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Mediating the Sugar Baby Imaginary: Popular Narratives About Gender and Sexuality in Sugar Dating

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Abstract

The internet is rife with opportunities to participate in dating practices, discourses about gender, romance, and sexuality, and, increasingly, efforts to restrict sexual expression. Therefore, it is important to square popular discourse with the perspectives and thought processes that color women's participation in romantic and sexual phenomena. This article explores how media narratives about women who pursue relationships at the intersection of intimacy, social class, and labor map onto the realities of their lived experiences. Specifically, I compare an analysis of popular press articles about sugar dating—a mutually beneficial relationship practice wherein people engage in frank negotiations of companionship, intimacy, and material benefits—with interviews with 13 women who have participated in sugar dating. I sought to understand how these women defined sugar dating, what motivated them to sugar date, and where their sugar relationships felt most rewarding or difficult. I argue that, for women, sugar dating can be a site of both labor and leisure. These interviews complicate how contemporary press coverage tends to frame sugar dating, revealing important insights about how women may conform to but also challenge popular narratives about their identities, labor, sexual desires, and agency. My findings, therefore, constitute a narrative about sugar dating that captures the nuances of women's thinking and operating logics. This is a crucial step forward in elevating the voices of those who participate in sugar dating and other romantic and sexual practices.

Keywords

gender; identity; intimacy; labor; media; platforms; popular culture; sexuality; sugar dating

1. Introduction

Across the internet, women engaging in relationship practices at the intersection of gender, intimacy, and social class are, to quote *The Wall Street Journal* columnist Satran (2023), "having a moment." Indeed,

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discourses about the "stay-at-home girlfriends" on TikTok and Instagram to which Satran was referring and women who participate in "high-value dating" and "hypergamy" (Bansinath, 2024; Simmons, 2024) abound. These discourses range from sweeping endorsements of class-conscious courtship—such as YouTube creator Shera Seven's (2024) "sprinkle sprinkle" movement, which encourages women to lead "soft lives" by only dating financially successful men—to critiques leveled at women who are thought to be jeopardizing their own financial security by relying on their partners' earnings (Smith, 2024). Regardless of their stance, all point to how media, platforms, and popular culture imagine the relationship between women's finances and their intimate lives.

One practice that has—as evidenced by headlines like "Inside the Sugar Baby School of TikTok" (Meley, 2022)—garnered significant media attention is sugar dating. While scholars vary somewhat in how they describe sugar dating (Gunnarsson, 2024; Scull, 2020; Upadhyay, 2021), based on their existing definitions, I take the phenomenon to mean a relationship practice wherein two people engage in frank negotiations of companionship, intimacy, and material goods and services. The premise is that these relationships—also sometimes referred to as arrangements—are mutually beneficial, and that their duration depends on each person's fulfillment of their agreed-upon contributions to the relationship. Although "high-value dating," "hypergamy," and even traditional dating also involve gifting and other activities at the intersection of intimacy and economic exchange, what most differentiates sugar dating from these phenomena is that sugar relationships are forged through the agreement by both partners to build a relationship based explicitly on exchange. However, given the fluidity of these boundaries, it is possible that a sugar dating relationship might take on a structure more akin to a traditional romantic relationship.

Although online and mobile dating services and social media platforms play a key role in mediating sugar dating, as people use the internet to find potential partners (Nayar, 2017) and circulate advice about best practices (Ellis et al., 2023), the phenomenon well predates them and is an upshot of women's introduction to the commercialized intimate sphere. At the turn of the 20th century, heterosexual courtship customs shifted such that women no longer needed to receive male callers in their homes. Indeed, women were increasingly meeting potential partners in department stores, theaters, and other public spaces. Many became "charity girls" who participated in "treating," a practice through which they offered men companionship—broadly construed—in exchange for dinner, theater tickets, and invitations to participate in other heterosocial leisure activities (Clement, 2006; Peiss, 1986). Charity girls used coded terms like *gift* and *favor* to convey their interest in treating while also mitigating suspicions that they were participating in illegal sex work. Treating, thus, is thought to have occupied a space like that which sugar dating now occupies—one that scholars have characterized as "its own thing" (Scull, 2020) and a "gray area" (Motyl, 2013) continuum between traditional dating and sex work.

To better understand how media, platforms, and popular culture are making sense of sugar dating, I compare narratives about women who sugar date with the realities of women's lived experiences. This study builds on previous scholarship on media representations of femininity and intimacy by exploring a thematic analysis of popular press articles about sugar dating. Alongside this analysis, I interviewed 13 women who have participated in sugar dating. I sought to understand how these women defined sugar dating, what motivated them to participate, and where their sugar relationships felt most rewarding or difficult. Based on my interview data, I argue that, for women, sugar dating can be a site of both labor and leisure. These interviews complicate the relationship of women who sugar date to their mediated cultural representation, revealing important insights about how women may conform to but also, crucially, challenge discourses

about their identities, personal appearances, labor, sexual desires, and agency. My findings, therefore, constitute a narrative about sugar dating that captures the nuances of women's motivations and operating logics—which could lead to transformations in how contemporary platform economies take up sugar dating and other class-conscious romantic and sexual phenomena.

2. Feminist Media Scholarship on Femininity and Intimacy

Media make people and their experiences visible, while at the same time creating, circulating, and reaffirming certain narratives. As late 20th-century mass media and advertising produced narratives about femininity and intimacy, media scholars sought to understand how the culture industries define and depict the relationship between women and sex. Across many feminist critiques of gender and sexual representation, objectification—denials of women's sexual agency, autonomy, and subjectivity—became a key concern (Attwood, 2004, 2011; Nussbaum, 2007). In her analysis of gender representation and cinema, Mulvey (1988) contends that women in films of this era were objects of display, presented as bodies available to male characters as they explored their own sexual desires and fantasies. Objectification also figured prominently in critical analyses of the production and consumption of pornography, as researchers (Cowan & Dunn, 1994; MacKinnon, 1989) and radical feminist writers and activists (Dworkin, 1981) positioned pornographic media as sites of women's patterned degradation and victimization. Broadly, the media objectification framework urged us to pay attention to how women appeared devoid of their own desire—instead existing as sexually passive and at risk of succumbing to men's violent domination.

As media texts began to engage more thoroughly with sexuality, scholarship shifted from women's objectification to a burgeoning focus on their sexual subjectivity (Gill, 2003). Radner (1995) observed a transition in late-20th-century romance novels away from female characters who were considered "virtuous" to those who conveyed sexual desire and potential through their embodied heterosexuality. Later, Gill (2008) noted that depictions of women in advertising as active, sexually powerful, desiring, and "always up for it" were outpacing those in which women looked passive and disengaged from their desires. Importantly, though, Gill and other scholars raise these points to critique how media have subverted the potential of women's sexual subjectivity. They call attention to where representations claiming to foreground women's sexual agency might, instead, advance postfeminist sensibilities grounded in a neoliberal media culture that contorts and commodifies feminist messaging and practices. Gill (2003), McRobbie (2009), and Attwood (2011) connect these postfeminist sensibilities to discourses about gender and empowerment, wherein women are thought to have achieved equality and, therefore, may choose their practices freely. Gill (2009) refers to these sensibilities as "pernicious" in that they pressure women to self-surveil their appearances and sexual behaviors. This reading of women's subjectivity resembles critical analyses of media genres like the "makeover show," which endeavor to improve women's self-esteem through mechanisms of discipline and control that promise "to make women look better while also making them feel worse" (Tincknell, 2011, p. 83). Harvey and Gill (2010) detect a similar pattern in *The Sex Inspectors*, as the reality television show's host attempts to persuade a woman that having sex with her husband will, in turn, improve their marriage. Here, the authors argue, women's sexual desire does get acknowledged—though the show situates it as a performance women should enact to please their male partners. Situated desire and agency are also salient in Pitcher's (2006) analysis of *Girls Gone Wild*. Pitcher contends that the adult entertainment franchise films women's consent to appear nude on camera to "stage" agentic choices that are, ultimately, indicative of the franchise's exploitation of women's bodily autonomy. Thus, while contemporary media representations may

afford women more desire and sexual agency than their predecessors, they simultaneously perpetuate mainstream beauty standards and traditional gender norms. In doing so, they reinforce the neoliberal notion that women's sexual expression should be controlled, choreographed, and commercialized.

3. Sugar Dating

Women's sexual expression and agency figure into a growing body of academic research about sugar dating, a mutually beneficial relationship practice. Sugar dating does, in some ways, parallel more mainstream heterosexual courtship customs. For instance, it draws on social mobility discourses rooted in the notion that romantic relationships allow women to transcend class boundaries—what Ouellette (1999) describes as the "pursuit of an upwardly mobile self via carefully strategized romance" (p. 365). However, sugar dating differs from these discourses in its overt and intentional foregrounding of intimacy and economic exchange. The overarching logic is that partners should be explicit about how they will exchange companionship, sex, money, gifts, and other goods or services. Even so, according to Gunnarsson and Strid (2023, p. 1045), one "important characteristic of sugar dating is its contested meaning." Scull (2020) raises a similar point, drawing on interviews with women who sugar date to develop a seven-part sugar relationship typology. She describes sugar dating as a "unique relational package" that involves "its own subcultural relationship script" (Scull, 2020, p. 142). These findings suggest that the broad "mutually beneficial" premise on which sugar dating is built could be construed to mean many different things.

Against the backdrop of this interpretive flexibility, scholars across fields have focused on teasing out and contextualizing women's motivations for forming heterosexual sugar relationships. In her later work, Scull (2022) argues that women sugar date for myriad reasons, including, among others, access to financial and material resources, travel and other experiential benefits, mentorship, and fun. Metcalfe et al. (2023) draw a similar link between sugar dating and women's desire for monetary gain, while also noting that women might sugar date because they are attracted to older men and believe this practice facilitates cross-generational connections. Upadhyay (2021) adds that sugar dating allows women to pursue casual, "no-strings-attached" relationships discreetly. These relationships afford women the opportunity to manage their intimate interactions, as the bounded nature of sugar dating means they may be able to circumvent the uncertainties of traditional romantic and sexual relationships (Gunnarsson, 2024). Other scholars (Mixon, 2019; Recio, 2022b) tie women's involvement in sugar dating to higher education, finding that women may sugar date to fund their college tuition. Online and mobile dating companies have contributed directly to this motivation. Perhaps the most telling example of this is Seeking, a luxury dating service referenced in several scholarly works on sugar dating (Di Cicco & Vandevenne, 2023; Nayar, 2017; Scull, 2020). Founded in 2006 as SeekingArrangement, the company garnered ample media attention for encouraging its members to participate in sugar dating. While Seeking has since removed direct references to sugar dating from its branding (Seeking, 2024), the company has, historically, offered free premium memberships to students who attach .edu email addresses to their accounts and once ran a marketing campaign called "Sugar Baby University" (Loudenback, 2017). Recio (2022b), who interviewed female university students in the United Kingdom, contends that these women exercised agency when they decided to sugar date—but that "it is necessary to recalibrate this agency in the face of the financial pressures that they were experiencing" (p. 556). One reason for this recalibration, Recio (2022a) argues, is that sugar dating blurs the boundaries of sexual consent. Regardless of their own sexual desires, women may feel compelled to participate in sex acts because they believe that is what their partners expect of them. Taken together, these accounts

demonstrate that women enter sugar dating with a variety of goals and desired material, romantic, or sexual outcomes—and they make agentic choices within the broader neoliberal contexts of financial instability and hegemonic heterosexuality.

4. Sugar Dating, Media, and Popular Culture

Sugar dating offers a productive lens for understanding the ways that media, platforms, and popular culture make sense of intersections of gender, romance, sexuality, and social class. To that end, existing sugar dating research does consider how digital platforms pertain to sugar dating practices and discourses. Nayar's (2017) analysis of sugar relationship dynamics draws on user content submitted to a sugar dating blog. Ellis et al. (2023) also studied blog posts about sugar dating, with a specific focus on the types of information and advice that people who post about sugar dating on Tumblr circulate. Both Recio (2022a) and Di Cicco and Vandevenne (2023) take a top-down approach to understanding the platformization of sugar dating, arguing that Seeking's website design and affordances reinforce normative expectations about femininity and women's roles in romantic and sexual relationships. These projects, therefore, demonstrate that platforms figure prominently in how contemporary sugar daters discover, discuss, and structure their participation in sugar dating.

To build our understanding of sugar dating in contemporary offline and platform-based contexts, this study foregrounds the relationship between sugar dating and media representation. Discourses at the intersection of intimacy and economic exchange have long been considered "slippery" (Johnson, 2007). Sociologists like Viviana Zelizer (2005) and Eva Illouz (2007) have spent decades grappling with how financial processes map onto people's private lives and personal relationships, and vice-versa. Sugar dating offers a compelling context for this research because it could surface important insights pertaining to how shifts in platform branding, regulation, and governance may, in turn, lead to shifts in the ways people's platformized relationship practices are enabled or constrained.

With this, I analyze sugar dating in situ. I ask how women's lived experiences in their bodies and with sexual desire and agency in sugar dating map onto media narratives about relationships at the intersection of intimacy and economic exchange. In what ways do these press narratives position sugar dating, and how might this mirror or challenge reality? This research extends existing knowledge on the motivations women have for participating in sugar dating, the platforms that structure their participation, the composition of their sugar relationships, and configurations of power and agency in these relationships by squaring identities and relational dynamics with popular media, which continue to take an interest in sugar dating.

5. Methods

To better understand how popular narratives about women who participate in sugar dating compare with women's lived experiences, this research draws on two data sources. The first is a corpus of 60 popular press articles that were published between 2010 and 2024. To locate these articles, I entered "sugar dating," "sugar relationships," and "women sugar dating" as search terms in my institution's library website database. Given that romantic and sexual practices—as well as perceptions of the relationship between gender, romance, and sexuality—vary globally (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993), I narrowed my search results to articles published by companies based in the United States and the United Kingdom. While this does create a

limitation, I contend that geographically specific sugar dating scholarship is an important building block for future study and cross-cultural comparisons. From this search, I drew a random selection of articles. I then completed a thematic analysis of these articles, taking note of the most common ways they characterized women who sugar date and the conditions of women's involvement in sugar dating. The second is a collection of in-depth interviews with 13 women who had either sugar dated in the past or who were actively participating in sugar dating. Interviews took place between 2023 and 2024. I recruited women who had self-identified as sugar daters in press articles or blog posts, as well as those who had expressed their affiliation with this phenomenon on social media platforms—namely Reddit, YouTube, and Instagram. All participants resided in the United States. Participants ranged in age, with some in their early 20s and others in their 30s or mid-to-late 40s. Their career experiences also varied, as a few participants were undergraduate or graduate students, while others worked in education, owned their own businesses, or held executive-level positions at companies.

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, and all were conducted one-on-one with the author. I asked participants about how they first discovered sugar dating, how they defined it, why they felt motivated to participate, where they sugar dated, and what they considered to be the benefits and challenges of pursuing mutually beneficial relationships. Specific comments about participants' identities emerged during interviews, as participants discussed gender, age, and race in relation to what they understood to be popular narratives about sugar dating. Importantly, they described where these narratives captured or, at times, contrasted their personal experiences.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 30 minutes and 2.5 hours. To protect participants' privacy, interviews were limited to Zoom's audio and chat features. I encouraged participants to replace their Zoom names with pseudonyms. I then replaced those names with pseudonyms to create an additional layer of privacy. To thank participants for their time, each was offered a gift card. With participants' permission, I recorded the interviews. I uploaded audio files to my secure Otter.ai account and transcribed the interviews. Following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded, inductive approach to qualitative research, I coded and analyzed interview data simultaneously. From these codes emerged the broader themes that structured my framework for grounding mediated sugar dating discourse in women's embodied realities. In my findings section, I highlight two popular narratives and detail the ways these narratives structured how participants made sense of sugar dating. I contend that emphasizing participants' perspectives in this way is important for understanding where media and popular culture may or may not adequately capture people's lived experiences.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1. Popular Sugar Dating Narratives: Consistencies and Contradictions

The narrativization of sugar dating in contemporary media production and reporting has codified a robust popular framing of women who participate in this relationship practice. Perhaps one of the most salient elements of this framing is that women who sugar date adopt certain labels and language unquestioningly—namely, that all women are sugar babies and refer to themselves as such. Hashtags like #sugarbaby—which, as of writing, surfaces nearly 246 thousand TikTok posts—demonstrate the popularity of the "sugar baby" label in platformized sugar dating discourse, thus reinforcing its resonance. Language use is, however, far

from universal, as several participants held negative opinions about sugar dating terminology. Lydia, who was in her 40s, said "I'm not a sugar baby. I'm a freaking woman with a house and kids." Lydia felt detached from "sugar baby" because she found the label infantilizing. It did little to capture her identity, her nuanced perspective on sugar dating, or her motivations for participating. In fact, more broadly, all the women I interviewed teased out the relationship between their lived experiences and two key popular narratives about sugar dating that emerged from the press articles. These narratives are structured around women and their personal appearances, as well as their labor, sexual desires, and agency. Thus, the following sections interweave findings from my press article analysis and interviews to demonstrate instances where the popular narratives are consistent with or contradictory to participants' perspectives. Importantly, this study neither endorses a paradigm of complete freedom and choice in sugar dating nor situates women who sugar date as inherently coerced or exploited. Rather, as evidenced by my participants' observations and reflections, agency, pleasure, oppression, and exploitation may coexist.

6.2. The "Hot Younger Woman" Narrative

The sheer frequency with which press accounts of sugar dating feature textual or visual references to Julia Roberts's character Vivian Ward—a Los Angeles sex worker—in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman* (Berman, 2018; McKay, 2011; Witt, 2023) as cultural touchstones is a fascinating manifestation of how popular media envision women who sugar date. Of course, while there are several ways to complicate the advancement of Vivian as a canonical figure in sugar dating, as well as the characterization of sugar dating as an embodied "Pretty Woman lifestyle" (McKay, 2011), I will start with pointing out that Roberts is often hailed for her beauty (Coates, 2024). Furthermore, across the sampled press articles, feminine beauty was a consistent throughline. A *San Francisco* magazine columnist (Smiley, 2017) profiled a man who sugar dates, describing two of his former sugar partners as a "leggy brunette in hot-pink stilettos" and a "busty artist." In a *Newsweek* article, Jones (2014) argued that men who sugar date often seek "companionship with a hot young thing." Jones's comment encapsulates the first key framing of women who sugar date: the "hot younger woman" narrative. This narrative consists of two distinct, yet interwoven threads related to women's physical appearances and ages.

The "hot younger woman" narrative fueled women's expectations—and anxieties—about their personal appearances, including the extent to which they considered themselves attractive. Autumn, a graduate student who was in her first sugar relationship, felt the narrative was a valid account of how most men expect the women they sugar date to look. She said that, before she started sugar dating, she had "never envisioned" herself doing it because she believed she "wasn't really hot enough to be a sugar baby. That's for really gorgeous people." Yvette also described her understanding of men's aesthetic expectations, noting that men typically seem to seek "cis[gender] white women" who "have the 'girl next door' type of look…fit, on the thinner side, curvy in the right areas." Helen, too, believed that the "girl next door" comparison was apt. She said that, as a "heavier woman," she believed she was "different than the traditional sugar baby." While these thinness and beauty ideals are not unique to sugar dating (see Sharp & Keyton, 2016), Helen, Yvette, and other participants noted that men who sugar date sometimes seem especially attached to them. They attributed this attachment to the mutually beneficial dynamic of sugar dating, which, they felt, might empower men to go for only the most conventionally attractive women.

Several participants did feel pressured by the notion of attractiveness. Rochelle, who used to sugar date but has since redirected her focus to finding a long-term partner, attributed this to what she considered "the

beauty standard in America." She said that "when we say attractive, people have these celebrities…these models in mind." She went on to describe herself as "beautiful, but not necessarily the beauty standard beautiful." The beauty standard to which she was referring mirrored Yvette's and Helen's comments about the "girl next door" look. Several participants said they felt especially pressured by this beauty standard in their online and mobile dating experiences. For instance, they observed that many men on Seeking kept their own profiles hidden but seemed to expect women to upload a variety of cropped and full-body photos. This fed their concerns about how their body types, facial features, and skin tones might hinder their sugar dating efforts. However, despite Rochelle's characterization of herself as an "average looking" woman, she felt the "hot" aspect of the "hot younger woman" narrative was not universally prescriptive of women's ability to form successful sugar relationships. Rochelle argued that "there's somebody for everybody," which, for her, meant that any woman interested in sugar dating could find a partner because "everybody's going to like different aspects." Ulyssa raised a similar point, saying that "people don't all want the same things." Rochelle's and Ulyssa's comments, thus, offer an interesting counter to other participants' takes on this narrative. Both women believed that—much like with traditional dating practices—time, patience, and confidence were the keys to finding a great sugar partner.

Returning to Jones's (2014) "hot young thing" comment, another crucial aspect of the "hot younger woman" narrative about women who sugar date is age. Participants and press coverage alike remarked on a presumed preference among men for youthfulness. In a CNBC article, Wells (2013) defined sugar dating as "older guys looking for younger women." Oppenheim (2018), writing for *The Independent*, referred to sugar dating as a practice "in which younger women are paid to go on dates with men who are often far older than them." A few recent empirical projects (Di Cicco & Vandevenne, 2023; Recio, 2022a) have even asserted that a sugar relationship is, by definition, an arrangement made between a younger woman and a comparatively older man. Yvette, who was in her late 20s, believed she might already be aging out of sugar dating because the men she encountered were interested in women "on the younger side." She said: "Once you get rid of that young fantasy, for some men, they don't like that." Yvette had even considered lying about her age to maintain the "young fantasy" she described. Autumn was around Yvette's age but in a steady sugar relationship. Even so, she felt that "the trope of the wealthy older man and the hot younger woman is there for a reason." In validating the existence of this trope, Autumn made the case that the feminine youthfulness associated with sugar dating was at least somewhat accurate.

A few participants countered the narrative by arguing that women benefit from sugar dating while they age. Erica started sugar dating in her 40s, after decades of traditional dating and a marriage. Because of this, she believed she was keenly aware of what she wanted out of a sugar relationship and how she wanted the men she dated to treat her. Erica felt she had finetuned her ability "to really strongly articulate my boundaries," and her sense was that she could stand up for herself better at this point in her life than if she had first discovered sugar dating at an earlier age. Like Erica, Helen mentioned the importance of boundary setting. She was in her late 30s but had first started sugar dating on Seeking more than a decade ago. Because Helen had "done a lot of inner work" since her earliest sugar dating experiences, she contended that the aging process had helped her and could help other women sugar date more confidently:

> I think a lot of women feel a lot better in our 30s than in our 20s. Our lives are better, we're more confident with who we are, we know what we want. And that comes from being physical with a person and being more comfortable in your own body and your own desires to also be firmer about knowing

> what you want. I've also been surprised from the man's perspective. I would have thought they would really prefer somebody younger. There's a lot of guys who might have 45 as their lower cutoff for age in their profiles.

Media accounts are not devoid of the age-related counterexamples Helen and Erica described. In 2023, 49-year-old writer Emme Witt wrote a Business Insider article about her decision to begin sugar dating as a "42-year-old divorced mother of two" (Witt, 2023, para. 3). Witt did nod to how her age defies the popular narrative—she argued that the "typical" definition of a sugar baby is "a younger woman who dates wealthy, older men"—but, even so, she believed the men with whom she formed relationships appreciated her "worldliness" and "maturity."

While Erica and Helen demonstrated that sugar dating need not be rigidly bound by age, they did acknowledge how the "hot younger woman" narrative—a longstanding construct across advertising, film, television, and other visual media known for valuing youth and conventional beauty—instills pressure to combat physical manifestations of aging. For instance, Helen tempered her comments with the caveat that having more life experience could be advantageous "as long as you still look good." Erica talked about how she:

> Had to start getting Botox, which costs money. It costs money to get your nails done. And it costs money to do all those things. So maybe at the end of the day, it's all moot because I'm maybe spending $2,000 a month.

Erica's reflections on her expenditures demonstrated how conforming to the "hot younger woman" narrative is, ultimately, risky in that doing so both upholds the narrative and reduces women's opportunities to achieve the financial security that may have inspired them to start sugar dating in the first place.

6.3. The "Withholding Sex Worker" Narrative

A key benefit of sugar dating is that people clearly articulate their exact desires and expectations. The resultant tension is that these conversations draw clear connections between intimacy and economic exchange. Therefore, another popular narrative characterizes women's participation in sugar dating as sex work. The *Pretty Woman* motif reaffirms this, and it is also evident in both the content and placement of other media texts. Baragona (2018), writing about women who sugar date for Business Insider, uses the terms "profession," "career," and "work." An article for *The Independent* features a headline about "sugar baby work" (Oppenheim, 2018). Another headline, this time for BuzzFeed (Dobrogosz, 2021) offers a "glimpse into the world of transactional dating." A Refinery29 article, categorized as part of the website's "Work & Money" vertical, appears to conceptualize the phenomenon as one that generates income for women (Chou, 2017). Scholars (Di Cicco & Vandevenne, 2023) have even assumed this labor framing, referring to sugar dating as an occupation, Seeking as a sexual gig work platform (Rand & Stegeman, 2023), and women's participation as a work role. Together, these examples discursively position sugar dating as sex work.

While some participants supported the worker framing, others complicated it. For Cam, who was seeing sugar partners while also in a long-term, non-sugar dating romantic relationship, categorizing sugar dating as work was both a relational decision and a necessary boundary because "my partner needs to see it as sex work." Yvette found the worker framing appropriate, though her reasoning differed from what Cam

described in that she focused on what occurred within the context of her sugar relationships. She argued: "Anything that falls under the category of getting any type of financial assistance in exchange for either your body or your emotions is some type of sex-esque labor." Yvette was also a dominatrix. Therefore, depending on the relationship, she said sugar dating sometimes felt like an extension of that erotic labor dynamic. Bridget also named exchange as a reason to define sugar dating as a "mild" form of sex work. However, she felt the boundaries were blurry:

> In the sense that I am dating these people, I am hearing about their lives, and I am spending time with them and getting to know them or like them. It's like non-monogamous dating. I just have several boyfriends. I don't have clients

Autumn, similarly, said:

> I think sugar dating is really what you make it. Yeah, there are some people who treat it more like light escorting on both sides. But I think there are also relationships where it just feels like you're dating or like boyfriend/girlfriend, but they happen to provide more financial support. And I think if you just described the situation to people, but you didn't use those terms, they would be a lot more receptive to it. So yeah, it's just that actual exchanging of cash that I think people find disconcerting.

Others distinguished between labor and employment, arguing that, although sugar dating is not a job, it does call women to perform aesthetic and emotional labor. While Nadine said, "I don't think it's really appropriate for someone to say oh, this is what I do for a living," she described sugar dating as "kind of a hustle" and said that there are "so many different directions that this gig can go towards." Rochelle concurred, explaining that she did not "see it [sugar dating] as a job. I see it as a side hustle, like an additional source of income." Even where participants did not explicitly declare whether they thought of sugar dating as work, implicit references to labor were evident in their descriptions of how they felt about the energy demands of sugar dating. Reese said she found sugar dating enjoyable but tiring: "There's a lot of time I have to dedicate to the men that I see, especially when I'm emotionally invested, of course, because that's what relationships are." She wanted a break from the men she dated so that she could "hang out with my girls and have girl time, maybe knit together or something….Literally nothing crazy. No drinking. No drugs. Just chill." Finally, although Erica said she considered sugar dating a relief from the typical day-to-day stress of her personal and professional obligations, she noted this feeling came only after realizing that a single, "consistent" partner would be more ideal for her than the "exhaustion" that came with seeing multiple men simultaneously.

Despite the tendency among several participants to support or offer a somewhat amended take on the worker narrative, a few women drew on notions of authenticity to refute this framing. Helen said that her participation in sugar dating was "not transactional" because "you really have a genuine relationship with the person on the other end." Similarly, for Lydia, sugar dating was "literally comparable to regular dating." She participated because she did not "have the emotional bandwidth to commit to a serious relationship in terms of expectations." As such, Lydia considered sugar dating "a friends with benefits with extra benefits." Her use of "friends with benefits," a label commonly attached to casual sexual relationships, links the sex worker narrative with how popular press articles frame women's sexual desire and agency in sugar dating. Often, these articles present desire and pleasure as feelings that are divorced from or even risky for women who sugar date. Meley (2022) clarifies that her informant's sugar relationships "never involves sex."

Rosman's (2018) conversation with Brandon Wade for *The New York Times* conflates women's sexual agency with power. Wade, the founder and CEO of Seeking, argued that "the moment you give sex, you have lost all your power." These examples underscore a belief that women who sugar date have sexual agency only to the extent that they exude sexual desire but do not actually act on it, as having sex with their sugar dating partners would signal forfeiture of both safety and power.

While other research (Metcalfe et al., 2023) has concurred with this characterization of sex in sugar dating as something that men expect and women might concede to performing, my participants complicated this understanding of women's sexual desire. A few were, indeed, sugar dating primarily for material benefits—and they did not always want to have sex with their sugar partners. Conversely, several participants attributed their involvement to their desire for intimacy and sex. Erica described how she derived immense sexual pleasure from sugar dating: "I feel like I came at sugar dating as way more of an empowered thing in that I want the sex. I want the orgasms, but I know specifically what type of sex I want." Ivy said she enjoyed having sex with sugar partners and even felt that sugar dating structured her broader epistemological understandings of romance and sexuality, such that she saw little distinction between her sugar dating and traditional dating practices. The fluidity with which Lydia approached dating paralleled Ivy's perspective. She believed women's sexuality was deeply compatible with sugar dating, as the mutually beneficial premise could empower women to be very agentic in articulating and seeking fulfillment of their exact sexual desires. Yvette, who said she was searching for a man who was "a little more open sexually, like experimental, interested in trying with other people," also felt that sugar dating afforded her sexual confidence and freedom.

To be sure, participants agreed with the press articles' assertions that women who sugar date must worry about their physical safety. Several recommended that women who use platforms to sugar date should consider uploading photos that are not already available online, as nefarious actors could use artificial intelligence or reverse-image search tools to locate their personal information. Cam also spoke about the need to "protect yourself" during the initial stages of meeting a sugar partner and continue to uphold firm boundaries even as a relationship matures. Cam then added that women in precarious financial situations might seek sugar relationships despite having limited prior knowledge and experience because they feel they have "no other options." Therefore, stressing the potential risks of sugar dating is important. In fact, several participants agreed with Cam's comment that anyone who "sugar dated while desperate" could sacrifice her sexual agency and subject herself to exploitation. However, they also noted that all dating practices present safety concerns that women must navigate when they pursue romantic or sexual relationships. Provided women are careful about why, where, and with whom they sugar date, as my participants' accounts make clear, sugar relationships could prove to be sexually liberating and rewarding.

7. Conclusion

Media and popular culture help us make sense of sugar dating and other complex social phenomena. However, the narratives they produce risk flattening people's nuanced experiences and perspectives. As evidenced by my analysis of popular press articles and my interview data, the "hot younger woman" and "withholding sex worker" narratives analyzed in this article are not without merit. For some, these narratives resonated with how they understood their identities, sexualities, and sexual agency in relation to sugar dating. For others, though, the narratives failed to capture the ways sugar dating had fulfilled their sexual desires and given them confidence in their appearances. In characterizing women's participation in sugar dating as a youthful,

entrepreneurial endeavor, the popular media narratives miss opportunities to tease out how sugar dating both transgresses and reifies patriarchal structures by offering women ways to simultaneously seek pleasure and transcend the boundaries of social class. Thus, situating sugar dating in feminist scholarship on gender, media, and sexuality is important in that it allows us to engage deeply with how identity and sexuality figure into women's embodied realities. This is a crucial step forward in elevating the voices of those who participate in sugar dating and other romantic and sexual practices.

The media and popular culture spotlight on sugar dating comes amidst a growing movement among tech policymakers since the 2018 enactment of the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act—two laws meant to limit use of online platforms for illegal sex trafficking—to deplatform sex work (Blunt & Wolf, 2020), sexual activity, and sexual content more broadly (Are, 2021; Bronstein, 2021; Garwood-Cross et al., 2024). While the internet affords visibility to women who sugar date, this heightened attention also invites scrutiny—such as Google Play Store's decision to ban sugar dating apps (Porter, 2021) and Meta's recent replacement of search results for #sugarbaby on Instagram and Facebook with a warning label titled "child sexual abuse is illegal." Thus, given these tensions, it is important to square narrativizations of identity and sexuality in sugar dating with the perspectives and thought processes that color women's participation.

Crucially, the results of this study are not meant to critique sex work or create distance between sugar dating and sex work. Rather, they exist to give sugar daters and non-sugar daters alike a more detailed understanding of how women experience this phenomenon—which could shape how platform developers and tech regulators structure their policy decisions. With that in mind, future research should continue exploring how women navigate the complex landscape of digital platforms as they sugar date, and how women worldwide understand their identities, sexualities, and sexual agency in these spaces.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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