights a sexual double standard regarding sexual liberty—women who engage in casual sex damage their reputations and are labelled sluts, while men are evaluated positively for achieving as many sexual conquests as they can (Farvid et al. 2017, p. 546). This observation might suggest that sugaring could be interpreted as a kind of feminist defiance against preconceived and long-held notions of women's weak sexual appetites.

Sugar babies' thoughts on feminism and sugar dating were somewhat divided. Although babies understood how their actions might be deemed anti-feminist – or even to some extent a contradiction of feminism – many still firmly stated that their control over their involvement within the sugar community demonstrated their agency and autonomy:

Sometimes it can be a little anti-feminist, because I feel like the idea of me kind of playing this role, of the male fantasy, is definitely not doing any favours for women out there. So that makes me feel a little bit icky. Like I

don't want to make them [daddies] think that all women are like this, like we're all just there to exist for them. But I feel like at the same time though, it would be unfeminist to say that you can't do it. Because I feel like being able to have control and have that decision, that if that's something you want to do with your life and with your body, then you can. (Liz)

Jenny expressed similar ideas about the power distribution in sugar relationships:

Based on what I think feminism is, I think it's [sugaring] pro because it's my choice, and I don't even have to talk to a sugar daddy if I don't want. I don't have to do any of this if I don't want to. Whereas I think a lot of people say, like they think the guys have all the control. Like, technically yes, they do control the money, but if I don't like the arrangement I can walk away and find another daddy. I'm never forced into something I don't want.

Babies also expressed a sense of empowerment, almost like a feeling of resourcefulness in using their sexuality for personal gain. Additionally, they asserted that they could attain true female solidarity in the sugar community, something completely unique to any other kind of 'sisterly' bond they had experienced. Jenna elaborated on this point:

Feminism is about empowering women in a way to support them to do whatever a man can do. Like, if you're a female engineer, everyone will be like, wow look at that feminist. But sugar dating is something that is not put in the same slot ... it's almost like the next wave of feminism in a way ... Sugar sisters are very supporting, almost like a sorority, but we get so much discrimination from outside the community, by the very same people that claim that they are all about empowering women, you know, and all about women's rights. But they are not really open people, like, other babies support each other way more than those people that claim to be really open to new things.

In the second-wave feminism of the 1960s, with the rise of the pill, sexual liberation and acknowledgement of the glass ceiling, the movement articulated more broadly— that women could own their sexuality and unapologetically seize their rights to express it (Cronan 1973, Okin 1989, deBeauvoir 1982). However, there are valid arguments to support the notion that sugar babies engage in behaviour that contradicts key foundations of feminism (Koeol 2009, Aiken et al. 2013, Balaban 2001). It appears that sugar babies claim their sexuality and find empowerment and agency in 'calling the

shots' when it comes to the commoditisation of their bodies. Conversely, babies still play a role in a hyper-misogynist structure, as women's sexuality is still objectified, separated from the women themselves, and sold for the pleasure of men. This concept again plays into power roles between sugar babies and daddies, blurring the line between true agency and manipulative exploitation.

However, the sense of empowerment many babies described also appeared to give many a sense of liberation. Sugaring serves to not only assist them in their financial struggles, but also in sexual expression; they are less reliant on their limited connections for networking and not confined to expectations on how to present womanhood:

It's empowering. Others might not see it as that ... I find it very liberating. I can choose to do this or not. I think it's as simple as that. It's not like I'm being forced to, and it's not like I'm a prostitute working under a pimp. This is all my choice to do this and I can walk out at any time, and accept what I want. I can even negotiate terms; it's in my hands ... So many people never acknowledge the other benefits that come with dating a sugar daddy, like the sex itself, the opportunities, and it's kind of fun being able to call the shots. (Becca)

Across the board, babies indicated that they did not always agree with how they had to represent themselves (as a male fantasy archetype). However, many felt that they still had to represent a very similar idea of femininity when conventionally dating. Ultimately, they believe that in sugaring, they assume control of their circumstances and find power in a male dominated social system. Babies also emphasised that although they were admittedly vulnerable due to their financial situations, they were not naïve, and were not being taken advantage of by daddies. Rather, they were quick to understand the highly transactional nature of romantic arrangements:

We aren't repressed by the same kinds of cookie-cutter image that most women are in society. Sure we still have to play by men's rules, but we get to call much more of the shots from the positions we are in compared to other women ... Instead, we are shamed into thinking that we are hoes because we use our minds and bodies to our advantage ... like the only way I feel

repressed is I can't be open about my [sugar] dating to my family. Like, if I told my dad I was going out with a guy 10 years older than me, and he supported me and bought me nice things, he wouldn't care, he'd probably even be happy. But if I told him how I met him, like through Seeking[Arrangement], and told him what the site was like, and used for, he would disown me ... I honestly just feel like people need to get on board. Sugaring is the way of the future [laughter], and that might be scary for my parents, but that's the way the world is headed. (Elaine)

Elaine's statement raised questions about the aversion that many feel towards the sugar community. Is it just a result of the clash between new and old approaches to sexuality? Perhaps there was a fading version of womanhood and femininity that has confined the thinkers of past generations to the point that they cannot fathom that sugaring might be the future of female sexual empowerment.

When the structures of conventional marriages are examined, it is also difficult to ignore that there are inherent and exploitative transactional aspects among these arrangements, yet these are rarely criticised as morally unjust. Sugar relationships differ from these traditional structures through their upfront and blunt negotiations of relationship expectations. Based on what babies revealed in interviews, it appears that many felt that they had found a way to monetise traditionally unpaid roles, which afford them a level of social mobility that would otherwise be inaccessible. In subverting social norms and streamlining their wants and needs, it could be argued that perhaps sugaring is the most sensible approach to romantic relationships.

3.6 Stigma

As discussed briefly in previous chapters, sugar members are subject to high levels of perceived stigma, forcing many members to be secretive about their involvement in the community. Daddies often expressed that they rarely discussed their sugar activities outside the company of other sugar members, and the daddies who did so only disclosed

their participation to close male friends. Conversely, babies were often more hesitant, suggesting they felt they had more to lose in revealing their involvement in sugaring. As Newman expressed, being exposed for sugaring as a daddy could be ‘embarrassing [be]cause people make it out to be shameful’. Newman believed that people had preconceived ideas about older men paying young women for dates, especially when daddies were married, which made sugaring seem immoral and, therefore, stigmatised.

However, Josie stated:

We [babies] have more on the line if we get called out for sugaring. It can limit job opportunities if I’m exposed. I don’t know about all the laws and fines and stuff, but people could think that I’m a prostitute or escort, and I could get in legal trouble. My parents would stop talking to me; I’d probably be kicked out of school. It would permanently ruin my reputation and any future opportunities ... Daddies don’t have to worry about that, because they are already all set up.

Many babies use the sugar forums, as an outlet to discuss their experiences in the sugar world, creating real bonds with their ‘sugar sisters’. One of the most frequently reposted threads on LetsTalkSugar concerned babies looking for other babies in their respective cities with whom they could meet to discuss their experiences. Babies expressed feeling an inability to share their experiences of the sugar world with people from outside the community due to the shame associated with sugaring. Although daddies did experience stigma when discussing their involvement in the community with non-sugar members, those who spoke openly to male co-workers or friends were met with envy or admiration. This envy and admiration provides positive reinforcements for daddies, something that babies did not report in this research.

The stigma of sugaring is often tied to the similarities between sugaring and sex work, the large age gaps between sugar members, and the perception of daddies as misogynistic perverts and babies as gold-digging opportunists.

When first introduced to sugaring, most babies were under the impression they could put in minimal effort and claim maximum results. Again, this appears to simply be a marketing tool to entice young students:

There is absolutely no way I could possibly have a part-time job while sugaring. People never think about how long it takes, to like, groom a daddy into wanting you. It's not like at any other job where you are taught a script to tell customers, you need to be able to read a guy, figure out what he wants, and then be that girl ... It can take days, or even weeks sometimes just to get a guy comfortable enough with you to meet up, and you aren't even getting paid at that point ... When I actually manage to pay off all that groundwork, I don't go blowing through my profits either. People love to jump to conclusions, that I waste it on junk, like a boob job or lip fillers, which is so untrue. After paying off my bills, and making sure I look presentable for dates, like my nails and hair done and stuff, I invest in shares. Which is another thing my daddy helps me with. (Liz)

Norah shared similar ideas about the workload of babies, of which many remain unaware:

I'm probably talking, dating or finding daddies about 10–12 hours a day ... It's not like any other job where you can just clock off when you get home. Throughout the day I'm responding to messages from daddies, sifting through salt daddies, and keeping the banter going with POTs [potential sugar daddies]. After all that, I have to also chat with my current daddies, remember the specific conversations we've had, then I have to organise my study time around going on dates. Don't even get me started on the prep[rations] needed before a meet up ... sugaring is far from a cakewalk.

Categorising sugaring as a 'get-rich-quick' scheme stigmatises sugar babies as opportunists. It depicts babies as too lazy to seek part-time employment, instead exploiting themselves and only spending returns on purchases of high-end clothing or cosmetic surgery. Babies admitted that they do spend a portion of their earnings, or request daddies to pay additionally for general upkeep (such as spa days, nail appointments and hair treatments). However, this could be interpreted as investing and maintaining the asset they offer to the market. In reality, when the level of involvement babies must commit to sugaring is understood, it becomes clear that sugaring is a highly

time-consuming and demanding ‘occupation’ for students. Due to the deeply personal nature of sugaring, as I have shown, sugaring is also demanding in terms of emotional labour, as babies are required to constantly embody the fantasy companion that their daddies pay for, both physically and emotionally.

The reality of sugaring appeared to be quite different from the kinds of relationships that sugar dating sites promise, with additional layers of continual emotional labour required. Thus, I was interested in how daddies viewed and experienced the ‘work’ performed by babies. Intriguingly, although daddies are themselves involved intimately with the sugar world, they perceive babies sugar work as quite undemanding. John stated:

All they really have to do is meet up with guys for a few hours and have a good time. If we go out on a Friday night, the level of effort a woman puts into her appearance is exactly the same, only with sugar dates, she’s guaranteed to get something in return, so it’s not really an inconvenience for her at the end of the day.

Richard believes that media plays a large role in informing young women’s expectations regarding to female students seeking material gains through sugaring. He stated that media influence encourages women, specifically millennials, to aspire for goods out of their reach:

Girls are looking to bypass the poor student phase and be catapulted into a more affluent lifestyle ... They don’t realize it, but they are skipping a rite of passage, and they use SeekingArrangement as a springboard for the life they want ... They want it all now.

At the same time, Richard did not believe that this was an indication of modern women’s greed or superficiality, but rather, it was a sign that they have been forced to grow up faster than his generation. In this accelerated growth, the benchmark for a comfortable standard of living has drastically moved. ‘It’s a millennial thing. It’s all about instant gratification.’

Reflecting on this, it is difficult to deny the influence of various social media platforms on younger generations. Many millennials and IGen'ers have been exposed to celebrity culture in high doses, with social media allowing celebrities to interact with their fans directly, showing off their lives of extravagance. The rise of personality celebrities like Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton and endless social media 'influencers' (who in the traditional sense lack any real talent or skills) has encouraged followers to believe that these lifestyles are readily attainable. Sugaring, in a sense, suppresses middle-class economic anxieties, while also making the lavish lifestyles paraded on social media appear as the new norm.

The stigmatisation that sugar members most frequently reported was the correlations made between sugar dating and traditional sex work. The foundation of sugaring—sexual exchange for monetary gain—aligns with the traditional concept of sex work. Despite this, babies vehemently tried to distinguish themselves from the sex industry. Although babies sometimes agreed that some aspects of their behaviours could be viewed as sex work, most informants wanted to clarify that they are not to be perceived as sex workers:

Yes, technically you could say that I've done sexual things with men and got paid. But it's different. We spend so much time together, and have genuine admiration and chemistry with each other. There are boundaries, and we don't force anything ... It's also not always about the sex, or the money, we truly enjoy each other's company ... Some of my daddies I've been with longer than any boyfriend I've ever had ... Plus, he's a sugar daddy, not just some guy that, you know, I picked up on the street and slept with for cash. (Norah)

In interviews, babies tended to describe themselves as what they *were not* more often than what they described what they *were*. Many emphasised the ways they differ from sex workers, forming identities separate from the professional sex industry. Babies often referred to the extended longevity of their arrangements, the 'genuine' chemistry shared

with daddies, the acceptance of mentorship as a mode of payment, and their autonomy over their involvement in the lifestyle. Daddies also did something similar, often referring to themselves as gentlemen (unlike the perceived men that obtain the services of sex workers). This then aids in distancing daddies from John's, and as a way of dissociating sugaring from sex work. By babies rationalising their choices in comparison to sex workers it would appear that they are eager to distance themselves from 'whore stigma'. This careful segregation of sugaring from sex work services to construct a distinction between what is deemed 'good sex' and 'bad sex' (Pheterson 1993, Bell 1987, Carrier-Moisán 2015, Miller-Young 2014). Although babies acknowledged that their arrangements often blur the lines between conventional courtship and transactional exchanges, they resort to vague language, such as 'companionship', 'mentorship' and 'gifts' to separate themselves from the commercial sex industry (Nayar 2017). By using language commonly deployed in conventional romantic relationships – such as 'chemistry' and 'romance' – babies attempt to decrease social stigmas relating to the sugar community.

Although babies often describe their arrangements with daddies as genuine – referring to the long-term nature of arrangements as evidence of this – some academics claim that sex workers also provide this service. Participants voiced that escorts only offer a façade of care and love, while babies create genuine bonds with their daddies, sometimes made stronger in sex-free arrangements (Daly 2017, p. 90, Bernstein 2007, p. 125). Attempting to separate sugaring from sex work, with claims that one mode of sex for compensation is more respectable than another creates further stigma for transactional relationships across the board. The more babies disassociate sugaring from the sex industry, sex work appears more immoral and socially unacceptable as a career. Vehemently denying sugaring as a kind of sex work, despite the presence of transactions

around sexual acts, highlights a contradiction—sex for money is not sex work, as long as you abide by some social expectations of a conventional romantic relationship. But the question remains; at what point do transactional relationships cross the border into sex work?

Daddies often tried to rationalise their sugar behaviours by normalising the phenomenon and supporting their views with historical or biological precedents. This approach often depicted romantic relationships as highly gendered and inherently transactional. Richard described the dynamic as the ‘natural state of relationships’:

Throughout history, there have always been men of status or power that have been with much younger women, like kings. In those days, being a man of success meant you could pick whatever woman you liked, which was often the youngest and most beautiful, because they're lively and more fertile and all those sorts of things. It's was the norm ... It was like that since the beginning, it was when the Victorianism of prudishness and that sort of thing changed it, influencing our culture. It's only in the last 100 years probably that that dynamic has dramatically shifted, where it's become anti-social or inappropriate for a man to be with someone 20 to 30 years his junior ... It's [sugaring] not revolutionary, and I'm sure in the future people will look back at sugaring as just another kind of dating.

In understanding the role and reward of being a provider for babies, daddies are enacting normative heterosexual and masculine expectations. Referring to this as the ‘natural state of relationships’ also suggests that for daddies, although they recognise that sugar relationships are socially taboo, they also imagine that that are engaging in a form of courtship that they deem innate to humans. Many adopted the stance that history informs our present structures around courtship, and that behaviour is learnt from our surroundings and shared by communities. Some members even believe that sugaring – inasmuch as it embodies many social and gendered constructs around courtship – may one day be viewed as a legitimate relational form.

Along these lines, mate selection theories from evolutionary psychology were also used to destigmatise sugaring. Daddies often referred to their preferences for young, attractive women as something influenced by a more primal, instinctive drive. Although an academically contested framework, daddies often expressed their belief that there were clear structured patterns in choosing partners, and that for women this was based on what the man could provide to the woman. Further, they asserted that on a biological level, men and women seek partners with features and assets most likely to meet their interests regarding survival, security and procreation (Puts 2010, pp. 164-166). A functional perspective towards evolution and mate selection was a shared view among daddies. They claimed that relationships are constructed in a way that men habitually provide a level of physical protection from elements and external forces that have the potential to harm the livelihood he has created for himself and his partner. This theory also suggests that men seek a young fertile and genetically viable woman that will have the greatest odds of carrying and rearing their offspring (Gangestad 2000, p. 51, Abigail 2014, p. 62). Conversely, women seek and select partners that appear superior in their ability to pass on more desirable genes and have access to or possession of needed resources (Smuts 1996, Roberts and Little 2008, p. 36).

Babies also appeared to be aware of the highly gendered roles they embodied in romantic relationships. Although babies often described themselves as liberated and independent, informants conceded that for both survival and social reasons, it is the norm for women to be viewed as the weaker sex in need of protection and support:

I hate being called the weaker sex because I see myself as a strong woman. I worked hard to get into university, and I aspire to be more than some housewife in the suburbs. In saying that, we live in a world where there are some structures that no matter how much you hate them, they'll always be there, so you might as well get on board with the program. I'm not saying that I will fold under the pressure and just become someone's wife or mother, but it

is crucial as a woman to be able to know how to carry yourself in a way that will give you the best opportunity at getting where you want in life ... Men have always been financially supportive of women; that's just the kind of world we live in, but it's how you use that fact to better your situation that counts ... We aren't the weaker sex; we are the resourceful sex, because we make do with what we can in an unfair system, that's like, designed for it to be difficult for us to succeed. Even when I date outside sugaring, and I would go home and tell mum, like, hey I met someone, her very first question would be, what does he do for work? Like that kind of speaks to the expectations of the role men have in our lives, you know? Sugar dating just allows me to date in a way I know what I'm getting into from the get-go. (Elaine)

Elaine's mother's concerns reflect the perceived social role that men play in romantic relationships, where their ability to prove themselves as worthy boils down to whether they can provide an appropriate standard of living and comfort to their partners. Sugaring claims to acknowledge this social understanding, and aims to cater to those wanting to be more direct about their approach to romantic relationships.

SeekingArrangement seems to be aware of these gendered expectations surrounding romance, and founded its company to cater to these fantasies. Further, it restricts men to the stereotypical role of stable and affluent providers. Wade defended his company approach to 'transactional romance' in stating:

Every romantic relationship is transactional ... My father provides more to the household financially than my mother, but that doesn't make my mother a whore. (Wade 2019)

Despite the current progressive atmosphere in regard to gender equality (based on sugar members' reports), many still rely on antiquated notions of gender performance. These ideas of innate gendered relationship roles continue to perpetuate patriarchal and paternalistic discourses around courtship. When sugar members explain this notion, it validates their arrangements as part and parcel of the same patriarchal system that structure society more broadly. By rationalising sugar arrangements in these ways, members attempt to normalise sugaring to lessen its stigma. However, this only

preserves hegemonic ideas, which restricts women to positions in which they are deemed to need constant nurturing and protection.

It is important to recognise that power is established and regulated through social norms. Those categorised as ‘normal’ have an unspoken power over those deemed ‘abnormal’ (Foucault 1980, p. 85). Sex and sexuality are monumental sources of power, often linked to an individual’s identity. However, sex and gender are – at least in part – socially constructed, serving as a tool to regulate people and control others. This suggests that sexual preferences and behaviours speak more about the discourses created around these desires, rather than any profound truths about human nature. Therefore, how individuals decide to behave within society, and define the environment in which they live, illuminate the social restrictions of their agency. This is continually reinforced by other forces in society, such as the media, political systems, community members and economic ideologies (Cordero 2015, p. 52). Defying this socially constructed idea of normal and acceptable behaviour stigmatises sugar members.

The hyper-functional approach to romantic relationships that Wade described—in which roles are defined based on physical needs and wants—raises questions regarding the purposes of romantic relationships. Are they purely for reproduction, to ensure that human life continues? Are they purely for survival – or an idea of love – like those depicted in romantic epics? If it is the former, what is the role or function of love in romantic relationships? Chris, a married daddy, affirmed:

People that think love is enough are living in a daydream. Real love requires more than this idea that as long as you love each other everything will work out. It’s reckless to build a future with someone based on such a fleeting feeling.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In Chapter 1, I outlined that the questions to be investigated: 1) Is sugaring a kind of sex work, and if so, what are the implications of framing it as such?; 2) How does sugaring affect financially struggling students, and more specifically, what sort of agency do they exercise in these arrangements?; 3) Do these students experience stigma due to these relationships, and if so, how does this alter how members experience and express their personal narratives about sugar relationships?; 4) Given these relationships are inherently commodified and age-discordant, to what extent do participants need to engage in forms of ‘emotion work’ to present themselves as idealised partners?; 5) How might the ‘hidden’ nature of these relationships further stigmatise and isolate participants from other kinds of mutually beneficial relationships?

It would appear that most sugar members do not perceive their activities as sex work in the traditional sense. Despite their denial of the sex work title, they acknowledged that aspects of their arrangements did mirror features of the sex industry. However, members also identified mutually beneficial traits of conventional romantic relationships to rationalise their choices. With this considered, I found that all romantic relationships could be viewed on a spectrum in which exchange and reciprocity were experienced universally but to different degrees. The community indicated that sugar members believe that they occupy the space somewhere between conventional romantic relationships and commercial sex work.

In addressing how the sugar world affects students in particular, I found that it was undeniable that sugar dating sites target students specifically for their age and implied intellectual ambition based on their pursuit of higher education. Students make great

sugar candidates, and sugar dating sites are attuned to the financial pressures they are under, and seek to exploit this. This limits babies' power in such arrangements, as they often felt that if they could not please the needs of a daddy they would risk losing a primary source of financial and mentoring support. Despite this, many babies did not report feeling a lack of agency or choice in arrangements. They claimed that they had the freedom to opt out of the lifestyle if it did not meet their needs or comfort levels. In fact, many expressed a sense of empowerment and resourcefulness, as they had found a way to capitalise within a patriarchal system that they felt often disempowered women. By the end of the research, I concluded that sugaring can best be understood as a way for female students attempting to replicate the social acceptability of instrumental intimacy, as a neoliberal tool to manage their current social and economic circumstances. However, in doing so subject themselves to stigmatization similar to those in the sex industry. To combat this, sugar members attempt to distance themselves from sex work, through normalizing their actions based on transactional similarities seen in conventional courtship.

The perception of social stigma emerged as one of the most interesting themes in my data. Many members tried to shape their narratives as natural and not too different from other modes of courtship – supported by historical examples – claiming that they abided by many of the social expectations around conventional courtship. This was often highly gendered; both babies and daddies were enmeshed in highly normative heterosexual structures. This appeared as a means to normalise or naturalise the nature of sugar arrangements so that members could distance themselves from the already heavily stigmatised sex industry. In highlighting the differences from sex work and emphasizing commonalities with conventional romantic relationships, they attempted to deflect social and self-criticisms about the morality of their arrangements. This defensiveness around

sugaring also led to members claiming that their mode of courtship can offer more genuine connections—as needs and wants are established from the outset—leading to wider society harbouring resentments towards the freedom offered by such arrangements. Informants often referred to conventional dating as deceptive and inauthentic, as individuals often had to project versions of themselves that were more impressive than honest to gain a partner's initial interest. In doing this, it would then set up a relationship on a false foundation, ultimately creating a disingenuous connection.

Based on the behaviours and descriptions of the sugar community, members appeared to evoke the same kinds of conventional dating discourses observed in heterosexual romantic relationships. However, unlike in conventional relationships, in which emotional work is standard, sugar babies engage in emotional labour. This meant that babies were often subjected to pressure to maintain a façade, or risk losing their daddy's favour and a source of income. This kind of emotional investment appeared to be highly demanding and taxing, owing to the constant performance demands of presenting an ideal 'baby' persona. The 'carefree' and 'no drama' relationships offered by sugar dating sites was also experienced significantly differently by babies and daddies. For babies, it was a concept they had to juggle, ensuring they appeared as daddies' fantasy girl, while also being perceived as 'authentic'. For daddies, it often worked to reinforce their masculinity and re-establish their manhood. However, it would be a disservice to the community to claim that all such arrangements are inauthentic; many sugar members reported that their connections often had genuine and loving aspects. Therefore, sugaring appears to blur the lines between emotional labour and emotional work.

The stigmatization of the sugaring has resulted in the community becoming secretive, and is the reason only very select people knew of members' involvements. However,

making the community secretive also resulted in sugar members appearing disquieting to wider society, and as a threat to conventional relationships. This only further stigmatised the community, as members are surrounded by mystery, creating unease about the true nature of sugar arrangements, ultimately creating a circular issue. Understandably, the community is hesitant to discuss the finer details of the sugar lifestyle, fearing it may result in shame and ostracism from the wider community. Greater transparency about the nuances of the community would demystify the group and alleviate some of the concerns society holds about sugaring. Further, trying to create clear distinctions between traditional sex work and sugaring, can results in greater stigmatisation of traditional sex work. In claiming that sugaring is somehow more respectable than sex work, it continues to perpetuate that the sex industry is not an ‘appropriate’ line of work. This demonstrates that although conversations around sex work are now quite normalised at the social level, is far from being accepted as a mainstream occupation.

In summary, sugar relationships constitute a quickly growing and complex community, rife with themes of authenticity in emotional labour, stigma around commoditised sexuality, anxieties about the exploitation of students and the ambivalence regarding economic and transnationalism in modern courtship. Additional research into the community will illuminate the potential trajectory of relationships that are structured on a collaboratively exploitative framework, suggesting that our ideas about acceptable forms of intimate relationships will continue to transform as technology evolves.

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