Blurred lines: Technologies of heterosexual coercion in “sugar dating”

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Abstract
“Sugar dating” is the practice of establishing a “mutually beneficial relationship” between an older, affluent male – Sugar Daddy – and a younger, financially disempowered female – Sugar Baby. Although the figure of the “Sugar Daddy” has become commonplace in popular culture, this area of study remains largely unexplored, especially in the UK. Among the numerous websites that have mushroomed in the last decades in this country, Seeking.com stands out not only for providing an online meet-up place for Sugar Daddies and Babies, but also for serving as the matrix where the “sugar” discourse is constructed. The site functions as a discursive producer of the subject, inasmuch as Sugar Babies and Daddies are subjected and subjugated through a process of assujettissement by this kind of discursive power. Interviews conducted with four women who had recently acted as Sugar Babies showed how this discourse permeates the subjects and acts as a “technology of coercion” that works to perpetuate hegemonic notions of heterosexuality and undermines the participants’ agency to refuse to engage in sexual intercourse, effectively “blurring the lines” of sexual consent.

Keywords
heterosexuality, Sugar Daddy, Sugar Baby, United Kingdom, heterosexual coercion, sexual consent
“Sugar dating” is the practice of establishing a “mutually beneficial relationship” (Seeking, 2019a) between an older, affluent male – Sugar Daddy – and a younger, financially disempowered female – Sugar Baby. These types of arrangements often involve the exchange of sexual services for money and/or goods (Kuate-Defo, 2004; Motyl, 2013; Nayar, 2017), therefore sugar dating can be considered a type of transactional sexual relationship. Heterosexual sugar dating has been documented in some countries of the Global South such as Kenya (Longfield et al., 2004; Luke, 2015) and South Africa (Brouard & Crewe, 2013; Phaswana-Mafuya et al., 2014; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013). Although some studies have been carried out in the Global North (see Miller, 2011–12; Motyl, 2013; Nayar, 2017; or Mixon, 2018, for articles based in the US; and Daly, 2017, for Canada), sugar dating in the United Kingdom continues to be under-researched.

The search for a “sugar” partner is predominantly conducted online, through specialized sugaring websites whose aim is to link prospective Sugar Daddies with Sugar Babies. The most popular and largest sugaring website in the world is Seeking.com (Tapper, 2019). This site provides its users with a platform to search prospective sugar partners, as well as with an informative section containing a glossary of terms such as “Sugar Daddy”, “Sugar Baby”, and “arrangement”. It also offers a comprehensive list of characteristics to clarify “what it means to be a Sugar Baby” (Seeking, 2019b).

Authors such as Alex Miller (2011–12) equate sugar dating to prostitution as the majority of “sugar” relationships consist of an exchange of sexual services for money and/or goods. Others, however, define sugaring as “instrumental intimacy” affected by “capitalist relations of sexual exchange” (Nayar, 2017, p. 337). Therefore, sugar dating should be considered a hybrid activity between transactional sex (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003) and heterosexual dating (Motyl, 2013) that operates within a context characterized by neoliberal financial insecurities.

Determining to what extent women exercise their own agency in transactional sexual dynamics is an ongoing endeavour within feminist studies (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Gavey, 1992; Hofmann, 2010). Binary visions on agency (whether the individual is able to act totally out of “free will” or completely coerced) need to be left aside to embrace the more nuanced definition of agency as the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). The sociocultural milieu in which agency is exercised is key to understanding its development; and language and discourse are an integral component of the sociocultural relations that affect agency (Ahearn, 2001). Bay-Cheng argues that young women in the Western world are now “judged on their adherence not only to gendered moralist norms, but also on a ‘neoliberal script of sexual agency’” (2015, p. 279), by which it is assumed that they act under their own personal responsibility, exercising their individual, fully uncoerced, sexual agency.

In the case of sugar dating, it is necessary to acknowledge that these relationships flourish within a context of financial insecurity, as well as against the background of hegemonic heterosexuality – the majority of “sugar” arrangements are heterosexual (Motyl, 2013). Hegemonic heterosexuality can constrain women's
agency. Normative sets of sexual behaviours often create situations where women feel that there is no space for voicing their consent to sexual intercourse (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012), therefore they can hinder women’s capacity to exercise their sexual agency. Neoliberal discourses around heterosexual women’s full sexual subjecthood often mask ongoing gender imbalances (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012); for example, the social consideration of women as sexual gatekeepers, thus those who bear the responsibility of preventing intercourse from happening (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013).

Researching the discourse employed by Seeking.com to define sugar dating, I became interested in understanding how the discursive construction of sugaring could act as a coercive tool regarding women’s agency during the course of heterosexual arrangements with Sugar Daddies. Drawing from Nicola Gavey’s (1992) concept of “technology of heterosexual coercion” – defined as an exercise of disciplinary power aimed at reproducing male dominance and heterosexual practice without overt force – as well as from literature on agency and sexuality in a neoliberal framework, this research will explore whether Seeking.com’s discursive construction of sugar dating could be understood as a “technology of heterosexual coercion”, and whether this “technology” allows sexual consent to be clearly and freely communicated.

The discursive production of the “sugar” subject

The definitions provided by Seeking.com guide the users in the project of “being” a proper sugar partner. Therefore, it can be argued that these definitions discursively produce the subject. According to Foucault (1979), the subject is constructed through a series of power relations that are transmitted and produced by discourse. Foucault (1979) uses the term *assujettissement*, translated into English as “subjugation” or “subjection”, to name the process through which the subject is constructed according to a series of knowledge-power relations.

For Foucault (1979), power precedes the formation of the subject, and not the other way around; it is through discursively produced power relations that subjectivities emerge and the subject comes into being. In the case of sugar dating, a preceding power that discursively creates the category “Sugar Baby” needs to exist for a subjectivity as a Sugar Baby to form; that is, for a person to identify as a Sugar Baby by embracing this subjectivity. Sugar Babies are “subjected” to this power in this process, but also “subjugated”, since they do not have the authority to redefine the concept, and therefore are, as subjects, “bound to seek recognition of [their] own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of [their] own making” (Butler, 1997a, p. 20). By adopting the name “Sugar Baby”, a woman is both subjected – she is now a Sugar Baby – and subjugated, for she needs to conform to what a Sugar Baby is if she wants to be recognized by others as such:

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

Arguably, in the case of sugar dating, a failure to comply with the necessary requirements to be socially recognized as a Sugar Baby may not result in social castigation but may cause the termination of the agreement with the Sugar Daddy. This analysis can also be applied to the subject formation of the Sugar Daddy, as he also needs to comply with the definition of the term if he wants to be recognized as such. However, a sugaring relationship is inherently an unequal one that is biased in favour of the Sugar Daddy in at least two ways. Firstly, in economic terms, the Sugar Baby is the one who needs access to the Sugar Daddy’s funds. This means the Sugar Daddy can more effectively resist his position, since if he stops behaving as a “proper” Sugar Daddy his material reality won’t be affected because his income does not depend on the relationship. Secondly, according to Seeking.com, there are four Sugar Babies for every Sugar Daddy (Seeking, 2019d). Therefore, the imbalance in supply and demand gives the Sugar Daddy more power to control how the relationship will develop, as theoretically it should be easier for him than for the Sugar Baby to find another suitable partner.

This does not imply that a Sugar Baby cannot exercise her own agency, only that her agency is socioculturally mediated by the sugar dating context. Moreover, the process of *assujettisement* is not a totalizing one and can be partially resisted. Foucault (1978) argues that linguistic power produces the subject but simultaneously creates the possibility of resistance. For Butler, the person interpellated by language can protest their situation, but only partially:

The one who acts (who is not the same as the sovereign subject) as precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constrains from the onset. (1997b, p. 16)

Therefore, even if a subject emerges as a result of an oppressive linguistic relationship, they can resist the very same discourse that creates the possibility of their existence, but only to the extent that the constraining linguistic field enables them. In the case of the Sugar Baby subjectivity, this means that some Sugar Babies may have some margin to negotiate the terms and conditions of their subjugation, but they necessarily need to conform to the hegemonic definition of “Sugar Baby” to a certain degree, in order to be recognized as such. If we agree with Butler and we accept that the subject is called into being by an authority, it is worth asking who is, in this case, the authority. The answer is twofold: firstly, inasmuch as Seeking.com is the worldwide leading website for sugar dating, it constitutes an authority as the discourse employed by the site is accessed by every person who uses that website to seek a “sugar” partner. Secondly, the Sugar Daddies and Babies (and in this case, for the reasons mentioned above, the Sugar Daddies hold a more
powerful position) constitute another type of authority: if the Sugar Baby does not behave as expected, her Sugar Daddy can terminate the agreement, and vice versa. The formation of the “Sugar Daddy” and “Sugar Baby” subjectivities has several implications for the subjects, such as the necessity to adapt their behaviour to the linguistic categories of “Sugar Daddy” and “Sugar Baby”.

**Methods**

The principal method employed in this research has been critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA allows one “to examine the constitutive role that discourses play in contemporary society” (Vaara, 2010, p. 217). CDA also seeks to highlight the link between discursive and other social practices – in this case, sugar dating. In CDA, discourses are not treated as neutral but rather as key loci of ideology embedded in the social context where they are produced (Vaara, 2010).

Empirical data has been gathered from Seeking.com and from semi-structured interviews with four women who were or had been in the past a Sugar Baby. Ethical approval was granted by Nottingham Trent University to conduct this research. The use of at least two different data-gathering sources has been defined with the term “triangulation” (de Souza, 2004), often describing the use of two different qualitative methods (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Triangulation “gives access to different versions of the phenomenon” (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 137). In this case, the analysis of Seeking.com shows how sugar dating is discursively produced, whereas the interviews provide first-hand testimonies of the participants’ lived experiences of sugar dating. The two data sources inform each other: interviews were placed in dialogue with the analysis of the discourse used by Seeking.com. This website was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, because it is the most popular website worldwide and therefore the one that is likely to serve as a model for other, newer sugaring sites; secondly, because it was the one employed by all of the participants to meet “sugar” partners.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. I will refer to the final participants as Rebecca, Suzanne, Rosa, and Jessica. The criteria were the following: UK-based women, between the ages of 18 and 30, who were sugar dating or had previously done so. After recruiting the first participant through social media, the snowball method was employed (whereby a participant referred the investigator to another potential participant) to recruit the rest. This non-random technique is commonly employed in qualitative investigations with hard-to-reach groups (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Written consent was freely given by the participants to use for publication purposes.

One-to-one, semi-structured interviews are an optimal qualitative method for conducting research on sugar dating as they are typically “used as a research strategy to gather information about participants’ experiences, views and beliefs concerning a specific research question or phenomenon of interest” (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 309). Contrary to other methods, interviews allow participants to narrate their own lived reality using their own words, something still revolutionary when
interviewing young women as it can be considered “an antidote for centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Interviews took place between August 2019 and December 2019. They lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. The quotations in this paper have been minimally edited for length, and further clarification has been added when needed. All the identifying data have been removed or altered.

**Seeking.com: The discursive matrix of the subject**

Seeking.com describes a Sugar Baby as an “empowered individual with exquisite taste and an appetite for a relationship filled with new experiences and a taste for the good life” and states that “[s]he’s not constrained by traditional definitions of relationships and is Seeking to create a Relationship on Her Terms” (Seeking, 2019b, emphasis original). The website introduces the ideal Sugar Baby as an agentic individual who adheres to contemporary neoliberal conceptualizations of women as sexually active as opposed to traditionally passive (Harvey & Gill, 2011). The Sugar Baby is also defined as either “college educated or college-bound” (Seeking, 2019b), and it is explained that she may find financial relief in the figure of the Sugar Daddy by virtue of “worry[ing] a little less about her tuition bills” or with “help [from the Sugar Daddy] to build a professional network of contacts” (Seeking, 2019b).

Seeking.com should be understood as an online technology that has benefited from the way in which “online sexual commerce [has] shifted the boundaries of social space, blurring the differences between underworld figures and ‘respectable citizens’” (Bernstein, 2007, p. 473). Sugar Babies, described as highly educated, are “respectable citizens”. This description works as a legitimizing mechanism for Seeking.com, as the site clearly attempts to discursively separate itself from the sex industry and its “underworld figures”. Sugaring is described on the site as a relationship where the Sugar Baby can potentially enjoy a luxurious life, and never as a sexual transaction or a job. In parallel, Seeking.com describes sugar dating to prospective Sugar Babies as a financial relief from tuition fees, disguised as a pseudo-romantic agreement. This description is in line with neoliberal notions of self-responsibility where the individual is detached from structural inequalities and responsible for finding individual solutions to a collective problem (Gill, 2008). Sugar Babies are encouraged to find relief from their financial problems in the figure of the Sugar Daddy, yet in the first available description of the Sugar Baby, she is described as an empowered individual with a taste for “the good life”. Seeking.com plays with the two descriptions of a Sugar Baby (empowered individual vs. indebted student) thus providing a contradictory definition.

The site has adopted a quasi-feminist rhetoric of empowerment and agency to appeal to younger generations who may be familiar with feminism. The site iterates several times the idea that Sugar Babies are empowered and agentic individuals: “The Seeking.com Sugar Baby is empowered, because she is unafraid of setting a
higher standard of whom they want in a romantic relationship hypergamy [sic], and doing what is necessary to find that”² (Seeking, 2019b, emphasis in original).

Seeking.com offers a stigma-free definition of sugaring in order to avoid being accused of promoting transactional sexual relationships. There is a clear preoccupation with the agency of the women who will act as Sugar Babies, as they are systematically defined as being the ones in charge of setting the limits and terms of the relationship. In addition, the discourse of Seeking.com aligns with Bernstein’s idea of the new technology-mediated sexual labour which offers “‘bounded authenticity’ (an authentic, yet bounded, interpersonal connection)” (2007, p. 474). The site invokes discourses of “genuine attraction” and “romantic relationships” between the Sugar Daddy and the Sugar Baby that clash with the reasons that they are offering prospective Sugar Babies (defined according to their second definition, indebted students) for dating a Sugar Daddy: to find relief from tuition fees or build up a network of business contacts.

The aim of these two different definitions of sugaring is to target prospective members in different ways in order to maximize its client base: to the Sugar Daddy, a romantic relationship is offered; to the Sugar Baby, an economic relief mechanism. The two different justifications for starting a “sugar” dynamic (romantic relationship/economic relief) create two different subject positions that reproduce the heterosexual binarism. The man embodies the hegemonic heterosexual masculinity by being the financial provider (Sugar Daddy). Conversely, the young woman can capitalize on her erotic capital (Hakim, 2010) by forming an arrangement with her Sugar Daddy by which she can expect to receive a financial compensation. Although Sugar Babies are supposed to set the terms of the relationships, this ability can be constrained by their economic context. These gendered behavioural codes can create a discrepancy between the Sugar Baby and the Sugar Daddy as their motivations for starting a sugar relationship may differ: the Sugar Baby is economically motivated while the Sugar Daddy can be attracted to the idea of a romantic relationship whose financial aspect may not be the most relevant factor (for him). The interviews with Sugar Babies showed how they struggled to balance these gendered expectations in their relationships and the derived problems that arose.

Managing different expectations when “sugar dating”

Interviews with participants have shown a double standard in terms of behaviour that is in line with the different expectations that Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies had prior to starting the relationship. Some participants, such as Suzanne and Rosa, felt that they needed to learn as soon as possible that the financial aspect of the relationship was a “taboo” and could not be mentioned to the Sugar Daddy – despite having discussed prior to its commencement that the relationship included a financial compensation for the Sugar Baby. In some cases, the illusion that the relationship was not economically motivated for the Sugar Baby needed to be maintained for the Sugar Baby to be able to obtain the agreed financial benefit
from the relationship. An episode recalled by Suzanne exemplifies the dialectic relationship between the Sugar Daddy’s expected authenticity and her need for financial gain. Suzanne and her Sugar Daddy had agreed she would travel to meet him in the north of Scotland and a certain amount of money would be sent to her beforehand to buy underwear, which he had requested in preparation for the encounter. However, a few days before her departure, her Sugar Daddy had only sent her half the agreed amount:

\[\text{Suzanne:} \text{ So, I said to him, can I have the rest of the money? And he started being really, really intense. So, I was like... I don’t know how to describe it.}\]

\[\text{Recio:} \text{ was he verbally abusive?}\]

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

Suzanne clearly expresses her frustration when the Sugar Daddy not only does not keep his promise of sending her the money, but also reportedly tries to manipulate her into feeling guilty for asking for it:

\[\text{Suzanne:} \text{ Yeah so, going back and forth, back and forth, and I am literally like, “if you are not going to send the money, I am not coming”. So, he was like “you are trying to blackmail me”, and I am like, “I am not blackmailing you! [laughs] this is what we agreed on, this is what we said. If it is too stressful for you just leave it, like, it’s fine”. He said, “I am sorry, I apologize, and he sent me the £100”. And I said, “ok cool, I will still go, we could actually have a good time, this was just a bit of a hiccup, it’s fine”}.\]

However, according to Suzanne, the Sugar Daddy didn’t change his attitude:

\[\text{Suzanne:} \text{ He then went on to like... nit-pick at me, like... “you’ve got the money now, you have really upset me with what you were saying”. Like, really little things like that, to kind of... it was not straight out abuse, he was just trying to make me feel guilty so I would do what he wanted. He was like, you know, “I don’t really have to pay, we already have a great connection, why are you trying to make it all about the}\]
money...”. This is a common theme with all the guys that I spoke to, “why are you trying to make it all about money”, like, “we should just enjoy”.

The expectations that Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies have regarding the relationship are different. In the case of Suzanne, she is embracing the Sugar Baby script: she is asking for money and she will spend time with him in return, traveling to where the Sugar Daddy is located. For her, this is an agreed financial transaction that her Sugar Daddy is trying to breach. Conversely, he reportedly feels like she is trying to “make it all about money”, which suggests that either they do not share the same idea as to how a sugar relationship should develop, or that the Sugar Daddy is intentionally trying to avoid fulfilling his part of the agreement.

Another participant, Rosa, complained during the interview about how often the potential Sugar Daddies had expectations regarding what a “sugar” relationship entails that did not match hers:

*Rosa*: I think it just really depends on the kind of relationships you want to have with them [Sugar Daddies], because I think the guys that are on AdultWork [.com] are probably more aware of the fact that it is money motivated, whereas the guys on Seeking Arrangement probably have this kind of fantasy that it is actually like love? Which is something that I find…like I remember guys like, “yeah, I don’t want to pay anyone, I am looking for a relationship” so then I would say “why the fuck are you on this website?”.

Eventually, Rosa started dating a Sugar Daddy with whom she agreed on a financial relationship. However, despite having discussed beforehand that an exchange of money for company (as well as sexual intercourse) would be the essence of the relationship, he sporadically tried to avoid paying Rosa. When asked about the kind of financial arrangement that they had, she answered:

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

It seems that Suzanne and Rosa’s Sugar Daddies expected that the “bounded authenticity” (Bernstein, 2007) was eventually going to be decoupled from the financial aspects of the relationship. It is also possible that the Sugar Daddies were exploiting their privileged position in the relationship in order to avoid paying the Sugar Babies. A third participant, Rebecca, expressed her frustration when she felt she had to comply with a series of requirements to “be” a proper Sugar Baby, while the Sugar Daddies were ultimately focused on having sex with her. This illustrates how the discursive production of the subject, alongside
challenging financial situations where the Sugar Baby is in need of the money, affects the Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies differently:

Rebecca: Men are just, actually, a different species, because...you have to be a certain...they are weird, because they say certain age, certain look, and the way you talk, and all of those things, it all comes into it. But at the end of the day, what they want to do is sleep with me.

Seeking.com does not explicitly mention that sexual intercourse is included in the agreements, but it is tacitly understood by both Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies alike. Even if penetration is not involved, it is accepted by both partners that some erotic exchange will occur. Jessica, who met up in a café with a 52-year-old Sugar Daddy, recalled that:

Jessica: It was going to be a platonic thing, he wanted me to like, go to hotels and dress up in lingerie for him, and at the time I agreed to it but [...] He was nice, but it was...I guess I felt uncomfortable, because I had just turned eighteen so I was still kind of new to everything and...he was talking about sexual things in a public space so I just felt a bit uncomfortable [...] after that, I kind of felt that I couldn’t do it in person.

A recurring point through the interviews was the participants feeling that they had to comply with a sexual script for the relationship to work. During the course of the relationships, intercourse was understood by both Sugar Daddies and Babies as hegemonically heterosexual, whereby men’s sexual desires are prioritized over women’s desires (Gavey, 1992) or even over women’s comfort (Dworkin, 1987). In this sense, Seeking.com’s definition of the relationships as developing according to the Sugar Babies’ terms did not match the reality of the participants interviewed. The Sugar Babies were not satisfied with their financial gains yet their sexual involvement was required, so the relationships were not evolving according to “their terms”.

According to the testimonies of Rosa and Suzanne, the Sugar Daddies were also not at ease with the idea that the relationship was economically motivated for the Sugar Babies, which reportedly caused frustration on their part. However, the relationships gave them sexual access to the Sugar Babies. In addition, the Sugar Daddies’ display of emotions could be interpreted as a performance of frustration or manufactured disappointment in order to exploit the ambiguity of the situation to manipulate the Sugar Babies.

The Seeking.com’s oppositional definitions of the “sugar” relationships as financially profitable and based on the terms set by the Sugar Babies, as well as a beneficial romantic agreement for the Sugar Daddies, creates a discrepancy in the vision that the Sugar Daddies and the Sugar Babies have on sugar dating. This discrepancy affected the participants interviewed who often had difficulties obtaining the agreed payments. Moreover, that hegemonically heterosexual sex is
mutually understood as inherent to the relationships could be considered a technology of heterosexual coercion (Gavey, 1992), which reproduces hegemonic heterosexual practices and hinders women’s ability to consent to erotic activities and/or sexual intercourse in sugar dating.

Technologies of heterosexual coercion in sugar dating

Gavey (1992), drawing both on de Lauretis’ (1987) concept of “technologies of gender” and Foucault’s (1979) “technologies of power”, argues that heterosexuality is constructed through a series of discourses and practices (technologies) which produce a sexuality that systematically ignores women’s desire, and allows women little agency to determine their involvement in sexual acts.

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

Technologies of heterosexual coercion operate through mechanisms that are not openly violent but are as effective in maintaining an unequal heterosexual relationship. Gavey (1992) explains that coercive behaviour cannot be reduced to only the most evident form – i.e., rape. Rather, it permeates heterosexual relationships in other, subtler ways. She draws on Foucault’s (1979) analysis of docile bodies to argue that dominant discourses of sexuality shape modes of thoughts and individual subjectivities: subjects are likely to absorb hegemonic positions that comply with the normative set of behaviours about sexual intercourse. In this light, Seeking.com can be understood as a “technology of heterosexual coercion”, as it creates the discourse that reproduces a male-dominated heterosexuality in “sugar” arrangements.

It is still commonplace for heterosexual women to engage in a series of practices that can be considered liminally consensual (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gavey, 1992). This means that, due to prescriptive notions of heterosexual sexuality, women often find themselves in situations where sex is somehow expected and they feel constrained to comply. In the case of sugar dating, this situation is exacerbated by the prescriptive notion of the “sugar” discourse which understands sex to be integral to the sugaring agreements and relies on the financial necessity of the Sugar Babies for compliance. During the interview with Rebecca, she recalled an episode with her Sugar Daddy in which sexual consent was compromised by her financial situation. Rebecca and her Sugar Daddy were arguing about his breaching of their verbal contract regarding a payment while continuing to demand sexual encounters:

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

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

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

_Rocío_: And you had sex with him every day?

_Rebecca_: Every day.

_Rocío_: Did you want it?

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

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

_Rebecca_: Yeah.

Because of the tacit understanding that a “sugar” relationship involves an exchange of sexual services for any type of payment, Rebecca felt that it “wouldn’t make sense” to refuse sex, despite the fact that her Sugar Daddy was not fulfilling his part of the agreement. Rebecca could be considering sugar dating as a type of aspirational labour – activities that “hold the promise of social and economic capital” (Duffy, 2016, p. 441). She was willing to “build up trust” in order to access the promised financial payment, and in order to do so she needed to comply with the sexual demands of the Sugar Daddy. This shows that, in this particular case, the social norms that regulate sugar dating apply differently to Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies: partly due to Rebecca’s financial vulnerability, but also because she felt there was “no way” she could refuse.

According to Gavey (1992), women may have learned that sex in a heterosexual sugar relationship is something that they consent to rather than desire, and therefore may “sometimes not [be] aware of consent and non-consent as distinct choices (given certain, acceptable, parameters of the relationship)” (p. 348). The way a sugar relationship is discursively produced creates these acceptable parameters. Rosa, for example, had problems articulating her ability to consent to sex, as she assumed that sexual intercourse was always included in the agreements with
her Sugar Daddies. When asked if she felt she was in control of consenting or refusing sexual intercourse with the Sugar Daddies she dated, she answered:

*Rosa:* It’s really hard to know [. . .] I need to think back [. . .] I mean, to an extent, no, in a way. Because there’s always a part of me that says, I am being paid for this, so like [. . .] so I may as well just get on with it [. . .] but then, also, if something would be really uncomfortable, I will say [. . .] I’d be like, no. I need to think about those specific moments [. . .] I think it was more like, especially the Sugar Daddy stuff [as opposed to sex work3], it was hard because, for me, consent was kind of a tricky thing because I have consented to it but, do I want to do it? You know what I mean [. . .] yeah [. . .] did I desire it? Probably not, but [. . .] it’s a different kind of consent, I don’t know. It is hard to explain.

Rosa expresses some difficulties when defining consent. Research conducted by Melissa Burkett and Karine Hamilton (2012) indicated that contradictory definitions of sexual consent were often provided by the heterosexual women they interviewed. For instance, they discovered that their participants felt that they had consented to sex if they had behaved in a certain way with a man, for example by accepting going to his house, or flirting. Their participants felt that once they had carried out these actions, it would have been inappropriate to “say no”, even if the encounter was non-pleasurable or coercive (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Similar to the participants of Burkett and Hamilton (2012), Rosa believed that by having engaged in a “sugar” relationship, she had already consented to sex, and it would be difficult for her to refuse. Likewise, Rebecca thought “there was no way” she could say no.

However, despite the tacit understanding that sex is included in the agreements, sugar dating may offer some space for resistance. That the relationships are inherently transactional can empower Sugar Babies to refuse to engage in some activities if they have not received the agreed sum. Suzanne, for example, recalled an incident with a Sugar Daddy where she refused to perform oral sex on him:

*Suzanne:* We went to the cinema and it felt like I was sixteen again, like, taking me to the back of the cinema and was like, trying to like, kiss me [. . .] and then he kissed me and, and I was like, ok, it was expected, this is what you really brought me for, whatever [. . .] just keep pushing through [. . .] So, then he was like, trying to get me to give him oral sex and stuff, at the back of the cinema.

*Rocio:* But him doing it to you or you doing it to him?

*Suzanne:* No, yeah. So, at no point was he like “oh I want to do anything to you [. . .] you just need to do all of this for me”. Which I prefer, because you are not touching me, and I can control [. . .] like, what I am doing, so it is what it is, but I would prefer. At that point I was not [. . .] I really didn’t want him to be like, touching me like that, so it was irritating [. . .] I was just getting angry, this is the bit when I was getting to the point of [. . .] so you are demanding on my time, you are demanding on my
Suzanne felt she could refuse to perform oral sex because she hadn’t been paid, which alters the parameters of the situation. Since the Sugar Daddy was not adhering to his script, she also felt she could “step out” and refuse oral sex. However, she consented to the kissing and the touching, even though she did not want that situation to continue. This exemplifies how men’s desires are prioritized over women’s, as she felt she needed to comply with the kissing because “it was expected”.

Within the context of hegemonic heterosexual relationships, women’s ability to consent to sexual acts can be severely compromised by a variety of circumstances (Gavey, 1992; Rowland, 1996). Firstly, in the case of Rosa, a specific situation may not allow for consent to be either refused or given, as both parties had understood that consent had already been awarded by starting a “sugar” relationship. Secondly, Sugar Babies enter sugar dating under the framework established by normative heterosexual sexuality, often exacerbated by the lack of financial means that some of them are experiencing. For example, during her interview, Rebecca iterated that the lack of money was a decisive factor for her becoming involved in sugar dating:

Rebecca: Yeah, cause it’s like... it’s the tuition fees, which is £9250 [per academic year], and then on top of that you get the maintenance loan and you have to pay that back too, so... It’s a lot of money and that’s the whole reason why I am going to sugaring, because me being at uni is a lot of struggle, even just to pay rent, and my first year being here, it was like... I was literally living with no electric, and just about any food in the house, going on days just not eating at all because I can’t afford it. Like, I had no money, there was nothing.

In the case of Jessica, she explained she was being helped financially by her Sugar Daddy, but she would also obtain other benefits such as financial advice:

Jessica: There’s been times when I’ve struggled really bad financially and he’s... not only helped me financially, but has been like, you know... “this is okay” or... he’s even given me advice... because he has years of experience and a lot of living because he is forty-one.

Rebecca described the challenging financial situation she was experiencing prior to deciding to try sugar dating. In this sense, her narrative is similar to Rosa’s, as she explained that she struggled to afford rent, bills, and food with her student loan. Thus, their ability to consent to intercourse was limited by several crucial factors. Because the Sugar Daddy is the one who possesses the financial capital and there are no official mechanisms in place to force him to pay the Sugar Baby if he refuses, Sugar Babies are dependent on the good will of the Sugar Daddy. Sugar
Babies who are financially struggling may feel that their ability to control the development of the relationship is constrained by their financial situation but that, at the same time, they are the ones solely responsible for their own well-being. This is reflected in Bay-Cheng’s description of the neoliberal concept of freedom as “something akin to a liability waiver: do what you will, but at your own risk” (2015, p. 283).

Conclusion

Seeking.com’s descriptions of sugar dating shaped the lived reality of the participants interviewed in this study. The interviews have revealed that the participants’ knowledge about sugar dating was based on the descriptions provided by Seeking.com, as they had the same gendered expectations regarding the behaviour of the Sugar Daddies as well as their own. These expectations were often at odds with one another and were deeply embedded in heteronormative discourses that privileged the sexual desire of the Sugar Daddy, even in situations where the Sugar Daddy avoided payment, as in the case of Rebecca.

The discursive constructions of the relationships as transactional, as well as their sexual nature (mutually understood and accepted by Sugar Daddies and Babies alike), constrained the Sugar Babies’ ability to consent to sexual acts. Some of the participants felt that there was no space during these relationships to actively consent or refuse to engage in sexual intercourse, which effectively “blurred the lines” of sexual consent by creating a “gray space between consensual and non-consensual sex” (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013, p. 522). Therefore, Seeking.com’s discursive construction of sugar dating, where sex is intrinsic to the relationship, can be understood as a “technology of heterosexual coercion” (Gavey, 1992), that reproduces an unequal heterosexual practice disregarding women’s desire.

The interviewed Sugar Babies did not conform to the individuals described in Seeking.com, who theoretically have a “taste for the good life”. They were women who had resorted to sugar dating as a coping mechanism for the financial precarity they were experiencing during their university years. The interviews have shown that some of the women were struggling to the point of not having enough food or not being able to pay their bills. Therefore, sexual agency in sugar dating needs to be recalibrated against a background characterized by gendered, neoliberal sexual scripts, as well as financial precarity that often precedes the involvement of the Sugar Babies in transactional relationships. In order to move towards a more egalitarian sexuality where exploitative arrangements do not occur, it is imperative to ensure that the parties arrive at the agreement in circumstances free from any type of coercion, including financial ones. In addition, sexual agency needs to be better understood by placing it within the context of heterosexuality and financial precarity and considering that some circumstances may favour the absence of consent, such as the discursive construction of sugar dating. Unless there is an acknowledgement that hegemonic heterosexual scripts and dire financial situations underpin sugar relationships, an egalitarian sexuality is difficult to envisage.
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Notes
1. The website was formerly known as SeekingArrangement.com, and that name still appears in several of the tabs of the site. Therefore, it should be noted that in this work both Seeking.com and SeekingArrangement.com refer to the same website (Seeking.com).
2. The word “hypergamy” contains a hyperlink that brings the reader to a new page where a definition of the term is provided: Hypergamy is here defined as the social phenomenon whereby women value the wealth or the social status of their partner when engaging in “mate selection” (Seeking, 2019c).
3. Rosa was also a sex worker at the time of the interview and comfortably self-described as such, so that terminology was used during the interview.

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