

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE SUGAR BABIES:
A CONSENSUAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the courageous women who told their stories in order to further academia's understanding of this understudied phenomenon.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT.....	x
 CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Sugar Lifestyle: Definition and History	5
History of Sugar Terminology and Current Definitions	6
Sugaring as Sex Work.....	8
Online Partnerships	10
Existing Empirical Research on Sugaring: South Africa and the United States	11
Student Involvement in the Sex Industry	14
Student Sugar Babies	15
Sugar Lifestyle Motivators	19
Sex Work as Empowerment.....	23
Sex Work as Exploitation	24
Social, Ethical, and Legal Considerations	27
Sex Work During a Pandemic.....	27
Legal and Ethical Considerations	29
III. METHODOLOGY	32
Researchers	34
Participants.....	34
Procedures & Recruitment	36
Data Collection & Analysis	37
Data Analysis Process.....	39
IV. RESULTS.....	41
Process and Considerations of the Lifestyle	42
Negotiation/Payment.....	42

Privacy Protection	44
Dating Activities	44
Emotional Labor	45
Comparison to Non-Sugar Dating	46
Vetting.....	47
Secrecy	47
Safety	48
Peer Support Network.....	48
Profiles Built on Specific Relationship Conditions	49
Exclusively Online.....	49
Benefits of the Lifestyle.....	50
Financial.....	51
Elite Access.....	54
Social Capital	56
Safety in Transactional Nature of Relationship	56
Excitement/Fun	57
Mentoring/Learning	57
Education Support (Monetary, Time, Etc.).....	58
Emotional and Sexual Outlet	58
Empowerment	59
Quid Pro Quo Trade-Off.....	59
Sugar Daddy Characteristics	60
Motivations	60
Married Sugar Daddies	61
Sugar Daddy Attractions/Desires.....	62
Differences	63
Respectful/Supportive.....	64
Self-Perception and Identity	64
Internal Stigma and Shame	64
Dissonance	64
Self-Esteem	68
Challenged/Expanded Worldview	70
Motivation/Influence to Participate in the Lifestyle	70
Financial Incentive.....	70
Peer Network Word-of-Mouth.....	71
Adventure.....	71
Educational Attainment	72
Comparison to Non-Sugar Work	73
Significant Other-Related	73
Relational: Emotional and Sexual Outlet.....	75
Trauma	75

Pandemic-Related Motivations	76
Miscellaneous Code (Ancillary Information Not Fitting for Other Categories)	76
Advice – Messages to Potential Sugar Babies	76
Reason for Participating in Research	78
Sex and Intimacy Involved in the Lifestyle	79
Expectations	79
Setting Sexual Boundaries	80
Fetish Participation	80
Pleasure	81
Uncertainty/Discomfort	81
Abusive	82
Camming	82
Negative Effects of the Lifestyle	82
Stigma	83
Jeopardized Safety and Privacy	87
Detrimental to Life.....	88
Disillusionment with Men and Their Power	88
Scams/Attempt to “Out” Identity	89
Sexual Health	90
Fetishized	90
Power Dynamics Involved in the Lifestyle	90
Sugar Baby (Self).....	90
Exchange of Power	91
Sugar Daddy (Other).....	92
V. DISCUSSION	93
Notable Findings	93
Sugar Baby Motivation and Benefits	93
Power Structures	97
Defining Sugaring as Sex Work	100
Online Sex Work and Intergenerational Sugar Babies	101
Limitations	102
Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy	104
Challenging the Narrative of Disempowered Women and Embracing the Unconventionality of Sugar Relationships	104
Implications for Counselors: Mental Health Support for Sugar Babies.....	106
Ethical Responsibilities and Policy Implications.....	109
Future Research	111

Conclusion	113
APPENDIX SECTION	115
REFERENCES	123

ABSTRACT

Sugar relationships (i.e., a sugar daddy/mama paired with a sugar baby) are a growing cultural phenomena gaining attention in the United States and becoming increasingly commonplace on college campuses. A sugar baby is defined as an individual who receives financial or material benefits in exchange for companionship and/or sex, often with an older partner, a sugar daddy. The researcher aimed to describe and understand the lived experiences of college sugar babies by employing Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology. She interviewed ten former and current college sugar babies. The results included nine coded domains and succeeding categories and subcategories. The domains included (a) process and considerations of the lifestyle, (b) benefits of the lifestyle, (c) sugar daddy characteristics, (d) self-perception and identity, (e) motivation/influence to participate in the lifestyle, (f) miscellaneous code, (g) sex and intimacy involved in the lifestyle, (h) negative effects of the lifestyle, and (i) power dynamics involved in the lifestyle. Findings indicated that sugar baby motivation was largely financial but that other more intangible drivers also existed, such as adventure and educational attainment. Implications include that counselors and stakeholders explore and challenge common narratives within sex work discourse regarding disempowered women. Although sugar relationships may exist within larger, more inequitable societal constructs, the act of sugaring may be a means of usurping dominant power structures for some sugar babies. Other results situated sugaring among existing definitions of sex work and intimate labor. The author also put forth recommendations on bias exploration for

counselors and cautions around moralistic language that alienates sugar babies, which may devalue their mental health and cause them to abstain from help-seeking behaviors. Finally, the author calls for higher education institutions to become better allies to sugar babies by providing neutral information about the lifestyle and mental health support.

Keywords: sugar baby, sugar daddy, seeking arrangements, sugaring, sex work

I. INTRODUCTION

Sugar relationships have grown as a part of global culture over the past decade, in addition to gaining increasing attention in the United States (Scull, 2019). These relationships consist of a sugar daddy or sugar mama connecting with what is termed a *sugar baby*. For the purpose of this study, the author relies on a definition of this term derived from the sugar community itself. Thus, a sugar baby is defined as an individual who receives financial or material benefits in exchange for companionship and/or sex, often with an older partner, a sugar daddy (Sugar Lifestyle Forum, 2018). It is worthwhile to note that two aspects of that definition, age disparities and sex, are noted in the literature as features that may or may not be a part of sugar relationships (Scull, 2019). Perceptions of the sugar lifestyle, like other forms of sex work, exist on a continuum of female empowerment versus oppression, oftentimes with a heavy stigma attached (Koken, 2011). The bartered emotional and sexual labor involved in these relationships often serves as “economic earning power for women and a desired commodity for men” (Roberts et al., 2010, p.153). One of the leading websites for sugar relationships, Seeking Arrangement (SA), hosts 22 million total online members. Of these, the United States outnumbers other countries and territories (i.e., Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Ireland) in its number of female sugar babies, reported as 8.7 million (SA, 2020c). Despite this fact, much of the existing research on sugaring has been limited to South Africa (Luke, 2015; Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2001; Thobejane, Mulaudzi, & Zitha, 2017) and information on the topic has been limited to that of public news coverage (Agrell, 2007; Fairbanks, 2011; Koppel, 2011; Motz, 2014; Padawer, 2009; Pardiwalla, 2016; Rosman, 2018; Ross, 2015).

Often termed *sugaring* or *sugar dating*, the sugar lifestyle has become increasingly commonplace on U.S. college campuses, with SA reporting three million student members on the site in search of sugar daddies (SA, 2020c). Specifically marketed to students who may be in debt or looking to pay tuition, SA offers free membership upgrades for sugar babies identifying as students and have dedicated a portion of their site to what is called *Sugar Baby University* (SA, 2020b). Compounding college debt is a potent issue, particularly for women. The American Association of University Women (AAUW, 2019) reports that women disproportionately hold more college debt than men, often interfering with their ability to pay for essential living expenses. SA has reported a continued increase in student sugar babies over the last decade, citing the rising costs of college attendance and a system that perpetuates continued indebtedness (SA, 2017). Lastly, Mixon (2019) found that among U.S. universities that rank highest in the number of sugar babies are those with the highest tuition costs and those that require the most financial resources for attendance.

As the prevalence of college-aged sugar babies increases, so does the dearth of existing research on this population. The counseling field has an obligation to better understand the experiences of sugar babies. Doing so will equip mental health professionals with an understanding of this niche subculture in order to best support those involved and maintain ethical practice. Increased scholarship regarding this topic is essential in fostering alignment with the standards set forth by the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015). In addition, expanding counselor awareness of this subculture further aligns with the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling

Competencies (MSJCC) framework published by Ratts et al. (2015). The MSJCC put forth core competencies designed to foster the development and exploration of counselor attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and action for working with multicultural populations. This expanded experience may be especially critical for counselors working in university settings or with this population in other settings. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) emphasized the disproportionate effects of women-specific risk factors that underline and increase gender inequality, such as gender-based expectations, violence, and stressors. This results in cumulative mental health and societal impacts, including higher rates of depression and biased medical treatment (WHO, 2020). Given the large number of women involved in the sugar lifestyle, there exists a need to increase competence in addressing women-specific concerns among professionals in the counseling field. This will help mental health professionals appropriately treat women in ways that promote autonomy, foster protective factors, and avoid stigmatization (WHO, 2020). Moreover, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI, 2012), mental health stigma remains one of the largest barriers to seeking counseling services among students. Compounding this issue is the general stigma faced by student sex workers. Sagar et al. (2015) investigated how student sex work is dealt with at higher education institutions and discovered a belief system among staff that student sex work brings down university respectability. They argue that a mentality of this sort may jeopardize the level of student support offered because staff may place university reputation over student inclusion and safety. As college counseling centers around the nation work to best support students and their needs, an understanding of sugar culture within the college population is imperative. Lastly, there are important

societal impacts as a result of increased awareness of the sugar lifestyle, including public health and higher education policy implications (Reed, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the lived experiences of individuals who participated in the sugar lifestyle while in college. The researcher aimed to highlight the most salient parts of those experiences while also uncovering commonalities. The researcher used the qualitative approach of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) developed by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) to explore the associated phenomena.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To adequately review the topic and associated literature, the researcher highlights (a) the sugar lifestyle, including defining characteristics and history, (b) student involvement in the sex industry, (c) motivators for entering the sugar lifestyle, including sub-sections related to empowerment and exploitation, and finally, (d) social, ethical, and legal considerations related to sugaring. Due to the lack of extensive academic research on sugar culture in the U.S., much of the review below stems from existing research regarding the sugar lifestyle in other countries, sex work in general, and media coverage on the topic. Additionally, literature on this topic lacks consistent language to describe relationships of this nature; although, most terminology is a derivative of the concept of a “recipient” and “benefactor” (Scull, 2019, p. 2). According to Seeking Arrangement (SA, 2020b), there are nearly three times as many female student sugar babies on the popular website than male ones. Because of this, the author chose the terms *sugar baby* and *sugar daddy* to be used throughout this paper to describe the aforementioned relationship dynamic and primarily relationships between male sugar daddies and female sugar babies. Despite the high prevalence of the male/female dichotomy within sugar relationships, a diversity of gender/sexual expressions and pairings of such do exist within these relationships as well.

Sugar Lifestyle: Definition and History

Examined in this section is an overview of the history of sugar terminology and similar lifestyles across the world, positioning sugaring among a history of female sexual labor. In addition, the author sought a definition of sex work and qualified how it related to the sugar lifestyle, making an argument based on literature that sugaring sits along a

continuum of intimate labor. This section also includes a discussion of how the sugaring lifestyle is facilitated online and advertised to students. Lastly, the author gives a brief review of the current literature that exists on the topic, albeit limited.

History of Sugar Terminology and Current Definitions

Sugar babies have been compared to the courtesans of nineteenth-century Paris who sat atop a class of *demimonde*, translated as a sect of individuals in a “half-world” between elite, respectable society and that of the morally questionable, lower class; these individuals differed from that of a “common prostitute” (Freundschuh, 2016, p. 72) in both societal standing and reputation. Daly (2017) noted a similar hierarchy in sugaring in which the community relies on romantic/dating discourse as a way to differentiate it from other forms of stigmatized sex work. The popular website Seeking Arrangement (SA) echoes demimonde expectations of sugar babies by providing tips on how to be a *socialite* versus *social climber* and advising where to meet rich men (Let’s Talk Sugar, 2019). This demimonde of sex work also exists as a cultural script, represented in fictionalized and sensationalized content (e.g., as seen in films such as *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* and television shows such as *The Girlfriend Experience*) portraying sex workers, and specifically sugar babies, as bestriding a world of virtue versus vice (Cohen et al., 2020; Soderbergh et al., 2016). The result is often a familiar double bind faced by women: racy or pure, temptress or prude. Interestingly, Brents and Sanders (2010) outlined a class shift in the sex work industry in recent years, calling it a *mainstreaming* of sexual commerce. This effect refers to the increased inclusion of sex work in mainstream economic structures and social acceptability. Daly (2017) also noted this extension of sex work from working-class contexts to middle-class contexts and

hypothesized that it helped make way for the phenomenon of sugaring. This class shift further makes an argument for sugaring's place within a class of demimonde.

Historical parallels extend to young women in the 1910s and 1920s working by day and swapping an allowance for companionship and sex at night to make ends meet (Fairbanks, 2011), mistresses to working men of the 1950s and 1960s (Chateauvert, 2014) and Japanese *odoriko* and geishas (Agrell, 2007; Scull, 2019). In particular, sugar baby ideology is reminiscent of Japanese geisha culture. In documenting the history of geishas, Johnston (2005) echoed the geishas' class distinction from "most prostitutes" due to a sense of "embodied artistic accomplishment and social sophistication" (p. 37). Johnston (2005) described a broad hierarchy of sex workers among Japanese culture, explaining that geishas ranked above most and were expected to be highly skilled and trained in the arts. According to this author, geishas were not expected to engage in sex unless patrons offered long-term commitment and that geishas who offered lower prices had a depreciated charge because it "implied that their main skill was sexual" (p. 40). The sugar dynamic is also akin to the practice of *compensated dating* in East and Southeast Asia, said to have originated in Japan during the 1990s and representing a "more noble form of interpersonal exchange" that "insinuates professionalism" (Chu, 2018, p. 7) as opposed to other, more traditional forms of sex work. SA has outlined demimonde-like sugar baby benefits that extend beyond financial compensation: mentorship and networking, companionship, increased social status, and an opportunity to see the world (SA, 2020d). Reiterating this notion, Kitchener (2014) reported that sugar daddies may desire intellect in a sugar baby, "someone to come along on business trips, go to company events" (para. 13). Zimmerman (2015) echoed the sugar daddy value of intelligence,

noting an assumption that intellectual sugar babies can provide “more than just sex and beauty” (p. 9).

The term *sugar daddy* and the associated sugar lifestyle has gained popularity since the early twentieth century with increasing representation in pop culture, even breaking into niche realms such as e-gaming, in which players exchange gaming perks for online intimacy such as in-game companionship or cybersex (D'Anastasio, 2018). Ultimately, the modern-day sugar lifestyle centers on the idea that a sugar baby (most commonly a woman) connects with a sugar daddy/mama (most commonly a man) for a transactional relationship, exchanging companionship and/or sex for financial or material benefit (SA, 2020a). The sugar community considers itself a niche subculture and cites key differences in sugaring as compared to other forms of sex work (e.g., prostitution or escorting); namely, sugaring allows participants to have the choice to establish relationship exclusivity and participate sexually (Sugar Lifestyle Forum, 2018). O'Leary and Howard (2001) noted that the exchange of affection for money in sugar relationships blurs the lines between traditional “prostitution” (p. 25) and dating, further complicating the central tenets of sugar relationships among sex work discourse. Without extensive research on sugaring, contemporary definitions of the complex sugar lifestyle are lacking.

Sugaring as Sex Work

Boris and Parreñas (2010) put sex work on a continuum of what is referred to as *intimate labor*, described as that which relies on the maintenance of social relations. According to their assertion, intimate labor can entail an encounter as fleeting as nail manicuring or as long-lasting as child and elderly care. The author recognizes that sex work comes in a multiplicity of forms that involve both physical and emotional labor.

Scull (2019) similarly put forth that a variety of arrangements exist within sugar relationships, each constituting a “unique relationship package” (p. 4) and that sex is not always a component of sugar relationships. This variety muddles the process of defining sugaring within current definitions of sex work. Scull (2012) aptly quoted a participant, “it’s its own thing” (p. 4). Certain expectations within sugaring relationships (i.e., companionship and intimate quality time) undoubtedly fit with Boris and Parreñas’ definition of intimate labor, but denoting sugaring as categorically sex work can be problematic. Bernstein (2008) discussed the academic notion of *sex work* as that which involves all form of sexual labor, not reliant upon the exchange of a discrete form of intercourse. Although, sexual favors are named as a part of the sugar community’s self-definition (Sugar Lifestyle Forum, 2018). Aligning with the former and latter designations, sugaring may be, in fact, labeled as sex work. Further complicating the matter, defining sugaring as *work* in and of itself is problematic. In point of fact, Seeking Arrangement (SA, 2020a) markets itself as a *dating* website; however, distancing themselves from perceptions of illegal prostitution may serve both legal and regulatory functions (Koppel, 2011). Daly (2017) noted that the sugar community borrows from traditional romantic discourse, conjecturing that this specific language functioned to distance sugaring from sex work and its stigma. Nayar (2017) iterated a similar conclusion: the romantic discourse typical among the sugaring community undercuts its defining economic characteristics (i.e., putting into question its status as *work* and distinguishing it specifically from *sex work*). Nayar (2017) also concluded the existence of an “insidious process” (p. 344) in which the paid labor relations of sugaring are concealed under a guise of egalitarianism and personal choice, risking further

disenfranchising sex workers. Scull (2019) further pointed out that a large range of noncommercial intimate relationships can and do involve an exchange of money. The author pointed to Zelizer's (2005) notion that despite an ever-present societal debate about the propriety of intermingling money and intimacy, the two commonly coexist, citing examples of parents paying nannies, alimony and child support, and child adoption fees. The degree to which sex and other forms of intimacy are involved in sugaring highlight the distinctiveness of these relationships, and it is important to consider these defining characteristics of the sugar lifestyle in order to contextualize the following review of literature.

Online Partnerships

One of the primary marketplaces for sugar relationships is online, with dozens of websites currently in existence. One of the most prominent is the Seeking Arrangement (SA, 2020a,) website which features 22 million members who take part in what the website calls "mutually beneficial relationships" (para. 2). The website advertises a 4-1 baby-to-daddy ratio across 139 countries, listed as a benefit of being a sugar daddy (SA, 2020a). The transactional nature of sugar relationships is expressed throughout the site. That is, SA markets the sugar lifestyle as being lavish with shopping sprees, expensive dinners, and exotic vacations, all with "no strings attached" (SA, 2020a, para. 8). In 2015, SA reported that, of a sugar baby's total financial compensation, an average of 26% funded tuition expenses, 23% financed rent, and 20% financed textbooks and school supplies (Pardiwalla, 2016). The remaining 31% was allocated to transportation and clothing. Stated another way, nearly three-fourths of total compensation was reportedly used to finance essentials and education (Pardiwalla, 2016). In order to make the

transactional nature of sugaring beneficial for both parties, SA advises sugar babies and sugar daddies to formulate contracts with their counterparts, encouraging the negotiation and re-negotiation of monthly allowances for anything from more time together to “more loving” (SA, 2019b, para. 6).

Existing Empirical Research on Sugaring: South Africa and the United States

This section includes a review of the entirety of existing empirical research regarding the sugar lifestyle in the United States and a snapshot of sugaring research in South Africa. In fact, of the existing research on the sugar lifestyle, a large proportion comes out of South Africa and relates to what are called “blesser” and “blessee” relationships. These relationships resemble sugar relationships, and the terms are often used interchangeably throughout the literature. However, Moodley and Ebrahim (2019) noted nuanced differences between the two, defining sugar relationships as being predicated on age disparities and a greater motivation for sex, whereas bleaser/blessee relationships are solely grounded in a bleaser’s monetary worth. Some researchers point to such relationships as contributing to the spread of HIV and endangering the sexual health of adolescent girls who engage in high-risk behavior (Luke, 2015; Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2001). Hoss and Blokland (2018) investigated sugar relationships in South Africa and found that social comparison was often a factor with a younger population of sugar babies. That is, those who came from impoverished backgrounds or were without parental support reported feeling increased pressure to fund a socially desired lifestyle. Hoss and Blokland (2018) also found that among the high school-aged individuals investigated, a portion of them experienced manipulation, abuse, and forced sexual intercourse, indicating that blesser often have an expectation of constant sexual

complicity from blessees. In the U.S., sugar relationships are often thought to offer excess and luxury; however, Thobejane, Mulaudzi, and Zitha (2017) found that the South African sugar babies they studied sought funding for basic expenses, such as food, clothing, and shelter. This research highlights the specific cultural factors involved in the motivations and resulting experiences of sugar babies in South Africa, in addition to the increased need for research in the U.S.

U.S. research on the sugar lifestyle is scarce. Scull (2019) conducted a series of 48 interviews with women who were experienced in the sugar lifestyle and used scripting theory to examine the structure of those relationships. Scull was interested in understanding how sugar babies related to existing social scripts that frame behavior in sexual situations. Scull identified seven distinct types of sugar relationships. The seven types included: sugar prostitution, compensated dating, compensated companionship, sugar dating, sugar friendships, sugar friendships with benefits, and pragmatic love. To this end, Scull argued against blanket classifications of sugaring as prostitution, although the author noted that the exchange of sex did occur in some sub-types. Scull's findings are significant because they illuminate the complex structure that exists within sugar relationships. In another study, Nayar (2017) used qualitative textual analysis to code more than 5000 online comments of sugar-related blog posts. The author concluded that the sugar lifestyle disrupted traditional systems of dating, positing that although these relationships hinged on reinforced social inequities, they also challenged the perception that commercialized sex is inherently oppressive. Nayar (2017) continued by evaluating the economic and emotional underpinnings of sugaring, placing it between traditional romantic dating and explicit sex work. This duality is also apparent in Cordero's (2015)

research. The author wanted to better understand the social constructs that influenced an individual's perception of agency within sugar relationships. The author interviewed a sample of sugar babies and sugar daddies ($N = 12$) regarding their experiences on the SA site. Similar to Nayar (2017), Cordero concluded that sugar dating upended traditional dating while also conforming to the conventional heteronormative notion of women as seekers of men with financial means. The author additionally determined that although sugar relationships propagated perceptions of modern egalitarian power among the sexes, they still ultimately sit within larger heterosexual norms. DeSoto (2018) performed a content analysis of 50 publicly available sugar daddy profiles and concluded that two divergent themes notably emerged: some sugar daddies desired deep emotional connections with their sugar babies instead of simply harboring sexual motivations, while other sugar daddies desired more mechanical, no-strings-attached sugar relationships. Zimmerman (2015) completed a textual discourse analysis of nearly 750 comments on SA's public blog forum. The author found that the negotiation of expectations was a key factor in differentiating sugar dating from traditional dating and that the relationships generated value in their perceived emotionality and authenticity. The author related this to Bernstein's (2008, Chapter 4, Section 8, para. 5) concept of "bounded authenticity," the buying and selling of authentic relationships. Bernstein (2008) noted the distinctiveness of this transaction when compared to the more traditional representation of prostitution, which includes impersonal street-level exchanges. This research begins to paint a nuanced picture of the sugar lifestyle and its many shades. However, despite preliminary research on the topic, sugar relationships continue to be uncharted within academic literature.

Student Involvement in the Sex Industry

Research on student sex work is still in its infancy, and most of the current knowledge is often circulated out of media coverage (Sanders & Hardy, 2015). Bell (2009), in advocating for sex work, noted that it may be a form of work that is, in fact, ideal for the college student population who may lack both the time and skills to enter into more traditional forms of labor, serving as an intermediary to a longer-term career. Yet, the commercialized sex industry is fraught with stigma, and this weight is compounded for student sex workers who regularly face discrimination and labels of deviancy (Trautner & Collett, 2010). In a conceptual article, Sanders and Hardy (2015) explored the relationship between higher education students and the sex industry in the United Kingdom (UK). Sanders and Hardy (2015) asserted that certain groups of students were “financially fragile” (p. 759) and that their involvement in sex work was often dependent on broader political and economic contexts (i.e., rising unemployment, gender and class dynamics, and education policy). They also remarked on the need for comparative longitudinal data to understand the phenomena further.

Another study situated in Wales, UK, investigated student involvement in the sex industry and found that a multitude of psychosocial factors (i.e., rather than just economic motivations) contributed to the willingness of students to engage in sex work (Roberts et al., 2010). These factors included positive outcome expectations, normative community beliefs, and financial hardships. However, the researchers also observed that their preliminary model lacked exploration of other potentially related factors, such as substance use, mental health, sexual victimization, the role of pleasure, power relations, and more. Both Daly (2017) and Roberts et al. (2010) discuss student sex work as a part

of a recent *mainstreaming* of sexual commerce. Brents and Sanders (2010) described this as a process of economic and social integration that ushers in sex work as an acceptable means of commerce, including a notable shift from working-class involvement to middle class. Bernstein (2008) outlined a similar influx and “whitening” (Chapter 4, Section 8, para. 20) of the sex trade within the middle class, stemming from a lecture from sex worker activist Siobhan Brooks. Brooks described the rise of what they referred to as “sex worker chic” in which white, class-privileged young women were becoming “the new face of sexual labor” (Chapter 4, Section 8, para. 20). These findings highlight a need to further the research and investigate additional factors related to sex work among college students. Furthermore, Sagar et al. (2015) found that, at one university in Wales, staff members’ knowledge of sex work and referral pathways was underdeveloped, sacrificing the level of individualized student support offered at the school. Thus, it is imperative that more institutions take inclusive steps in ensuring student sex workers have the support of the university readily available, further underscoring the need for research that expands higher education professionals’ understanding of this topic.

Student Sugar Babies

College students are a specialized target for the sugar lifestyle. Many sugar websites explicitly market to college students, positioning the sugar lifestyle as a way for students to pay off college loan debt and tuition. Seeking Arrangement specifically caters to this population through a portion of the site nicknamed *Sugar Baby University* that features an electronic ticker counting the ever-increasing national student debt by the second (SA, 2020b). The site also releases annual rankings of colleges with the most sugar babies (SA, 2020b). Asserting that three million students are members of the site

(SA, 2020b), SA claims that sugar babies make an average monthly allowance of \$3,000, allowing them to “pay off tuition in about three months” (SA, 2019a, para. 5). SA has referred to the money gained by student sugar babies as “sugar scholarships” (Motz, 2014, para. 24). In addition, SA is known for offering free membership upgrades to individuals who sign up with a .edu e-mail address (Rosman, 2018). These .edu members are also allowed to send unlimited free messages and granted access to advanced sugar daddy search features (Fairbanks, 2011). It has been reported that the organization employs search engine optimization to target individuals who use the search terms *student loan*, *tuition help*, *college support*, or *help with rent* (Padawer, 2009). The site makes accommodations for students by labeling profiles with the designation of *college sugar baby* (Fairbanks, 2011). SA has claimed that a driving force for students joining the site included word-of-mouth from peers within their school settings (Ross, 2015). The SA founder Brandon Wade anecdotally claimed that sugar daddies are more inclined to help students looking to pay for school versus funding other sorts of activities, citing breast implants as an example (Goldberg, 2013). In addition, the phenomenon of sugaring has also reached the opposite side of the lectern: Algar and Jaegar (2019) reported SA’s claim that thousands of school teachers used the site to supplement their income.

Often away from parental figures for the first time and tasked with daunting life decisions, the prospect of financial independence beckons to many young people (Thobejane, Mulaudzi, & Zitha, 2017). In fact, according to the American Association of University Women (AAUW, 2019), women disproportionately hold more college debt than men, and nearly two-thirds of the outstanding debt in the United States belongs to women. This often results in an unbalanced amount of stress placed on women; one study

found that 65% of women cited money as their biggest stressor, compared to 52% of men (PwC, 2019). The issue is multi-faceted: not only do women typically take on more debt while in school, but due to the post-graduation gender pay gap, they take longer to pay off the debt, often accruing more once out of school (AAUW, 2019). The effects are cumulative, with each degree level and year out of school serving to widen the gap (AAUW, 2019). In particular, women of color are more likely to take on more student debt than average and experience the most difficulty paying off their loans. This, in turn, can interfere with their ability to pay for essential living expenses (AAUW, 2019). One study found that the average White male was able to make significant gains in paying off student debt post-college, whereas the typical Black female's loan balance increased (Demos, 2019).

Reed (2015) aimed to study perceptions of sugaring on U.S. college campuses by employing a quantitative survey of 335 participants who were either students at a Midwest university or members of the general public. They found that sugaring was not widely accepted as a means to earn a living among either sets of populations, likely reflecting an overall lack of awareness of this form of work combined with an existing stigma around sex work in general. In fact, in order to manage the stigma and maintain a positive self-image, some students frame sex work as a transient occupation, with their identity as a student acting as a mediating factor in fielding outside judgement as a sex worker (Trautner & Collett, 2010). There are several factors that contribute to stigma around student sex work. Betzer et al. (2015) issued a questionnaire to students ($N = 4,386$) at various universities in Berlin, Germany evaluating student involvement in sex work. They found that student sex workers reported having more STDs and engaging in

significantly higher rates of substance use than non-sex work students, potentially contributing to continued stigmatization. Reed (2015) noted that sex workers are frequently marginalized based on continued stigmas; the author hypothesized that the term *sugar baby* may be viewed more favorably by society as a signal of empowerment versus victimhood, as opposed to *sex worker*.

Daly (2017) completed a textual analysis of SA's online forum LetsTalkSugar and semi-structured interviews with two Canadian sugar babies in order to shed light on sugaring on Canadian college campuses. The researcher found that student sugar babies were motivated to pay for school expenses such as tuition, textbooks, and loans. Another common theme was comparison to non-sugar work as paying less with larger time commitments. The researchers found that sugar babies were often adamant about distancing themselves from the title of *sex worker*, despite acknowledging the prominent role of sex in sugar relationships. The author speculated this process of oppositional distinction stems from sex work's societal stigma. Zimmerman (2015), in a textual discourse analysis of SA's blogs, found a similar emphasis; that is, those within sugar realm strive to distance themselves from an association with sex work. The author concluded that these attempts served to negatively perpetuate gendered stigmas and inequality, in addition to silencing important discussions around sugar baby safety. More research is essential to fully carve out the experience of a student in the sex industry, specifically as sugar babies, and understand their subsequent experience and marginalization.

Sugar Lifestyle Motivators

The decision-making process behind student involvement in the sugar lifestyle is largely under-researched (Scull, 2019). However, some scholars have attempted to better understand such motivating factors in these types of age- and resource-disparate relationships. One of the most foundational evolutionary theories in existence surrounds the belief that women have evolved to barter their fertility for fidelity in goods and services, or, more directly, instinctively sought out a man's wealth, protection, and status in exchange for erotic pleasure (Ryan & Jethá, 2012). Feminist scholars often rebut evolutionary psychologists for the tendency to essentialize women, or denote phenomena as biologically determined. They argue that the act overlooks sociocultural and environmental factors and justifies discrimination and prejudice (Davis, 2020). One argument is that the origins of the sugar baby culture exist within a larger societal script of fanaticized relationships in which women are subservient to men (Chateauvert, 2014). For instance, Zimmerman (2015) pointed out that sugar relationships are often romanticized, positioning sugar daddies as similar to the "white knights" (p. 11) of fairy tales. Another example is within the *Dominant Daddy/little girl* (DD/lg) kink community in which the infantilization of women is at the heart of the kink (Ansara, 2019). Although, worthy of note is that less heteronormative substitutions exist, challenging the daddy/girl binary (Ansara, 2019). The subordination of women often shows up in *bondage-discipline, sadism-masochism, domination-submission* (BDSM) relationships: Wismeijer and Assen (2013) found that a majority of men typically assume the dominant role and women the submissive one. Whether this is a reflection of society's patriarchal values or biological inclinations remains to be seen and is hotly debated among scholars

(Cross & Matheson, 2006; David, 2020). Of note, Cross and Matheson (2006) sought to orient these types of kinks within feminist discourse, noting enthusiasts of the BDSM lifestyle tend to embrace tenets of gender equality and found no disproportionate adoption of overly traditional gender roles.

Seeking Arrangement (SA, 2020e) explains the motivation to be involved in the sugar lifestyle as an “expression of preference” (para. 7), a predisposition both learned and evolutionary, founded in the sociological notion of *hypergamy*. Hypergamy is the concept of mate selection based on disparities across dimensions such as education and socioeconomic status (Qian, 2017). SA’s perspective outlines two psychosexual forces: female desire for economically successful men and male valuation of female physical attractiveness (SA, 2020e). Cordero (2015) summarized SA’s claims as being built on heteronormative social stereotypes that often inherently embody inequality between men and women. Interestingly, the professed men’s rights movement and media op-eds have embraced and propagated a notion of hypergamous women as fickle and abandoning, fueling a foundational principle of this movement that declares women have flipped the script on inequality and ascended into a privileged class at the expense of men (Taranto, 2013; Futrelle, 2019). Qian (2017) found that over nearly a twenty-year period in the U.S., educational hypergamy had reversed among men versus women, resulting in women often marrying “down” (p. 328) in terms of education level as opposed to partnering with those who have higher levels of education. Although, the author also revealed that the tendency for women to partner with those of a higher income level persisted over the last two decades, even when normalizing for gender differences in income. Qian (2017) therefore concluded that although “mate selection that embodies

male dominance” (p. 331) is much less entrenched than in previous decades, the notion has persisted. Pew Research Center (2017) put forth data that reflects a similar cultural perception. Namely, Americans see the role of financial provider as primarily that which belongs to a man, even as women’s earnings grow. Other literature empirically refutes this binary. McClintock (2014) studied married, co-habiting, and dating couples ($N = 1,507$) and found limited evidence in these relationships of a gendered exchange between a woman’s beauty for a man’s socioeconomic status. Additionally, Zentner and Mitura (2012) investigated the gendered differences of mate selection and desirability across individuals ($N = 12,130$) in countries with increasing gender parity. These authors specifically examined the presumed evolutionary paradigm of reproductive success that hinges upon a man’s wealth/access to resources and a female’s young age/fertility. Their conclusion was that differences in mate preferences across gender were negatively correlated with a nation’s Gender Gap Index ranking (i.e., a measure of gender equality); thus, traditional mate preferences leveled off as equality among sexes increased. Schmitt (2012) criticized these results, noting that Zentner and Mitura (2012) committed ecological fallacy in their study’s groupings of mate preferences and called attention to varying contexts which may be more accurately connected to gendered differences in mate preferences (e.g., environmental adaptations, fertility patterns, sociocultural pressures, etc.). The relationship between sugaring and hypergamy has yet to be defined within the academic research.

Other more acute and less perfunctory motivators may exist for involvement in the sugar lifestyle. Student sex workers in Germany were found to receive significantly less financial support from their families than other students (Betzer et al., 2015). In the

same study, participants indicated a stronger desire to participate in sex work as the perceived financial opportunity of sex work increased. In Daly's (2017) investigation of sugar babies on Canadian college campuses, the researcher concluded that the top sugar baby motivator was money. Other motivating factors include flexibility, shorter working hours, higher wages, and increased agency. These important economic drivers reverberate throughout other literature discussing women entering into the sex work industry at large. Roberts et al. (2010) notably drew a distinct line between student sex work and shifts in the economic costs of attending university and accruing loan debt. They pointed to the rising costs of tuition, increasing debt, and low-paid work as major contributors to the student supply route into sex work, often from privileged socioeconomic positions. Brent and Sanders (2010) found similar "push factors" (p. 56) related to the potential for financial gain and a lack of well-paying jobs.

Additionally, although a prevailing theory is that sex workers are often victims of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), some scholars have disputed this hypothesis. Certain researchers have found few differences in the prevalence of CSA in sex workers compared to the general population (Griffith et al., 2013). Research on the topic remains limited and conflicting; Abramovich (2005) called into question the methodological soundness of conclusions about sex workers and CSA. The author noted several issues to consider within current studies on the topic: the occurrence of overlooked risk factors (e.g., family environment, characteristics of the abuse, etc.) and the lack of overall diversity in sampling and sex work types (e.g., limited to street sex workers and certain cultural groups). Abramovich (2005) further concluded that these considerations make any claim of a causal relationship between the presence of CSA and involvement in sex

work questionable. Similar to this topic, sex work and explanations around one's involvement are often embroiled in public and personal stigma. Below is an exploration of these beliefs systems, often placed on a polarized continuum between exploitation versus empowerment.

Sex Work as Empowerment

The broad-reaching explanations for participation in sugaring often fall on a continuum between empowerment and exploitation. Female sex work conflictly sits among contemporary feminist discourse. Feminism, by definition, stands for the advocacy and equality of women (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), although the term has rife political associations beyond this simplified definition and oftentimes follows a partisan divide (Pew Research Center, 2020a). Therefore, deciding who owns the privilege of disentangling feminine empowerment from female oppression is commonly overrun with bias and partiality. Fem Magazine names this divide in feminist schools of thought as one that focuses on intersectionality rather than sex worker exclusionary radical feminism (SWERF; Miano, 2017). SWERF is characterized as discriminatory towards sex workers, whereas the intersectionality approach focuses on inclusion and equality. Long-held values often dictate that sex should not be commodified and that intimacy is sacred and private (Berg, 2014). However, feminist supporters of sex work often cite the enjoyment and empowerment derived from retaining the right to control one's own sexuality (Bell, 2009). Concordant to this notion, the perceived feminine power gained as a result of sugar relationships has been documented in the literature by Cordero (2015), who found that the power a sugar baby wields is relational in nature rather than structural (i.e., within the relationship itself versus within the cultural system at large). In addition,

Wamoyi et al. (2011) found that Tanzanian women who engaged in transactional sex found autonomy in the power to exploit their own sexuality, resulting in a feeling of pride and sense of value. Hawkins et al. (2008) compounded this idea by finding that Mozambique women in age-disparate relationships perceived themselves as “empowered entrepreneurs” (p. 179) with high self-esteem, despite an increased risk of HIV contraction. Ditmore et al. (2013) warned against using language such as “trafficking” that can be prejudiced, moralistic, and not fully encompassing of the true experience of women in the sex industry. Seeking Arrangement (SA) founder Brandon Wade has described sugar relationships as empowering for both sides and a continuation of the “Disney dream” to be a princess where “every independent princess still needs to find a prince” (CNN, 2014, 6:58). Despite the fact that some identify with a sense of agency and empowerment stemming from sex work, this population is often viewed as victims of cultural subjugation, circumstance, and exploitation (Reed, 2015).

Sex Work as Exploitation

Another framework for understanding sex work is through the lens of exploitation. First, however, it is vital to understand the cultural context in which sex work happens. For instance, Hunter (2002) reported on the heavy influence of masculine discourse in South African culture, which fueled sugar-like relationships between young women and older men and resulted in gendered power structures and expectations. Zimmerman (2015) echoed the existence of gendered power dynamics in sugar relationships in the U.S. and found that SA users often play a part in preserving dominant gender norms. Cordero (2015), in looking at sugar baby and sugar daddy relationships, concluded that despite the active choice to participate and negotiate terms, sugar babies

continue to “operate within the constructs of the patriarchal institution and system of oppression” (p. 97), negotiating for power within heteronormative and masculine power structures. Often the sugar lifestyle is framed as being predicated on these patriarchal structures and its inequity.

In favor of an argument around exploitation, South African scholars have noted the ongoing perils of sexual trauma and abuse within sugar relationships that risk long-term mental health effects for those involved. In fact, Hoss and Blokland (2018) found that one in five high school-aged sugar babies in their South African study met criteria for PTSD, with more than half reporting mild to severe depressive symptoms. In addition, UNICEF has had an active presence in countries in which sugar relationships are prominent, claiming that the proliferation mainly stems from high poverty rates and has become a threat to public health in some African countries due to its association with rising HIV diagnoses (UNICEF, 2004). Some nations have run public service announcements (e.g., public billboards in Uganda and a UNICEF animated film and children’s book) to discourage young females from getting involved with sugar daddies (UNICEF, 2000; UNICEF, 2004; U.S. Department of State, 2008).

However, in the U.S., the lack of empirical research makes it challenging to draw conclusions regarding exploitation in sugar relationships. Although, prevailing theories proliferate through media coverage. For instance, Motz (2014) classified SA’s representation of the sugar lifestyle as intentionally euphemistic and asserted that the site indiscreetly targeted financially vulnerable populations. An author in the *Yale Daily News* reported, “It’s taken women years to claim a place in higher education, yet today, some still have to subject themselves to this kind of submission in order to stay” (Guarco.

2017, para. 41). Others argue that when sugar relationships commodify emotional and physical companionship, they also objectify the sugar baby, putting her at risk for negative health effects (Noh, 2018). A *New York Times* article told the stories of several sugar babies who were exploited out of sex without being paid by one scamming sugar daddy (Rosman, 2018). An important caveat to note is that media often insert moral interpretations of the lifestyle into their coverage, affecting public discourse and overall perceptions of the subject. In reality, the lack of peer-reviewed research on this topic makes it challenging to detail essentialized characteristics of the lifestyle. Scull (2019) added that sugaring is often diminished to “sensationalistic portrayals that frame women as desperate, broke, sexual deviants” (p. 19).

Some nonprofit organizations draw a hard line in their stance on sugaring. The National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCSE) denounced the sugar lifestyle for weaponizing student debt to entice college students into participation (Arenson, 2020), citing the recent murder of a Utah student with an online sugar profile as a warning. The NCSE classifies sugaring as sexual exploitation and trafficking, facilitating email campaigns that petition various brands to stop running advertising on SA’s website and request that Google Play remove SA’s application (NCSE, 2020). The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women takes a similar stance against pro-sex work institutions, including those promoting sugaring (CATW, n.d.). In addition to the range of discourse that exists surrounding the sex industry, sex work and the sugar lifestyle also interplay among a larger context of social, ethical, and legal considerations that require examination.

Social, Ethical, and Legal Considerations

In this section, the author explores the context within which sugaring research exists, including the 2020 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. In addition, the author outlines some of the legal implications related to sugaring, often colloquially compared to prostitution. Included is also an examination of website liability and the corresponding laws that contribute to the current regulatory environment around the sex work industry, particularly how it manifests online. The author also briefly reviewed sex work decriminalization and legalization before orienting sugaring within the larger social context of the women's rights movement. Lastly, goals of this thesis and the research question were stated.

Sex Work During a Pandemic

Worthy of note is that this research study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, which caused widespread fear, worldwide economic crisis, and a swift and heavy death toll. Women, in particular women of color and women between the ages of 20 and 24, were especially economically hard hit (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). A disproportionate number of women left the workforce accounting for nearly 80% of the decline in September 2020, four times more than men (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). The reasons for the drop were numerous and still require more research; potential causes relate to the burden of childcare and homeschooling caused by stay-at-home orders, women holding more jobs that require in-person attendance versus remote (i.e., many minimum and lower-wage jobs), and lost jobs in female-dominated industries (Ewing-Nelson, 2020; Taub, 2020; Hinchliffe, 2020). This impact to women exacerbated the already existent gender wage gap (Alon et al., 2020). In addition, the college-aged

population aged 18-23 years old was particularly affected by the pandemic, with nearly half within this sect reporting job loss or pay cuts within their household following the outbreak (Pew Research Center, 2020b). The effects of the pandemic will likely change educational and employment outlooks for years to come.

The pandemic backdrop is also significant because of its impact to the sugar baby landscape and overall sex work industry. Similar to any other form of work, sex work participation often fluctuates in response to the current economy (Brents & Sanders, 2010). As in-person interactions became dangerous during the pandemic, the way in which sex work was facilitated transformed in formats that are yet to be researched. Some of what is known reflects the relationship between technology and sex work. Sex work has long seen a migration online as digital platforms continue to revolutionize human connection and sexual commerce (Jones, 2015). COVID-19 has contributed to this evolution; the economic forces surrounding the pandemic coupled with the rise in cultural popularity of sites like OnlyFans, a subscription-based photo and video site known for individualized pornography accounts, made sex work an option for some who had not participated previously (Steadman, 2020). In fact, many sites of this nature began targeting laid off workers in need of supplemental income with OnlyFans reporting 60,000 new sign-ups in the first month of the pandemic (Zoledziowski, 2020). In addition to sex work becoming a more accessible and viable revenue stream for individuals during the pandemic, those focused on in-person sex work saw their work drastically cut (Felton, 2020). This drove many individuals, often disenfranchised and ineligible for unemployment, to consider virtual exchanges instead (Felton, 2020). For sugar babies, media has covered stories about both the decline in sugaring opportunities (López, 2020)

and an increase in prevalence of sugaring during the lockdowns, the latter stemming from a public relations talking point from Seeking Arrangement (SA) claiming “record-breaking numbers” during the pandemic (Hayes, 2020, para. 4). Some news outlets are also reporting an increase in sugar daddy scams (i.e., advance fee scams) during the pandemic (Rissman, 2020). Others reported an increase in what sugar daddies are willing to pay for the simplicity of human touch and noted the increase of online dating overall (Kaplan, 2020; Meisenzahl, 2020). The full impact of the pandemic on sugaring is yet to be seen.

Legal and Ethical Considerations

Koppel (2011) explained that the sugaring practice typically falls into a legal gray area. The author stated that without an immediate and apparent exchange of sex for money, sugaring does not directly qualify as prostitution. Accordingly, Seeking Arrangement (SA) frequently asserts the legality of sugaring and its distinction from prostitution, citing a lengthy terms of service which prohibit the exchange. However, the site does openly promote an exchange of “physical companionship” between sugar daddy and baby (SA, 2019c, para. 3). Motyl (2013) noted that sugaring websites are largely without liability, since the practice of exchange relates to the conduct of its users, not the website itself. Due to this fact and others, some women have not been able to seek restitution within a legal capacity. One former sugar baby filed assault charges on her sugar daddy, though these charges were dismissed due to her “demeanor” (p. 3) in court and because she chose not to report the assault initially (*Kiani v. Huha*, 2018). Alex Page (2017), a licensed sex worker in Nevada, expressed warnings to sugar babies on the risks of the lifestyle in her blog. After being raped by a man she met on a sugar dating website,

she sought to tell her story and call attention to what she called an important and dangerous distinction between legal prostitution and sugaring. Because the sugar lifestyle falls within an unregulated industry without standards of practice or protection for women involved, the likelihood of sexual abuse increases and the viability of recourse for those abused decreases (Page, 2017).

With the intention of curbing sex trafficking, the U.S. Congress recently challenged formerly permissive internet legislation making website owners even more wary of sex work exchanges that happen online. In April 2018, Congress passed H.R. 1865, titled Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, in addition to the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (together known as the FOSTA-SESTA bill). These bills were intended to specifically combat trafficking in online spaces, limit sex work advertising online, and hold websites accountable for sex work facilitated on their platforms. In enforcing this law, some reports have claimed that undercover police monitor exchanges that happen on SA (Nagarajan & Zhu 2019). Many critics have said that the law disadvantages sex workers, preventing them from having a safe place to screen clients and disperse warnings to others about dangerous clients (Romano, 2018). These critics also argued that the laws drove sex workers offline, to the streets, where protections are sparse. These sex work advocates often note a key distinction between *consensual* sex work and *involuntary* sex trafficking. Further, many promote full decriminalization, which is distinct from legalization (Sex Workers Outreach Project [SWOP] Behind Bars, 2019). The former represents the removal of criminal penalties that apply to sex work, while the latter implies broader regulation and licensing. Fully

illuminating the experiences of sex workers, including those in the sugar lifestyle, has broad implications for future lawmaking and regulation.

The #MeToo and Time's Up movements have collectively opened the public's eyes to stories of sexual harassment, assault, and abuse that heretofore hid in the shadows and haunted survivors who had few avenues for help and healing (North, 2019). The movement challenged a culture of silence and secrecy perpetuated by fear of retribution and not being believed. These movements have illuminated the inherent power differential that often exists within sexual relationships and have further questioned the nature of coercion and consent. Yet, feminist discourse demands that members of society make a commitment to respect the self-identification and autonomy of sex workers (Berg, 2014). Many questions continue to surround the world of sugaring, including power differentials inherent in the work, the similarity and dissimilarity to other forms of sex work, and the debated morality of monetizing companionship. To better understand sugaring and the experiences of sugar babies, the researcher of this study asked the question, "What are the lived experiences of college sugar babies?" The researcher aimed to describe and understand the narrative of this population in order to add to the limited literature on sugar relationships in the U.S. and across the globe.

III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the present study was to better understand the experiences of female college sugar babies who participated in the sugar lifestyle. The researcher hoped to illuminate the salience of these experiences and uncover commonalities among them. To answer the research question, the researcher employed Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology. CQR was selected because of its fit for exploring topics that have little empirical understanding and for which there are no measures in existence (Hill, 2012). In terms of philosophical stance, CQR may be described as a combination of post-positivist and constructivist investigation (Hill, 2012). CQR's inductive underpinnings allow for themes to emerge from the data itself, compared to apriori or deductive analysis which may impose known principles on collected data (Hill, 2012). The sugar lifestyle is distinct from other forms of sex work; therefore, the researcher aimed to distinguish its unique contextual factors by using this inferential approach. Further, the rigorous consensus process involved in CQR allowed the researcher to minimize individual biases that may have affected the interpretation of the data (Hill, 2012). The in-depth approach inherent to CQR is particularly useful when exploring individuals' "inner" (Hill, 2012, p. 14) events that are not readily observable. Given that little is known about the lived experiences of students who engage in the sugar lifestyle, this methodology was an appropriate fit. In addition, the idiographic approach of CQR allowed the researcher to describe and interpret the complex contextual data among the college-aged sugaring population, setting the stage for later nomothetic research on the topic.

The researcher employed a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed for flexibility on the part of the interviewer, specifically for the purpose of exploring topics of particular importance or probing for more individualized information. The constructivist approach of CQR rests on the interactive relationship between interviewer and interviewee and its ability to further participant disclosure and substantiate data validity (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Hill (2012) noted the responsibility of the interviewer to establish this essential, collaborative alliance in order to contribute to the richness of collected data. Furthermore, the emic perspective allows for the formation of a cultural context from which to ground the data (Hill, 2012). The researcher in this study also strove to reduce any perceived inequality between researcher and participant, leveling the potential hierarchy by ensuring a substantive informed consent process, avoiding authoritarian directives, and encouraging autonomous response and participation. Doing so is particularly important when operating from a feminist lens. The researcher made efforts to acknowledge the expansive contexts that participant stories exist within, but ultimately endeavored to rely on spoken words and meanings. In order to instill methodological rigor, the researcher and researcher team of this study followed an extensive bracketing process to control for researcher bias and extremes of subjectivity. Bracketing included a journaling process that explored the visceral sensations, associated cognitions, and personal judgements or expectations that emerged with a set of words and phrases relevant to the research, including phrases as simple as “sex work” and as implicative as “equality/abuse/patriarchy in sex work.”

Researchers

The primary research team included three individuals: two female non-Hispanic White individuals (a graduate student and assistant professor) and one Hispanic/Latinx assistant professor. The auditors included two male non-Hispanic White individuals, a department chair/professor and an assistant professor. Prior to the study, the researchers bracketed their biases and expectations through the process explained above. Some members of the research team expressed questioning related to whether sex workers may have disproportionate histories of sexual trauma compared to the general population, whereas others voiced opposition to this notion. The researchers also explored sex work-exclusionary feminism and the spectrum of voluntary versus involuntary sex work. The researchers continually engaged in bracketing through each major stage of data collection and analysis: interviewing, coding, and completion. Given the varying positions of power within the team, the researchers were conscious of aiming to create egalitarian consensus throughout the process.

Participants

Ten participants were recruited who ranged in age from 20-64 years ($Mdn = 28.1$, $SD = 12.95$). Participants were current ($n = 6$) and former ($n = 4$) sugar babies who participated in the sugar lifestyle while enrolled in college. Most participants identified as cisgender females, although one participant identified as gender fluid. Despite the many differences in sexual experience and expression across gender, the original targeted sample aimed to reflect the most common sugar daddy/baby pairing (male/female) and was the primary focus of the study, despite one participant reporting having had a sugar mama at one time. Five participants identified as non-Hispanic White or Euro-American,

two as East Asian, one as Southeast Asian, one as Hispanic/Latinx, and one as Middle Eastern. A majority of participants stated that they entered the lifestyle at age 20 or younger ($n = 7$). Participants reported varying monthly allowances ranging from \$60-\$2,500 and an average pay-per-meet of \$350. At the time of this study, participants identifying as current sugar babies reported an average of 4 years and 6 months (54 months; $SD = 49.23$) active in the lifestyle. Participants identifying as former sugar babies reported an average of 1 year and 5 months (17 months; $SD = 27.36$) active in the lifestyle. Participants reported an average length of sugar relationships of 7 months ($SD = 6.39$). Participants also reported having an average of 3.7 sugar daddies ($SD = 2.83$) during their time as sugar babies. Half of the participants stated they came from a middle-class upbringing ($n = 5$), while others reported coming from lower ($n = 1$), lower-middle ($n = 2$), and upper-class ($n = 2$) upbringings. Some participants ($n = 4$) reported working part-time in addition to sugaring, while others reporting working full-time ($n = 3$). Half of the individuals ($n = 5$) had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, while some obtained graduate degrees ($n = 3$). There is a clear delineation in current relationship status between the participants who identify as current versus former sugar babies. Those still active ($n = 6$) all reported not currently dating (both looking and not looking), while those out of the lifestyle reported being in present monogamous relationships. All individuals included the words "cash" or "money" when briefly describing their reason for entering the sugar lifestyle. Two participants stood out among the group as outliers. One participant sugared exclusively online (i.e., avoiding all in-person sugaring), while the other was a sugar baby in the late 70s/early 80s. These experiences tended to skew more negative and that is noted among the results.

Procedures & Recruitment

The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher's university. Homogeneity of the sample is an important aspect of CQR in order to facilitate effective comparisons and reduce variability across the sample (Hill, 2012). Therefore, the researcher used purposive sampling procedures to reflect the common, yet unique, experience of college-aged sugar babies. Snowball sampling was also employed as a method of recruitment, a common procedure used to access a sample that is more difficult to reach because of stigma and for ethical and legal reasons (Wahab & Sloan, 2004). The sugar baby culture has a high level of secrecy and anonymity for these same reasons (Ross, 2015); thus, snowball sampling allowed for better access to participants through word-of-mouth recruitment. Inclusion and exclusion criteria limited the sample to cisgender females with cisgender male sugar daddies who sugared from the ages of 18-30 while enrolled in college. We stipulated that participants be at least 18 at the time they began sugaring. Exclusion criteria was defined as individuals who participated in fetishized sugar relationships. This was deemed to be a specialized type of sexual relationship that might have biased the data. Among the current data set, fetishized relationships arose as a theme, indicating to the researcher that a clear delineation between fetishes and sugaring is often not possible. Although the research team originally sought to exclude individuals who participated in other forms of sex work (e.g., pornography, prostitution, stripping, or web camming), they decided against doing so in order to avoid unnecessarily narrowing the sampling. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, restricting the population to those that exclusively sugared would have been premature before developing a holistic understanding of overlapping sex work.

The researcher recruited participants on social media forums, specifically Facebook. Recruitment information was posted in three open groups that existed for the following, respectively: sugar babies and daddies, college students, and sex workers. In order to increase the geographic range of this research and due to COVID-19 restrictions, the researcher sought video-facilitated interviews. Participants had to be at least 18 years of age and willing to discuss their experience as a sugar baby. The first three participants were recruited with no offer of compensation. After a stall in response, compensation of \$50 per person was offered in order to increase the success rate of recruitment. The first three participants were retroactively paid for their involvement in the study. Prior to the beginning of the study, individuals signed an informed consent outlining the risks and benefits of the study, approved by the researcher's IRB.

Data Collection & Analysis

The researcher used an open-ended semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A). In addition, participants filled out a demographic survey electronically prior to the first interview that included age, gender, race/ethnicity, and preliminary information regarding their interaction with the sugar lifestyle. Prior to interviewing participants, the researcher held mock interviews to assess for any spoken bias in the questioning. Two pilot interviews were then completed with two participants in order to assess the need for clarifications, additions, and/or changes to the protocol. Following this assessment, no changes were made to the protocol. The primary interviewer was trained by her thesis committee members on how to avoid leading questions and the insertion of bias. All interviews took place with video conferencing in light of COVID-19 restrictions. This expanded the geographic reach of the research, although all participants

were located in the United States. Interviews were recorded and stored according to IRB protocol.

A copy of the interview protocol was provided to participants ahead of each interview so that they had adequate time to contemplate responses related to the past. Questions that risked generating politically correct responses, or for which an immediate response was desired, were not included in the protocol sent ahead of time. Despite criticism related to allowing participants to prepare for the interview (Hill, 2012), the researcher of this study made the important effort of ensuring participants were able to make a fully informed decision to participate prior to the interview process. Because of the potential emotionality of the questions and subsequent response, in addition to the need for self-reflection, allowing participants to adequately prepare for the interviews was determined to be an ethical mandate (Hill, 2012). The distinction between pre-provided questions versus not is indicated among the questions in the protocol. Participants were free to withdraw at any time with no penalization.

The first interview included three parts (i.e., rapport building, interview, and debrief) and lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. The researcher began each interview with an introductory statement that was meant to build rapport and familiarize participants with the interview process and goals of the research. This portion also allowed participants to ask anticipatory questions before the interviewing started. In the next part of the protocol, the researcher facilitated specific interview questions. The open-ended questions allowed the researcher to use unscripted probes that were customized to each participant's story. The researcher endeavored to avoid invasive or exploitative lines of questioning and was sensitive to broaching topics of vulnerability. All participants had the option to decline

response to questioning or to stop participation at any time. Of note, the primary researcher conducting the interviews had training in the basic skills of a counselor, including empathic listening and the use of reflective statements. In the final portion of the protocol, the researcher facilitated decompression, offered broader reflection, and provided referrals to community counseling resources. After 3-5 weeks, the researcher initiated the second interview with the participants. This interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was intended to capture further context relevant to participants' narratives, allowing for clarification on or expansion into previous topics or topics not included in the first interview due to lack of time or unfamiliarity with the interviewer. A transcript of the first interview was provided to the participants for review prior to the second interview. Two participants opted out or did not respond to requests for a second interview.

Data Analysis Process

The research team followed CQR procedures for data analysis (Hill, 2012). The main researcher first completed a thorough transcription process, followed by the creation of domain lists via an inductive approach that allows themes to arise from the data itself. These domains, "discrete and nonoverlapping" (Hill, 2012, p. 105), are representative of the major topic areas evident in participant language. The domaining initially took place on the first three transcripts and was subsequently applied to all. The domain list began to stabilize after five or six transcripts, a hopeful indicator of theoretical saturation (Hill, 2012). The main researcher assigned each block of interview data to a domain. Once the interview data was segmented into domains, the researchers developed core ideas with the purpose of summarizing participant statements into shorter narratives. The coring

process was predominantly completed for the first three transcripts. The team veered from the traditional CQR process by largely focusing on domaining and categorizing the rest of the transcripts (versus coring) due to the ease with which the data emerged exclusive of coring. The domaining and coring process for the first three transcripts included rigorous consensus-building among the researchers. At this point, the researchers continued the cross-analysis process which included identifying themes common across cases. This process entailed the researchers clustering common concepts together within a domain in order to develop categories and subcategories. Any piece of data that did not fit under a developed category was placed in the Miscellaneous Code category. The researchers also made note if any data was double and, sparingly, triple coded. Consensus is foundational to CQR, grounded on the premise that “a truer representation of the participants’ meaning” (Hill, 2012, p. 180) is built from the compounded perspectives of the researching team. In this spirit, the researchers invited critical feedback throughout the analysis process in order to enrich the validity of the findings and avoid succumbing to groupthink. This process also involved the researchers continually revisiting the data to ensure the relevancy and accuracy of developed domains, categories, and subcategories. Of note, whenever changes were made to the domains, categories, or subcategories, previously coded data was re-coded. At each major step (i.e., creation of domains, core ideas, and cross-analysis), two auditors reviewed the core team’s results and provided feedback. Upon completion of data analysis, another round of member checking was completed by sharing with participants a list of the domains, categories, and subcategories, plus their frequency (see Table 1), for awareness and feedback. No feedback or requests for changes were shared from participants.

IV. RESULTS

The researcher of this study sought to investigate the under-researched experiences of college sugar babies, using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR). Concordant with CQR process, cases were coded with one of the following designations: general, typical, variant, and rare. These designations were assigned as follows: general: 9-10 cases; typical: 5-8 cases; variant: 2-4 cases; rare: 1 case. Important to note is that due to the small sample size, differences between these designations were low, a reason to be cautious of generalizability. Although often removed from CQR studies at the risk of overinterpreting anomalies (Hill, 2012), the researcher retained certain rare and variant case categories if notable. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, these rare cases may provide a nuanced look into the lifestyle, providing a foundation for future researchers to investigate.

Below is an overview of the nine coded domains, including the categories and subcategories within each domain. These listings are also provided in Table 1, including the total number of cases and frequency designation. The domains included: (a) process and considerations of the lifestyle, (b) benefits of the lifestyle, (c) sugar daddy characteristics, (d) self-perception and identity, (e) motivation/influence to participate in the lifestyle, (f) miscellaneous code (ancillary information not fitting for other categories), (g) sex and intimacy involved in the lifestyle, (h) negative effects of the lifestyle, and (i) power dynamics involved in the lifestyle. There were also portions of transcribed data that were irrelevant to the research question and coded as “No Code.” These portions were not included in the corresponding table.

Process and Considerations of the Lifestyle

One of the largest domains included participants describing the processes involved with participation in the lifestyle. These included sought precautions, shared activities, and the negotiation process – the ins and outs and how-to's of sugaring. The categories included (a) negotiation/payment, (b) privacy protection, (c) dating activities, (d) emotional labor, (e) comparison to non-sugar dating (f) vetting, (g) secrecy, (h) safety, (i) peer support network, (j) profiles build on specific relationship conditions, (k) setting boundaries/non-negotiables, (l) alcohol/drugs, and (m) exclusively online. Due to the large scope of this domain, unless notable, only typical and general categories and subcategories were outlined. See Table 1 for variant and rare cases.

Negotiation/Payment

This general category comprised discussion of negotiation and payment within sugar relationships. The subcategories are as follows: (a) unfamiliar process – the oddity of pricing human companionship, (b) sugar daddy-led, (c) sugar baby-led, (d) general process of negotiation/payment, (e) pay-per-meet, and (f) price setting. Only typical subcategories were covered below.

Unfamiliar Process – The Oddity of Pricing Human Companionship. This subcategory included seven cases in which participants detailed the unfamiliar, and often uncomfortable, process of putting a price on their time and companionship. A sugar baby expanded, “It is nerve wracking... the approach where you're not saying here's my price, right? But here's what I expect from you and here's what I'm willing to offer, without it being transactional is a hard thing.” In explaining how the exchange of money can be often awkward, one sugar baby said, “He gave it to me under the table like your

grandparents sneaking you money. He was like, ‘This is always the weird part.’” Several expressed initial guilt in accepting money when a friendship existed in their relationships: “I do genuinely feel like they're my friends. It’s kind of difficult once I cross that line though, because they send me money to converse with me, and so sometimes I do feel like, I would do it for free.” Another expressed a similar dilemma:

It is weird to talk about, to straight up say, like, ‘Oh, I'm just in this for money.’

Because that was my first initial intention, but I actually do enjoy spending time with him because it's like spending time with a friend.

Sugar Daddy-Led. On the other hand, seven cases outlined the ways in which sugar daddies took the lead in pricing and negotiations. Several participants described sugar daddies inquiring as to their needs and basing their sums on that. For instance, one sugar baby said, “He’ll just ask me like, ‘What’s up this week?’ Like, ‘What do you need? Grocery shopping? An event?’” Others said their sugar daddies were more forthright about the negotiations. One participant expanded, “He was like, ‘Look – if everything, we hit it off, everything's good, it's five hundred dollars. If there's chemistry. If there's no chemistry, for your time, I'll give you three.’”

Sugar Baby-Led. Five cases involved participants illustrating the ways in which they led the negotiations with sugar daddies. Many felt comfortable approaching the process with confidence, while others were hesitant. One sugar baby determined, “I think people often view it as the sugar daddy’s job to start. And while I would love that, so I didn't have to do that, I haven't found that that's really reliable.” Another echoed, “I didn't mind asserting myself and saying, ‘No, that's not going to work. I'd need X amount of dollars.’” One sugar baby expressed reticence in negotiating and stated, “You have to be

upfront and I'm not super upfront person, so honestly, it was hard having that conversation... We mostly texted over it and that was facilitated by my roommate.”

Another sugar baby participant who struggled with in-person negotiations resolved to do it over the app: “I realized that me being good at numbers and talking about money is never going to be something I'm good at... So, I realized it was easy for me to do it over the screen.”

Privacy Protection

Nearly all of the sugar baby participants outlined precautions sought for protecting their privacy. Many mentioned using pseudonyms and changing their phone numbers or any other identifying information. One participant did not buy the privacy waivers provided by SA and defined the looming threat: “I mean, people have hacked into the government. I'm sure they can hack into Seeking Arrangements if they really wanted to.” The sugar baby participants noted many different approaches to protecting their privacy. While some used nondescript photos that could not be linked back to their true identity (notably through reverse Google image searches), others used photos that already existed online so as to have an excuse if their profile was found (specifically a claim that their images were stolen and used without permission) in order to save their reputation.

Dating Activities

Nine cases made up this general category in which participants chronicled the act of dating sugar daddies. Dining, dancing, and courting-like behavior were plentiful. The sugar baby participants mentioned: “Italian dinners,” “boomer musicals,” “picnics,” “the

nicest hotels,” talks with sugar daddies that “lasted for three hours,” “watching movies,” and “getting margaritas.”

Emotional Labor

This category outlined the various ways in which sugar baby participants described outputting emotional labor in their sugar relationships. The subcategories involved (a) general emotional labor, (b) companionship, (c) relational skill building, and (d) social justice education. Only two typical subcategories are outlined below.

General Emotional Labor. This typical category included six cases about the general emotional labor exerted in sugar relationships. One sugar baby reported, “It took it out of me, like I’m an extrovert, but I felt like an introvert when I would hang out with him.” She continued to explain that it was tough to hold conversations with her sugar daddy and resolved, “I felt like that was a lot of emotional labor that I was putting in. And so, I wanted to be compensated for that... [it] didn’t feel quite worth it by the end of it.” Another remarked, “There have been times where it gets mentally draining and exhausting.” One sugar baby participant similarly depicted, “It’s just an emotional toll because I was trying to pretend to be this person that I wasn’t... you’re trying to be the best version of yourself, but also kind of sugar coat things.” She continued, “It was another job. I would literally Snapchat my friends and be like, ‘Leaving work. Going to clock in at [sugar daddy’s] house.’ Because it was work to me. You had to put in 110% at all times.”

Companionship. Five cases made up this typical category in which participants categorized the work put in to facilitate companionship and the level of closeness often built with sugar daddies. One participant recounted, “They’ve told me things they’ve

never told anyone. Because there's no judgment." Another plainly stated, "With sugaring... there is more of an emotional labor, and that is also part of what you're being compensated for. It's the companionship." A participant reflected on the companionship built: "I do feel like we really kind of bonded and almost became like friends."

Comparison to Non-Sugar Dating

This typical category included eight cases that discussed how sugar dating compared to non-sugar dating. The subcategories included (a) more authentic/clearer expectations, (b) decline in non-sugar dating, (c) general differences, (d) less authentic, and (e) deception in relationships. Only one typical subcategory was outlined below, the rest classifying as variant.

More Authentic/Clearer Expectations. A typical subcategory, five cases expressed how sugar dating is more authentic and facilitates clearer expectations than that of non-sugar dating. One participant outlined, "You're not emotionally indebted to one another. And the expectations are clear and managed more so than they would be in a traditional dating relationship, whether that be emotional support, time, sex, money, all of it really." They divulged more about the perks: "I definitely like just the forwardness of it versus regular dating. Right? Like things are out on the table. We know what to expect. You don't really play as many games once you're established." Another participant also mentioned games: "It's a lot of mind games with actual dating... This [sugaring] is kind of refreshing." The participant went on to describe how dating fellow college students has increased sexual expectations compared to sugar dating: "I've definitely felt a lot of pressure from people around my age... I feel like I do kind of owe [my sugar daddy] something, but I don't owe these people anything, yet they expect more of me."

Vetting

Nearly all sugar baby participants described the relentless vetting that is required to find a sugar daddy of quality. Many reported being bombarded with messages and having to sift for legitimate opportunities. Others described doing research on sugar daddies to verify their identity and profession. The participant who sugaring exclusively online outlined an extensive process for sugar daddy identity verification, including a community blacklist. She explained:

We've got a massive Google Drive filled with screenshots of profiles on who to avoid, including evidence of what they've done to the women... The app allows you to take a photo and it has an indication when it's a live photo, meaning that photo was taken then and there. So, we will ask for a photo of themselves and we'll then ask for a photo of like – we change it up, but let's say, I'll ask for a photo of them touching their nose with their pinky, so I still get a clear look at their face and then I ask for a photo of their I.D. and we match it to the face. If it looks even slightly off, if it's an I.D. that they haven't renewed in years and they look different and they're super close to their twenties or something, we won't accept it.

Secrecy

Eight cases mentioned the importance and process of maintaining secrecy so as to not reveal themselves as a sugar baby. A participant said it often was exhausting because, “It was just this whole secret life.” Several participants discussed feeling worried about the public appearance of their relationship, sometimes scenario planning for excuses if they happened upon someone they knew while out with an older man (“If anyone asks,

you're my uncle.”). Two participants mentioned having to hide money from their parents. Another participant was intentional about finding older sugar daddies who were more discreet saying, “I don't want just your money and you to like, flaunt me around. Fuck that. I like that, you know, there's some discretion.”

Safety

Safety was a significant concern for most sugar baby participants. Seven cases summarized the safeguards they instilled to protect themselves. Often participants would share with trusted friends their whereabouts or phone location and be sure to only meet with potential sugar daddies in public places. One sugar baby had a friend attend the date from afar, watching for anything of concern. Others recounted taking steps to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections, included getting tested often and having transparent conversations with sugar daddies.

Peer Support Network

Six participants discussed having a peer support network as a sugar baby. These networks helped them navigate what it means to be a sugar baby (“I reached out to her and I was like... ‘what do you wish you'd known?’”), the accompanying processes (“I contacted my close friend and she walked me through the whole process.”) and provided mental health support (“I had a friend who was going through a similar situation... I had him to kind of lean on.”). The participant that sugared exclusively online notably had the largest peer support network. She explained:

A lot of them are also first-gen students using this as a way to get through schooling. So, it's nice... We've created a mutual aid fund that the workers can apply for. And so, we've managed to help women who cut it close a little bit with

rent or food or gas or last-minute school fees. COVID has kind of put a wrench in in-person sex work. So, this way, we've-we've been able to make sure that nobody's being left behind right now since sugar babying has had to regroup and stuff with COVID because we can't – we're trying to keep as safe as possible. And then my online community, we have just a safe space chat where we just are free to rant and discuss and ask for advice.

The participant concluded, “If I did not have those resources to be able to vent in, I don't think I would have lasted as long as I have being a sugar baby.”

Profiles Built on Specific Relationship Conditions

Five sugar babies outlined the specific relationship conditions that SA provides as foundational to building their sugar relationships. Both sugar daddies and sugar babies have profile classifications such as no strings attached, friends with benefits, platonic, mentorship, etc. This would often set the stage for finding one another on the website and the subsequent negotiations. Many said this helped with expectation-setting and expanded the possibilities of non-sex relationships.

Exclusively Online

Although this rare category only included one case, it is a distinct case for exploration. One sugar baby participant facilitated a majority of her sugar relationships exclusively online through an app called Kik. After feeling unsafe while in-person sugaring, the participant said, “I found out that there were ways to do it from the comfort and safety of your own home.” This experience can most similarly be compared to that of *camgirls* or online escorts. This participant outlined a chatroom-like structure in which groups of women gathered in what are called “blocks.” They developed menus for

online-only services, (e.g., messaging, photos, videos, live chat, etc.) and coordinated the same pricing on each block so as to not price one another out. This process also included an extensive sugar daddy identity verification process to avoid scammers and/or those looking to bribe/dox sugar babies. Often applications such as Cash App or PayPal were used for payment, although these transactions carried a risk. The participant explained:

They are notoriously anti-sex worker. They shut your account down so quick. If you get flagged for any kind of suspicious activity, they don't even ask questions, your account is shut down and you can't create another one. So that's another tactic that the buyers will use. They'll be your client for whatever, however long it takes them to be a client. And then after payment is sent and y'all are done, they report your account and shut it down.

On the other hand, the participant defined some of the online perks, such as flexibility to stop sugaring ("I can turn my phone off whenever I want"), rotate through sugar daddies ("If I feel harassed, all I have to do is block and move on."), and care for personal privacy ("I only use the app because I can remain anonymous.").

Benefits of the Lifestyle

This domain encompassed the benefits participants described deriving from sugaring and included both tangible and intangible impacts to their lives. This domain differed from the *Motivation/Influence to Participate in the Lifestyle* domain in that it represented derivatives of the lifestyle versus incentives for initial and continued involvement. The categories included (a) financial, (b) elite access, (c) social capital, (d) safety in transactional nature of relationship, (e) excitement/fun, (f) mentoring/learning,

(g) education support (monetary, time, etc.), (h) emotional and sexual outlet, (i) empowerment, and (j) quid pro quo trade-off.

Financial

One of the largest categories of the study, all participants described the financial benefits of their sugar interactions. This general category is divided into the following subcategories: (a) general compensation, (b) supporting family/avoiding burdening family, (c) financial freedom, (d) ease of earning, (e) excess, not survival, (f) essential needs (rent, etc.), (g) career building and closing the pay gap, and (h) social justice causes.

General Compensation. This general subcategory was applicable to all cases and included participant descriptions of being compensated by sugar daddies and the unique uses of those funds. One participant told of a sugar daddy paying for an emergency pet visit to the vet. Another spoke about the ability to cover an emergency with her car and said, “It's been a pretty consistent way for me to make ends meet.” One sugar baby described the shock of getting a lump sum payment from a sugar daddy who preferred to avoid constant conversations about money: “I’d never had \$12,000 in cash.”

Supporting Family/Avoiding Burdening Family. This typical subcategory contained six cases in which participants discussed their ability to both support and avoid burdening their family with funds earned through sugaring. One participant bought her sibling a car while sugaring, enabling a rippling effect for the sibling to “go work and make money for themselves.” The participant further described increased stress during a period paused from sugaring, saying, “My dad gave me a thousand bucks at one point because I wasn't sugaring... that sucked.” One participant knew she could rely on a

parent, but deliberately chose not to: “My dad raised me by himself... I didn't want to fall back on him.” Another participant’s dad faced job loss due to COVID-19 and she stated, “I didn't want to burden my parents.” Lastly, a participant highlighted the importance of these funds in the absence of parental help: “It has allowed me to get this far because I'm a first-gen student and so my parents cannot afford—could not afford to help me.”

Financial Freedom. A typical subcategory, this encompassed six cases in which participants described the perk of having financial freedom. One participant outlined how this freedom afforded time to focus on growing their business, explaining, “Having the business or financial side helped with or taken care of to some extent allowed me to put my energy into what I really cared about most.” A participant described the freedom of choice: “It's nice because I knew that I could use the money for, like, literally anything that I wanted, and it was having that freedom of choosing.” Another boasted that being a sugar baby enabled her to upgrade her lifestyle: “I just kind of lived like I was a rich person.” One participant described the safety net she built using sugar baby funds: “It's allowed me to gather up an emergency fund.” The participant further explained that sugaring became a second income used for large purchases, expanding, “I bought my car this way. I bought a tiny house this way.” A participant described the sense of peace that financial stability brought while attending school, adding, “The feeling of being financially stable in college was probably one of the best feelings.”

Ease of Earning. This typical subcategory was outlined by five cases where participants disclosed one of the perks of the sugar lifestyle: “It’s easy money.” Participants discussed the ease with which they were able to earn money: “The first time I saw that money. I was like, ‘Wow, that was the easiest two hundred bucks I’ve ever

made.”” Others described the exchange: “I’m not going to really have to do anything and I get gifts and whatnot,” and “Just a month of, which is like four days, four nights worth of hanging out with someone I enjoy.”

Excess, Not Survival. This typical subcategory included five cases in which many participants were specific in clarifying that the financial perks went beyond survival needs. One participant pointed out, “I have been very privileged because I don’t have to do it.” Another resounded, “I wasn’t doing this because I desperately needed the money... I could survive without doing it.” Others were intentional about avoiding dependance on the money from sugaring. A participant explained, “I kept a job, so I never depended on the money at all.” Another echoed, “It’s not rational or reasonable for me to be like, ‘Oh, I’ll just give this up and I’ll depend on sugaring.’... I don’t want to feel dependent on it.” A third reiterated, “I just had this extra income and I wanted it to stay extra. I wasn’t going to depend on this money.”

Essential Needs (Rent, Etc.). This variant subcategory included two cases in which the money made from sugaring included primary survival means. When one participant spoke of her sugar daddy and said, “He paid my rent every month and bought me groceries.” Another mentioned that sugaring was a consistent way to pay bills: “I always knew that I had a reliable source of income that I could tap into if I needed to.” Of note, the two participants in this category were unique in that they identified as either an online-exclusive sugar baby or a former sugar baby from the late 70s/early 80s.

Career Building and Closing the Pay Gap. Two cases made this a variant category where participants described efforts to even the playing field with money made from sugaring. One outlined how sugaring helped them build a business: “I just had zero

dollars and had the bright idea of starting this practice. So that became my need-based era of sugaring.” Another revealed that sugaring enabled her to choose career building over earning money and to select internships based on reputation in order to build her resume: “I got to work for [Fortune 10 company] ... and I didn't have to worry about them paying me nothing.”

Social Justice Causes. This rare subcategory was comprised of one case in which a sugar baby used sugar funds to support social justice cases. The participant proclaimed, “There was a lot of causes, like BLM, and a lot of issues that I wanted to contribute to and support, so he did give me the means to donate money that I wouldn’t otherwise have had the means to.”

Elite Access

The elite access category classified as typical with seven cases illustrating an increase in the luxurious elements of one’s life as a result of sugaring. The category included subcategories of (a) miscellaneous, (b) restaurants, (c) shopping, and (d) travel.

Miscellaneous. This typical subcategory included five cases that described various types of abundance. One participant remarked, “For me – it was, gosh, glamour.” She continued, “(It) seemed like I had finally arrived at some place of wealth and position.” Another commented on the experiences as “opening my eyes to things I would never have been able to have done.” She added, “When you have that much money... your standard of living changes so much. And while it can frustrate me... I allowed myself to take advantage of it.” One participant observed a similar notion, “Most of the time we're doing stuff that I would like to do anyway that I didn’t have the means to do before.”

Restaurants. This typical subcategory encompassed five cases where participants described going to “restaurants that I would have never gone to otherwise.” One participant said of the experience, “He bought us like a four-course meal... It was very gourmet, very lush.” Another similarly stated, “I think I've been to probably at least seventy five percent of the nicest restaurants in [the city]” Sugar daddies were not always included, one participant said, “I treated myself to nice dinners all the time. I didn't eat fast food because I can go get a twenty-dollar salad and not worry about it.”

Shopping. Four cases characterized this variant subcategory of access to various types of indulgences as a benefit to the sugar lifestyle. One participant stated simply, “I went shopping all the time.” The participants also outlined compensation in the form of gifts: “He would just send me... e-gift cards all the time. <laughs> You could just go to Nordstrom.” Another reiterated, “Some of the dates included trips to boutique stores or trips to lingerie stores.” One participant conveyed, “I would buy purses and shoes and I had like a new perfume every week.” Hair care was also notably mentioned. One participant observed that she was able to “get my hair done more often,” while another remarked, “(I) got my Brazilian blowout so my hair wasn't as frizzy.” The latter participant later lamented when referencing a break from sugaring, “I had to buy cheap hair shampoo again. My hair felt like shit... I realize that's so diva... but it ended up giving me a lot of satisfaction.”

Travel. This variant subcategory involved two cases portraying the increased access to travel as a result of sugaring. One participant spoke about international travel and getting wrapped up in the lifestyle: “There may have even been a semester that, where I didn't even go to school because I was just too busy having fun.” The other

participant expounded on the places she went, “Got to go to Vegas. I got to go to Napa and Sonoma. I got to go to Nashville.”

Social Capital

Six cases outlined earned social capital as a perk of involvement with the sugar lifestyle. This typical category ranged from participants earning cash and time to spend on and with friends (“I can go out with my friends next weekend, drinks on me.”), to earning friend “cred” (“I think I got the most joy...from telling my friends who are girls that I was doing it.”). One participant reflected on telling her best friend: “I just enjoyed telling her... I like to be unpredictable.” Another, referring her “ego,” said:

I did kind of want to flaunt it, like, obviously I didn't tell many people about this. But to the two or three trusted friends who knew what I was doing... I remember I just tucked it into my bra, and I took a Snapchat video, and I was like, ‘Do you see this? I did this. This was me.’ [smiles, poses, and laughs]

Safety in Transactional Nature of Relationship

This typical category involved five cases where participants described a sense of emotional safety that stemmed from the specific characteristics of sugar relationships. For instance, one participant described sharing their grief with a sugar daddy and expressed, “There’s even more of a space to share these deeper parts of yourself because it is within this tight bubble of vulnerability.” They continued qualifying their sugar relationship: “We would probably kill each other if we were just to start dating. But because we have these other bumpers in our life, it allows us to exist in this smaller kind of vacuum.” One participant spoke of a similar emotional freedom and said, “The expectation was known... I was able to kind of shut down a lot of my other shit of life, like, and just be.”

Another participant outlined the nuanced features of sugar relationships: “It's that emotional investment, but without strings attached at the same time versus one that is just purely physical.” Safety in a no-strings-attached approach was echoed by others. Whereas other types of relationships may trigger anxiety and stress, one participant compared the manufactured nature of sugar relationships to the dating show *The Bachelor*. She continued, “We go on these amazing dates. There's no pressure. It's only in the moment. You set the standard exactly what you want.” One participant spoke about what sugaring offered her as a single mom attending school and working full-time: “I wanted someone who I knew wasn't going to blow up my phone or go crazy about, like, me not being able to see them as much. So, it really benefited me.”

Excitement/Fun

This typical category represented five cases where sugar babies expressed the joy they encountered while sugaring. A participant reflected, “One of the things I really liked about it was just like these are people that I probably wouldn't meet otherwise.” Another divulged, “It's literally you just have fun with the person, and you enjoy their company” She continued, describing the oft simplistic interactions, “There was no pressure because it was just happy in the moment.” Another recounted getting to take her dream car for a spin, “I'd never been in a Tesla before... it was exhilarating.”

Mentoring/Learning

This typical category contained five case where participants reported an advantage of sugaring was mentorship from sugar daddies. One participant sought advice from her sugar daddy who worked in the medical field, explaining, “The uniqueness as a student would come in like the mentorship and networking that I was trying to do...

understanding my academic options... picking someone's brain who's in a field that I wanted to get into.” Mentorship from a sugar daddy offered a way to further her career, she expanded, “I found that there was this other way that I could kind of improve myself.” Another participant spoke about a sort of “romantic creativity” that motivated her schoolwork. In referencing writing a paper, she said, “He gave me an interesting, different perspective on it that I was able to then be inspired by.” Another participant noted, “They had lived cool lives, and I learned so much from them.”

Education Support (Monetary, Time, Etc.)

This typical category covered five cases that represented the ways in which sugaring afforded participants educational opportunities in many forms, including financial support and time saved to dedicate to studies. One participant spoke about the strenuous juggle between work and school as a first-generation college student and how sugaring afforded her the option to focus on school more often: “It allowed me to go to school without that underlying stress of like, ‘If I miss this shift at work because I have to study for my final, I'm not going to make rent.’” The same participant said, “I don't think I could have gotten this far into school without doing this.” She further explained, “It allowed me to go to one of the best universities... without accumulating all of that debt.” Another acknowledged, “Being kept like that allowed me to go to school full time so I don't have to worry about working.”

Emotional and Sexual Outlet

This variant subcategory contained four cases in which participants detailed the emotional and sexual benefits derived from the sugar lifestyle. One participant spoke about feeling sexually liberated: “It really just kind of ultimately helped me find more of

myself and my sexuality and that I really appreciated.” Another linked the connections within sugar relationships to that of human experience: “There are so many real people who just are like me and just kind of fascinated by it and have these complex needs that somehow, sometimes get met by this arrangement.” Others described the “emotional reassurance” and more “trust and commitment” that exist within the bounded nature of sugar relationships. One sugar baby further summarized, “I’ve been able to be more honest and kind of open.” Another described the unique intimacy often facilitated in sugar relationships:

The pillow talk, which I think [is] one of my favorite things about the larger umbrella of sex work is just this like small, intimate, pillow talk space, of like the places you can go within yourself with this person who only exists in this one part of your life.

Empowerment

Four cases conveyed a sense of personal empowerment as a result of sugaring, categorizing this as a variant category. One sugar baby reflected, “It was definitely linked to empowerment because I just sat there, like, I was holding the \$200 and I said, ‘I did this for literally, like, nothing.’” Two participants used the same words to describe sugaring as “very much on my terms.” Another connected sugaring to feeling in-control: “It was a great way for me to feel that sense of control and for me to just kind of run things how I wanted them.”

Quid Pro Quo Trade-Off

This variant category included four cases that discussed a benefit being the quid pro quo nature of sugar relationships. A participant explained, “It made everything just

more clear and concise to have like a protocol... almost like a business transaction in a way.” This type of trade-off offered a straightforwardness that was often an appreciated part of the process: “I got something good out of it and they also seem to get something productive as well.” The this-for-that relationship offered a sense of security that may be absent from other types of relationships. One sugar baby quipped, “You don't experience those petty emotions, those insecurities like, ‘Oh, do you like my nose?’ It's like, ‘Okay, well if you don't like my nose, give me money to pay for a new one.’”

Sugar Daddy Characteristics

This domain outlined sugar baby descriptions of sugar daddies. The categories included (a) motivations, (b) married sugar daddies, (c) sugar daddy attractions/desires, (d) differences, (e) respectful/supportive, (f) affluence/reputation, (g) miscellaneous characteristics, (h) deception, (i) similarities, and (j) disrespectful. Due to the large scope of this domain, unless notable, only typical and general categories and subcategories were outlined. See Table 1 for variant and rare cases.

Motivations

This typical category included eight sugar baby participants illuminating the reasons in which they think sugar daddies were motivated to be a part of sugar relationships. The subcategories were as follows: (a) companionship/loneliness, (b) connection to younger women, (c) power and control, (d) sex, (e) social capital, and (f) escape/outlet. Only the typical subcategory of companionship/loneliness was described below.

Companionship/Loneliness. This typical category was reported by five sugar babies as one of the most common reason sugar daddies sought out sugar relationships.

One participant described, “There's a sexual tension... the tension just came about from, you know, that kind of feminine gap in their lives because the men I spoke to were divorced and they didn't really have women to talk to.” The word “lonely” was mentioned often, along with a need for “someone to talk to.” The participant who sugared primarily online said:

Most of the time these people online are craving any kind of interaction. So sometimes it's not even necessarily sexual. So, I have a couple of regulars who pay me just to just to ask how they're doing. ‘How are you? How's your day?’

Another sugar baby echoed this sugar daddy need:

I feel like that person is also almost admitting like they need you and they can't get what you would give, which is emotional labor and intimacy. Whatever form it is. It's almost like by paying you, they're admitting that, which I think is really vulnerable and kind of holy in a way. I think it's kind of sacred just in its rawness and beauty and just realness. That's just a real thing. Like, dudes just need love and emotional attachment.

Married Sugar Daddies

Seven participants made up this typical category in which sugar babies depicted relationships with married sugar daddies. Some participants set boundaries: “I saw a lot of husbands on the site... I'm not interested in that.” Several others expressed guilt when with married sugar daddies. One sugar baby admitted, “I began to feel real guilt about being in this relationship where there was another woman who didn't know about it.” Another made sense of it and said, “I really do believe that it's an outlet and it makes it,

and he said it, it makes my relationship better with my wife.” She continued, “If that means he's present 13 out of 14 days.”

Sugar Daddy Attractions/Desires

This typical category involved seven participants chronicling the attractions and desires of their sugar daddies. The subcategories included (a) students/mentoring, (b) the girlfriend experience, and (c) kinks/fetishes. One typical subcategory was defined further below, in addition to a variant subcategory of note.

Students/Mentoring. This typical subcategory encompassed five cases in which participants describe sugar daddies as having a preference for student sugar babies and the desire to be a mentor. One sugar baby put her biology major on her profile and said, “They would always ask me about that because I think they did want somebody with goals, somebody with ambition.” In describing an encounter with a sugar daddy, she continued, “He just seemed like he wanted to just educate me in the way of the real world.” Another remarked on the fact that “advertising” that she was in graduate school helped attract sugar daddies: “The student thing... that's sometimes attractive... I've been told like, ‘Oh, it's shows you're ambitious.’” She continued, “They feel good about giving the money and, you know, it being put to at least like not drugs or something.” Another determined, “There are so many men on there that are just consumed with their ego and power that them paying for school and mentoring their sugar baby is just about their ego.”

Girlfriend Experience. This variant subcategory is made up of three participants who recounted their sugar daddies longing for a “girlfriend experience.” A sugar baby participant noted that with one sugar daddy, there was no sex involved. Instead, she said,

“He was just really kind of wanting someone to, like, hold his hand out in public and just like act like they were his girlfriend.” Another similarly confirmed, “He was more like a romantic type and wanted an actual girlfriend type figure without having the commitment of a girlfriend.” The participant that sugared exclusively online said that the “girlfriend experience” was the most common selection on her menu:

It is what it sounds like. It's literally I am going to be your pretend girlfriend for – I sell it weekly or monthly. And so, if they want it weekly, then I'm your girlfriend for a week and that means we text. I basically, I just play the role of-of your girlfriend for a week. ‘How are you doing? How’s your day been? How’s work been?... It does get pricier if they're wanting, depending on what kind of like sexual content they're wanting.

Differences

This typical category included six cases in which sugar baby participants characterized the differences between themselves and their sugar daddies. The subcategories included (a) older and (b) social justice/political views. The former typical subcategory was covered below.

Older. Five cases reported that their sugar daddies were moderately or significantly older than their current age. Age ranges varied from under ten years to more than 30 years, often more than double their age. For some, this was a part of the attraction. Most participants neutrally described this as a common precondition to sugar relationships.

Respectful/Supportive

Fives cases involved sugar babies characterizing sugar daddies as respectful and supportive. One participant said, “They've all been very supportive, understanding, open-minded, non-judgmental, kind of exactly what they want in return, I think.” Another compared her sugar daddy to men her own age and reflected, “He was probably one of the better people I had been on a date with... just based on the way he treated me.”

Self-Perception and Identity

This domain represented participants as they grappled with notions of their personal identity development and perceptions of self. This domain is distinct from *Negative Effects of the Lifestyle* in that, although it often categorizes effects of participation in the lifestyle, the outcomes are not solely negative. In addition, this domain recorded the flow of inner processes and changes that occurred as a result of sugaring. The categories included (a) internal stigma and shame, (b) dissonance, (c) self-esteem, and (d) challenged/expanded worldview.

Internal Stigma and Shame

As a general category, this was present in all ten cases within the study. Sugar baby participants described feelings of internal shame and guilt. One participant described feeling alone: “I felt like I didn't have anybody I could share this with because it was kind of a shameful thing to admit to another person.” Another elaborated, “There is a lot of stigma and a bit of shame and guilt associated with the work.”

Dissonance

The most common category within this domain, dissonance was one of the most common themes to arise from all ten cases. This general category included the following

subcategories: (a) general cognitive dissonance, (b) identity as a sex worker, (c) sacrificed authenticity and compartmentalization, (d) protective justifications: safety in the student identity, and (e) guilt/shame.

General Cognitive Dissonance. A typical subcategory, seven cases described conflicting feelings around sugaring. The questioning was observable in a participant's decision to sugar in the first place: "It was definitely a lot of back and forth... is this something that I would regret later on?" Some struggled in the negotiation and payment process. A sugar baby said, "Yes, I know my value, my time is valuable, but is it valuable enough for someone to pay for my time?" Another reported, "It felt a little bit wrong because I felt like maybe he needed that social interaction, yet he was paying for it." Some participants grappled with feeling victimized versus empowered. Several mentioned their own contradictory stances regarding their married sugar daddies, mostly worrying about the impact on sugar daddies' wives. One participant said, "I maybe don't want my husband doing that...but like, I kind of understand it." Another sugar baby, also a sex therapist, further summarized:

"I had a 'no married people' rule. I was like 'It's too weird.' Right? I'm a couples' therapist. The irony is just too loud for me. And then as I got further into my own work, I was like, you know what, I'm not condoning cheating, but it's just not that simple. Who am I to say, like, that's my rule in the context of sugar dating? Right? So, I kind of loosened up on that one."

The most palpable observation of dissonance was displayed through an anecdote about a sugar baby's dual role as both a phone sex operator and sexual violence hotline operator.

In working a double shift, she received a call from a man with an exhibitionistic fantasy and outlined the juxtaposition:

It's kind of weird because it's like, I'm trying to increase sexual positivity in the world and reduce harm from sexual assault, you know, but I was also getting this phone call where I was kind of, like, encouraging his fantasy.

Identity as a Sex Worker. This typical subcategory included seven cases in which participants detailed their own reckoning with a sex worker identity. One sugar baby remarked, “I just don't feel like I'm part of the system as a sex worker, even though maybe I am.” Another recounted, “I was constantly reassuring myself, that like, ‘You're not less than because you're doing this. You're not being forced to have sex. You're doing it because you want to.’” Several spoke about disconnecting from the societal narratives around sex work: “It took me... learning more about sex work for my own knowledge and seeing it as something totally different than what I was kind of raised to see it as.” Another contended, “Regular people are sex workers, like they aren't unicorns, and they aren't crack whores, like all these bullshit narratives that we're fed about it.” The term *prostitution* arose often as sugar babies struggled to define sugaring as different or the same: “I guess it's like prostituting myself... but I don't feel that way.”

Sacrificed Authenticity and Compartmentalization. This typical subcategory included six cases where participants reported having to forgo authenticity while sugaring in lieu of manufacturing the relationship. This subcategory also included descriptions of compartmentalization as a protective mechanism. One sugar baby explained, “I felt like an actress, like I was playing a different person. You do have to get into that kind of like mentality to kind of numb yourself.” Another spoke about similar pressures: “It's just an

emotional toll because I was trying to pretend to be this person that I wasn't... and putting your emotional feelings aside so you don't feel bad about yourself.” One participant likened the tendency to what sugar daddies do and stated, “I immerse myself to a different place just as much as I think they do.” Others remarked on wearing a “mask” as a sugar baby: “They don't see me at my worst.” A participant echoed:

It was always just like trying to be like the best and happiest version of myself because, I mean, he wouldn't want me there if I had a long day at work and like, had no makeup on and my hair was thrown up back in a ponytail.

Protective Justifications: Safety in the Student Identity. Four cases emerged with this variant subcategory in which sugar babies described being able to rely upon their role as a student in ways that not only helped them justify sugaring to the world, but also to themselves and to sugar daddies. One participant described the bind: “College is something that we can externally validate as a reasonable need for money versus someone that just would like a different lifestyle.” Another continued, “The appropriateness might be a little bit different if I were a professional... but I think as a student, it was just me trying to, you know, learn and grow from these people who are older and more experienced.” She continued by expanding on the need to justify: “If I weren't doing this for like a concrete reason of like, ‘Oh, I'm trying to go to medical school. I need funds to apply.’” A participant who sugared in medical school also outlined the dilemma: “I feel like it made it okay in a way... maybe like a sense of safety in being a student, because if you're sugar babying and not a student, then maybe...maybe it would be more immoral in some meta sense.” The participant further compared this distance from sex work to her position within the medical system:

Hiding behind your student status... I do that now as a doctor in a medical system I don't really agree with. I'm a doctor to change the medical system, right? To change this from this nasty Western perspective to a better perspective. And now that I'm a doctor, not a student, and I can no longer hide behind that student status. Like, now I do a circumcision, which is not medically indicated, and I feel bad because I can no longer really go, well... the system does that, people in the system. Now I'm part of the problem.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was a general category that emerged from all cases but one and encompassed the subcategories (a) enhancement, (b) disentanglement, (c) self-understanding and acceptance, and (d) diminishment.

Enhancement. Seven cases made this a typical subcategory that encompassed ways in which sugaring boosted participant confidence. A sugar baby expanded, "I feel like I learned a lot about my value. And what I bring to the table." Another confirmed, "It's definitely a confidence booster... I have better self-worth." A sugar baby added, "It was confidence building. It was empowering and it made me feel I do have... the reins in my life."

Disentanglement. This variant subcategory included four cases where sugar babies worked to disentangle their sense of self-worth from the stigma of sugaring. After revealing her past sugar status to a significant other, one sugar baby described a hit to her own sense of self-esteem, later confessing, "Eventually I realized that it doesn't really reflect my self-worth... I have the respect for myself." Another recounted her self-talk:

“It’s also draining trying to... tell myself like, no, ‘You’re not worthless, you’re fine, you’re doing great. You’re just doing what you have to do to make ends meet.’”

Self-Understanding and Acceptance. Four cases defined this variant subcategory in which participants reported developing self-understanding and acceptance while sugaring. One participant described reconciling her shame and coming to a new conclusion:

I was more shameful or more unsure about how I was going to feel about myself in the beginning. But I’m amazed that as time has gone on, I’m like, there’s no reason that this needs to be frowned upon, you know, to each their own.

A theme that arose was also participants making peace with their decision to sugar. One participant described integrating their two seemingly contradictory identities of sex therapist and sex worker and said, “I’m not alone. We just don’t talk about it... We disregard our past identities so often when we have a new one. This is still part of who I am. And it feels good to not ignore that anymore.”

Diminishment. Two cases defined this variant subcategory in which self-esteem diminished as a result of sugaring. A participant elaborated, “I would often not ask for things. In fact, I think that reluctance to ask for things I need exists today. It’s something that has stayed with me.” Another noted, “I feel like my confidence, kind of, gets a little shot sometimes.” Of note, both participants were unique and differed from other participants in that one participant sugared exclusively online and the other sugared in the late 70s/early 80s. Both of these experiences tended to skew more negative than other cases.

Challenged/Expanded Worldview

This typical category included five cases in which sugar babies discussed the impact sugaring had upon their worldview. One sugar baby described the change: “I’m less judgmental of myself and others. I think that I see different things differently.” For others, their views on sugar daddies changed. One said, “I stopped just stereotyping everyone as a bad guy... some people are just wanting that human connection.” Others depicted the opposite: “I just became more cynical of people in general and after sugaring because I was just over-occupied with the question of, ‘What do you really want?’” Another sugar baby illustrated this change through cultural exposure: “No one else would have taken me to this super old-time musical, you know, and listen to 60s music in the car, which I ended up really loving.”

Motivation/Influence to Participate in the Lifestyle

This domain included participants’ motivations, influences, desires, and expectations for entering the sugar lifestyle. Categories included (a) financial incentive, (b) peer network word-of-mouth, (c) adventure, (d) educational attainment, (e) comparison to non-sugar work, (f) significant other-related, (g) relational: emotional and sexual outlet, (h) trauma, and (i) pandemic-related motivations.

Financial Incentive

This general category applied to all cases and was the most common motivator for involvement in the sugar lifestyle, with participants often mentioning their student status. Participants statements included matter-of-fact admissions, such as, “Being a college student, you know, we all need money,” and “I was 19 in college and I was very hard on money.” One sugar baby participant characterized the relationship between sugaring and

money that fueled her decision to sugar by expressing, “It's a lot of energy, so I think when there's not a really specific need... it doesn't feel worth it for me.” Although, the need for money was often said to be distinct from desperation (see *excess, not survival* subcategory).

Peer Network Word-of-Mouth

This typical category fit seven cases and involved mentions of peer word-of-mouth. Participants noted not necessarily active recruitment happening among the sugar community (although one participant did mention this), but instead incentive to get involved after seeing friends in the lifestyle. One participant said, “I was inspired by this because I had two friends [who] started sugaring.” Another stated, “One of my best friends at the time started doing it. It just pushed me further towards the decision to do, start it myself.”

Adventure

Participant data within this category described pursuing the sugar lifestyle as a form of adventure, encompassed by seeking novelty and asserting one's autonomy. The category classified as typical with six cases fitting within the theme. Subcategories include (a) thrill, (b) bending the status quo, (c) independence, and (d) sexual exploration.

Thrill. This variant subcategory contained four cases in which a desire for excitement was described as motivation. One participant stated, “The adventure and the unknown about it was exciting.” Another described her decision-making. “I was in med school... and I was kind of just bored because all I did was study medicine all day... I wanted to do something a little out there, maybe risky.”

Bending the Status Quo. This variant subcategory represented four cases in which participants defined sugar lifestyle involvement as a way to push the bounds of what was perceived as status quo. One participant stated, “My attitude about a lot of things [is] just down to try anything that was deemed as taboo or different.” Another echoed this sentiment and said, “I also did it for the taboo/adventurousness,” further explaining, “I like the idea of wearing my white coat to work at the time as a med student and being very professional... but then in the evenings, just doing random stuff like trying out sugar babying.” Another noted, “The fact that it’s not a conventional thing... compounded on that tension and that excitement.”

Independence. This variant subcategory included two participant descriptions of sugaring as a way to assert autonomy. One participant stated, “I wanted to show [my father] like, ‘No, I’m good. I got it.’” Another sought independence from her parents and asserted, “I think that might just be an aspect of my personality in wanting to kind of do things on my own and not depend on other people.”

Sexual Exploration. This variant subcategory contained two cases in which participants indicated the pursuit of sugaring as a means of sexual exploration. One shared, “I [was] feeling very sexually adventurous, but I didn’t want to necessarily have a relationship.” Another reiterated, “[It] definitely has been a safe space to explore sexuality and emotions.”

Educational Attainment

This category was classified as typical with six cases that categorized motivation for sugaring as educational in nature. Several participants noted that the cost of medical school applications and tuition fueled their decision to sugar. One said, “I was applying

for medical school and everything was getting a bit expensive.” Another echoed, “Medical school applications are really expensive.” A third said, “I was also looking for side hustles because med school, it's over \$200,000 of tuition.” One participant used the funds for graduate school and stated, “I had no money saved and couldn't get a loan for grad school.” Another shared her underlying drive: “I was determined to get through school, and I was determined to figure out a way to pay for it and to not graduate with \$40,000 of debt.”

Comparison to Non-Sugar Work

This typical category included five participants who described their reasons for seeking out sugaring as an alternative to other forms of work that often pay less for more time spent working. One sugar baby described, “This wasn't my last resort. My last resort was getting a second job and just working nonstop.” Another participant said, “The only real income I'd ever generated in my life up to that point was like, I worked at Starbucks and [laughs]... that line of work involves so much more labor than what I went through with this man.”

Significant Other-Related

This variant category included four cases that outlined the ways in which participants' significant others were involved in the decision-making process. Subcategories included (a) end of relationship/loss, (b) encouragement, and (c) escape.

End of Relationship/Loss. More common than other subcategories within the significant other category, this variant subcategory included three cases where participants expressed motivation to become a sugar baby following the end of a relationship or death of a partner. Describing the feeling of losing oneself following an

abusive relationship and recent divorce, one participant recounted, “Getting into sugaring, it was like, I was able to call the shots, I was able to be the one who could have things on my terms.” Another spoke of the time following a heartbreak and her mentality as a sugar baby, “18-year-old me was like, ‘You know what? If I'm going to have to deal with men from now on, then I should get something out of it that genuinely benefits [me].’” The participants also discussed how sugaring offered them an opportunity for physical connection at a time when they were feeling stunted emotionally. One participant stated:

I'm a widow, and that was another factor of why I wanted this ‘in between’ kind of connection, because I knew I was in no place to like date again, or at least not in an emotionally available, appropriate kind of way, but that I did have love to give and sexual needs that I was very comfortable with meeting even in a period of grief.

Another iterated, “A part of it was – I was ready to just kind of explore a part that I felt like I had missed out on since I had met my previous partner when I was 19.”

Encouragement. A rare subcategory, one participant reported that her significant other encouraged participation in the sugar lifestyle: “He understood that there was an opportunity here that I didn't see.” The individual further explained:

He said that he felt empowered by the fact that his girlfriend was like, he used the word ‘using,’ but I don't really want to use that word, but that's what he said, is that I was using these men. For some reason, that gave him a power trip.

The participant expanded on the motivation, “I don't know that I would have done it if he hadn't pushed me to. Not push, if he hadn't offered up the idea.” Further outlining the

dynamic, the participant said, “He didn't think I would leave him for these gentlemen.”

Escape. A rare subcategory, one participant explained using the sugar lifestyle as a way to cope with stress within a relationship, saying, “We were just having troubles and I was just creating a little bit of an escape, I think, from all the stress of that time of my life.”

Relational: Emotional and Sexual Outlet

This variant subcategory encompassed three cases where the individuals described seeking a way of meeting relational needs, both emotional and sexual, through sugaring. One participant said, “It just made me feel wanted. It made me feel valued.” Another pinpointed, “At the time, being a single mom and working a full-time job on top of that... I was looking for that sexual outlet and to satiate those needs.”

Trauma

This variant subcategory encompassed three cases where individuals mentioned the occurrence of trauma as a potential motivator for their participation in the sugar lifestyle. One participant who sugared in the late 70s/early 80s recounted childhood sexual abuse and concluded, “Coming out of that kind of experience... sex meant love.” Another said the loss of her parent may have set the stage for the precocious decision to sugar: “My mom passed away when I was 13... It made me grow up very quickly, and I feel like that's why I was so mature at 19 and 20 and was able to make these decisions.” She further explained that the death of her parent impacted her sense of know-how by stating, “I was like, ‘I know what I'm doing. I know my boundaries. I know what's okay. I know what's not okay.’” One participant wondered aloud as to the correlation between

trauma and sex work: “I can’t imagine someone who has not had sexual trauma doing it.” The participant further stated, “Sexual trauma? I’ve had sexual trauma galore.”

Pandemic-Related Motivations

This rare category only applied to one participant who explained how COVID-19 led to her decision to become a sugar baby: “With coronavirus, my dad lost his job... I also couldn’t get a job.” She further stated, “Coronavirus freed up a lot of my time.”

Miscellaneous Code (Ancillary Information Not Fitting for Other Categories)

This domain was reserved for data that did not relate directly to the research question, but was deemed worthy of inclusion, nonetheless. The categories were (a) advice – messages to potential sugar babies, (b) incidental/participant-specific, (c) reason for participating in research, and (d) sugar daddies versus sugar mamas. Due to the large scope of this domain, unless notable, only typical and general categories and subcategories were outlined. See Table 1 for variant and rare cases.

Advice – Messages to Potential Sugar Babies

This general category stemmed from a question within the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) and included the following subcategories: (a) know thyself, (b) safety and privacy, (c) education/informed process, (d) don’t settle/set boundaries, (e) beware, and (f) have support network. Three typical subcategories are included below.

Know Thyself. Seven participants shared a common recommendation for those considering the sugar lifestyle: know thyself. One sugar baby endorsed a “risk-aware approach” to sugaring. Another suggested evaluating one’s mental health before entering the lifestyle, concluding, “you have to be in a good place.” One participant also brought

up boundaries: “You definitely need to know a little bit about yourself and you need to know what your limits are, hard limits, soft limits.”

Safety and Privacy. This subcategory was echoed by six participants and encouraged new and fellow sugar babies to constantly consider their personal safety and privacy. A highlight of the recommendations follows:

- “Make sure everything is protecting your identity, protecting yourself. You have to realize not everyone has your best interests at mind.”
- “Recognize when you don't feel completely sure. You need to tell your friends where you're going to be.”
- “Also understand that there's risks. So please be very careful. Don't put your personal information out there. Protect your privacy.”
- “I just like to think back and reflect and make sure, like, nothing really stood out to me weird. Sometimes you just miss stuff.”
- “Go online.”
- “Think about what safety means for them and to know that they shouldn't feel pressured to do anything that they don't want to do.”

Education/Informed Process. Five cases in this subcategory involved participants emboldening new and fellow sugar babies to educate themselves on the sugar lifestyle in order to be fully informed. One participant stated, “I would give advice to go in with eyes wide open and with consideration for your needs, not just theirs.” Another sugar baby outlined, “How much research have you done on these dynamics before you immerse yourself?... Being really aware and cautious about what your approach is, why you're doing it, what do you want to get out of it.”

Reason for Participating in Research

This general category arose from participant descriptions of why they decided to take part in the research and included the subcategories (a) normalization/fight the stigma, (b) catharsis and ability to tell story, and (c) miscellaneous reasons. The only typical subcategory was outlined below.

Normalization/Fight the Stigma. This typical subcategory included five cases and encompassed one of the most common reasons participants designated for participating in the research. Many appealed to a larger desire to normalize sex work and sugaring. They passionately shared a desire to fight the stigma attached to sugar babies. One sugar baby explained, “If we can get sugaring to be palatable to the average person, perhaps that will open us up to better conversations about sex work as a whole.” Another participant wanted people to know that with sugaring, “there's actually a lot of fulfillment and a lot of great things that can come from it.” The participant concluded, “I would love to see there not be a stigma on it anymore... I mean, even people who are sugaring are still people.” Another participant aspired:

I just think of my communities, both local and online, a field of women who would just benefit from talking about their mental health with somebody. I think it's important to understand what this kind of job, just like any other job, does to your mental health. I would like – in my nice future, sex work is recognized, and they get mental health days off, and they get benefits, health benefits, you know, like in my made-up fairy dreamland, that's what I would love to see.

Sex and Intimacy Involved in the Lifestyle

This domain contained the characteristics of sex and intimacy as it related to sugaring and the relationships therein. The categories were as follows: (a) expectations, (b) setting sexual boundaries, (c) fetish participation, (d) pleasure, (e) uncertainty/discomfort, (f) abusive, and (g) camming.

Expectations

This general category was mentioned by all but one case and included discussion around the expectations for sex and how that presented in sugar relationships. The subcategories included (a) expectation for sex and (b) no expectation for sex. Although seemingly contradictory, the participants in these subcategories discuss both ends of the spectrum in terms of sexual expectations from sugar daddies and sugar relationships.

Expectation for Sex. Six cases made up this typical subcategory that mentioned both sugar daddy expectations for sex and general expectations for sex within sugar relationships. One sugar baby said sexual expectations were ubiquitous, even if unspoken: “What you're providing is companionship and usually some form of sex. Usually all the forms of sex, but people who you may see on the site who say no sex, just companionship, just cuddling, I would never trust that.” For one sugar baby who was not sexually active with her sugar daddy, she predicted, “I do anticipate in the future if I was seeing him longer term that that's something he might expect.” Two participants said sex was “a part of it.”

No Expectation for Sex. This typical subcategory encompassed five cases where sugar baby participants voiced that their sugar daddies had no expectations for sex or were open to platonic relationships, at least at the beginning of their relationships. A

participant spoke about the mentoring benefits of her sugar daddy relationship and said, “I was really transparent about what I did and didn't want to do, and none of them had overstepped or had tried to change my mind anywhere down the line, which was really appreciated.” Another repeated a similar finding: “I never, ever, not even one time, got that he was trying to have sex with me.” Other instances revolved around participants outlining that they were not pressured into sex, it was instead an active choice. One reassured herself, “You're not being forced to have sex. You're doing it because you want to.”

Setting Sexual Boundaries

This typical category included six cases in which participants described setting sexual boundaries. One sugar baby made the decision not to have sex with her sugar daddy, but outlined her profile strategy: “I stated, like, I only want to provide companionship, but I might be open to intimacy. I was just kind of just telling myself that because, well, the way that I wrote it was because I wanted more possible opportunities. [laughs]” Another noted the ability to be authentic with her long-term sugar daddies, “I was very much myself. If I didn't want to do anything sexual that night, that was fine.” A sugar baby shared that she knew her “hard limits,” but that there was flexibility: “It was okay to try things and not like them... it was okay to try something and love it.”

Fetish Participation

This variant included four cases in which sugar babies discussed participating in fetishes with their sugar daddies. One participant described exploring new sexual interests with her sugar daddy: “We dove more into his kinks and fetishes, and I mean, and it worked with mine. He was the dom. I was the sub.” Another similarly stated, “I've

tried different things, like some bondage stuff, but all very comfortable.” She continued, “It’s funny cause I thought like, ‘Oh, there’s definitely going to be, like, a lot of dominants.’ That’s not the case.” On the contrary, one sugar baby participant asserted, “I’m just also too dominant of a person... I do have a narrower pool of who I could date on that site because it is more set up for submissive women.” Another spoke to the sense of safety and communication that must be established prior to kink participation: “I’m like, he’s putting collars and chaining me up. I need to make sure that I trust him because this is exactly what you see in shows and stuff.”

Pleasure

Three cases in this variant subcategory included sugar baby participants voicing their pleasure as it related to their sugaring sex life. One simply stated, “It’s good sex... it’s very normal.” She continued, “I very much am attracted to them and it’s great. It’s a great sex life. Like, I feel very pleased and satisfied.” Another participant paralleled, “I mean, physically, I also very much enjoyed myself. And so, I was getting a lot of satisfaction from that.”

Uncertainty/Discomfort

Four sugar babies discussed this variant category of uncertainty and discomfort around sex while sugaring. One plainly stated, “It made me kind of physically ill to have sex with him.” This drove the participant to end the relationship, noted as a first among her sugar relationships to date. The dilemma in the participant’s words: “Unique with this guy was that he was the most generous with his money, but it was also the least satisfying sexually for me.” Forced to choose between a physical reaction and financial rewards, the participant said, “I decided to take care of myself better.” On the topic of sex, another

participant described, “The anger that I felt towards men just turned into disgust.” This sugar baby participant made the decision not to have sex with her sugar daddy and stated, “I just couldn’t wrap my head around ever being intimate with those men. But, you know, everybody has their own personal choice.”

Abusive

This rare category encompassed one case in which the participant was a sugar baby in the late 70s/early 80s. The participant described, “Sometimes the sex was really rough. I felt like they took advantage of me and had rough sex with me.”

Camming

Another rare category, this included a description from one sugar baby of online only interactions with sugar daddies; therefore, the sexual component took the form of *camming* (or live *video camming*), text messaging, sending photos and videos. The participant noted, “The more sexual it gets, the higher the price gets.”

Negative Effects of the Lifestyle

This domain is comprised of participant-described downsides of involvement in the lifestyle. These items are notably more concrete and other-focused (versus self) when compared to the domain *Self-Perception and Identity*. This domain defined the material effects and non-self-related consequences of participation in the lifestyle, reserving the latter domain for categorizing inner self processes and outcomes. Categories included (a) stigma, (b) jeopardized safety and privacy, (c) detrimental to life, (d) disillusionment with men and their power, (e) scams/attempt to “out” identity, (f) sexual health, and (g) fetishized.

Stigma

The stigma category qualified as general, applying to all cases, and was one of the largest downsides to the sugar lifestyle mentioned. The category involved participant descriptions of encountering shame and judgment surrounding their identity as a sugar baby. It included the subcategories of (a) reputation and public perception, (b) judgment from father/significant other, (c) judgment from family/friends, and (d) cultural expectations.

Reputation and Public Perception. This general category applied to all but one case. According to the study's participants, one of the biggest negative effects of the sugar lifestyle was the risk surrounding one's reputation and public perception. One participant revealed, "His friends always looked down on me. So, I felt shame as well. They questioned my motives for being with this old wrinkly guy when I was this 19-year-old." She added, "It can feel like a very isolating place for people because of the shame and the guilt and the fear of judgment." One sugar baby, a practicing sex therapist, spoke about the constraints and rigidity of the system they work within: "Being told that my identities, even though they align with my clients, now have to be shut off to allow for my clients to have safe space, which is bullshit." In explaining the interplay between their identity as a sugar baby and as a sex therapist, they expanded, "I have just never been someone that has lived in fear around losing my license over something that I've done that I feel is ethical in terms of the context of my actual clients." When referencing the media's representation of sugar babies, this participant continued,

They always have an agenda...a very specific, juicy, scandalized agenda of talking about what this whole thing is. And they will specifically go towards the

most stereotypes... towards the people who did look like Barbie dolls with like a Gucci purse and big boobs and facial plastic surgery... They really want to push this narrative of girls, women that just want to get purses and surgeries and have no I.Q. and no inner life, that are just chasing, like, gold diggers. That's obviously the very prominent narrative. And it's just so not true.

Another participant spoke of intentionally keeping quiet about her life as a sugar baby, saying, "I knew that people would see me differently if I told them about it." One participant pointed out, "I don't want the world knowing." Many sugar babies expressed concern about the public appearance of an older man with a younger woman. One sugar baby felt more comfortable sugaring while studying abroad versus risking seeing someone she knew while at home. Several sugar babies spoke about the possibility of their employers finding out. In fact, one participant's sugar daddy ran in the same social circles as the individual's employer and revealed her status as a sugar baby. She recounted, "That was another ordeal... one of the doctors I work for kind of giving me little innuendos like, 'Hey, I know that you're doing something that you probably shouldn't be doing.'" The risk was evident, she explained, "I could have lost my job." A participant also spoke about the irony of earning money to better one's station in life in a way that also risks one's reputation: "The reason why I started doing this was to push myself further in my job, you know career-wise and school-wise. And so, it would be such a shame if I got through all of that and then it ruined it." She continued, "It would suck for a potential employer to find out about it and not hire me because of it." Another echoed:

I have so many dreams and wanting to change so many messed up systems in this world that I always keep in mind, like, if I want to run for political office... I think about this probably like once a week... what if some sort of damning video were to come out, and then I didn't get elected... I just don't think I could handle that.

Judgment from Father/Significant Other. Gender roles and expectations became an apparent part of this typical subcategory. Five cases described worries about judgment from fathers and male significant others. One participant revealed her sugar baby status to a significant other and expressed, “I think internally it just kind of raised an alarm for him.” A sugar baby similarly made this disclosure to her significant other and assumed, “I literally thought we were going to break up. I was like, ‘There's no way you're going to be with me after this.’” In contrast, one participant recounted a feeling of acceptance following partner support: “Him giving me that support and saying this is something you should do... that also contributed to me not feeling like dirty or, you know, ashamed of what I was doing.” Two sugar babies mentioned facing questioning about sex and sugar daddies: “The ‘we didn't have sex’ part, I guess, is important for the male partners to know.” Another grappled with the prospect of telling her father: “I thought about, ‘What if my dad found out? What would I say?’ And I honestly think he would more be really sad and disappointed that he couldn’t have helped me.” A sugar baby echoed, “God forbid my dad found out.”

Judgment from Family/Friends. Three cases made this a variant subcategory that covered fear of judgment from family and friends. One participant worried, “If

someone finds out about this, they're going to think so much differently of me.” Another resounded:

I always want to live a life that I can be proud of... Because my son was only like two or three at the time... It was also one of those things like, well, what if like when he was older and asked me about like things that I did as a single mom, it's like, would I be able to tell him this and feel proud or feel like he understood? Would that make him judge me? ...And so, [I was] trying to really kind of figure out where I felt at peace with those different situations.

One client spoke of her parents, saying, “I think more than anything, they would be disappointed that I would feel the need to do this.”

Cultural Expectations. Three cases made this a variant subcategory in which participants spoke about the discrepancy between what was expected of them culturally and the identity of a sugar baby. One participant explained “the clash of cultures” between Bangladeshi/Muslim traditional ideals and a more Westernized, liberal notion of sexuality. The clash often became personified in meetings with sugar daddies where the participant expressed worry that the arrangement was apparent. The participant explained, “I'm a minority...if I'm meeting up with people that are white, it's a little bit more obvious.” The participant further described the fear of stigmatization with her parents:

My parents are immigrants... And it's kind of contentious because... I'm an American. I can say that. But they don't want me to be that way, you know, because I think they have a skewed view of what it means to be sexually liberated... I think they see it more as dirty, like the things that I'd be doing, like

if they knew what I was doing, I think they would call me all sorts of names with negative connotations about sex workers.

Another participant considered the expectations placed upon her as a doctor. She said, “No doctor would ever admit to doing that... it contradicts it.” The expectations involved gender roles, as well. This participant noted the increase in sex shaming of women in the public sphere, saying, “I just have fears about that... I was just told so many things about how that could be so damning to you.” A second participant reiterated a similar expectation of doctors and said, “I’m trying to be a doctor... I don’t want any of my past information about sugaring to come out because that would definitely affect my professional reputation.”

Jeopardized Safety and Privacy

This general category applied to all but one case in which participants shared the most common negative effect of the lifestyle: jeopardized safety and privacy. A participant simply questioned, “What if I’m kidnapped and murdered?” This concern was echoed by others: “Personal safety – that was just a constant threat to me.” Others continued, “I look back on when I did that and I’m like, so thankful I didn’t get murdered. It’s just so dangerous.” Another worried, “If this ends badly, what will he do? Because, like, he knows where I work. He knows essentially where I live... He knows who my friends are, he knows my daily routine.” Participating in certain kinks also brought risk, one participant explained, “He’s like putting collars and chaining me up. I need to make sure that I trust him because this is exactly what you see in shows.” Most participants outlined the constant process of accessing one’s sense of safety. One questioned, “What would happen if I was in a dangerous situation?... Can I really trust this person?”

Detrimental to Life

This variant category included four cases where participants described ways in which the act of sugaring was damaging to their lives. The participant who solely facilitated sugar relationships online said, “It's hard to humanize us because we're behind a screen, and so we do get a large portion of buyers who are just rude, and I feel like they tend to forget that we are real.” Another worried about the long-term effects of the lifestyle:

If I would have done that longer than I had, it would have had a negative impact on my mental state just because it's such a façade to keep going. And I might have lost sight of who I really was as a person.

A participant shared a similar concern and said, “One thought that always was in the back of my mind is that I would succumb to this... it just kind of seemed like it was a slippery slope into a seedier life.” This participant sought out therapy for childhood sexual trauma and remarked, “I didn't know what I was doing was more detrimental to me than good.”

Disillusionment with Men and Their Power

Another variant category, four cases chronicled the effect of becoming disillusioned by powerful men. One participant expressed a growing cynicism towards men as “entitled” during her time sugaring: “I would sit there and think, well, ‘Who gives you the right to be so choosy if you have to pay for companionship in the first place?’” Another participant detailed the hypervigilance one must embrace as a sugar baby and succinctly illustrated, “It's men. It's men and money. Right? Two of the most dangerous things in the world.” One participant described a mental shift that occurred while she was sugaring and elaborated, “I began to feel like I was just being used.” One participant

continued, “It just felt gross, like, I just became repulsed.” This participant reflected on men’s “true intentions” and concluded, “All men want is sex... I felt like, I'd gone out there, I collected evidence and now...it's confirmed.” She shortly after conceded, “To be fair, that wasn't a very fair assumption considering that my sample pool was people on Seeking Arrangements.” One participant outlined some of the consequences of the disillusionment: “I feel like it's made me question anyone, any guy who's getting to know me.”

Scams/Attempt to “Out” Identity

This variant category included three participants expressing fear around sugar daddies exposing their identity as sugar babies or scamming them out of time and money. A participant spoke about the fear that “some crazy dude is going to try and tarnish my name, which does happen.” They later explained the term “salt daddy” to describe an individual who lies about being willing to fund a sugar baby. One sugar baby, who primarily operates online, noted the extensive process their community took to protect themselves against one man who had been harassing the group for three years. The individual’s goal seems to be related to *doxing*, an internet-based practice of exposing an individual’s private information ((Merriam-Webster, n.d.). He finally succeeded in outing a participant to their family after bribing other sugar babies for information. Other scams exist, one sugar baby explained, “We've had buyers report the payment to reverse it.” Another participant talked about spambots filling up her inbox. This participant also spoke about the fear of exposure, contending, “You don't know people. You don't know who they would reach out to if you made them upset.”

Sexual Health

Three cases outlined this variant category that involved risks to sexual health as a result of sugaring. A participant explained, “I think that the community is probably more sexual... so the risk of disease and infection, it definitely crosses my mind.” Another questioned, “We had the arrangement that they wouldn't be seeing other people while they were seeing me. And, but at the same time, I'm like, ‘Well, how do I really know?’”

Fetishized

This rare category applied to one case in which a sugar baby described her identity being fetishized by men on the website. She explained, “You get a lot of messages. I think being Asian, like, that is attractive to primarily white older men who might have an interest in that fetish.” She said that her sugar daddy, of a similar ethnicity, stood out among the influx in messages.

Power Dynamics Involved in the Lifestyle

This domain cataloged the power, both embodied and exchanged, within sugar relationships. The categories were as follows: (a) sugar baby (self), (b) exchange of power, and (c) sugar daddy (other).

Sugar Baby (Self)

This general category included nearly all cases comprising examples in which sugar baby participants contended with the power they wielded within the sugar relationship. One sugar baby reflected on the money earned while sugaring and said, “I get this just because I am being myself, I am being a woman. I didn't even have to really touch him either.” Another remarked, “I've never felt that they have power over me. Yes,

they have the money, but I'm the one that I can walk away at any... I can walk away." A participant weighed in on sex work, noting, "it is actually work," and expanded:

Ultimately, from what I've heard from other workers, is that everyone usually feels like they're in power and they're in control. And what better thing to do in your life than when you feel like you have complete control over it? I think there's something that's empowering about that.

Another participant revealed an anecdote about entering into a new college semester and finding out that a one-time former sugar daddy was her professor. Although the two never formally acknowledged the association openly, the participant stated that in the long run, it was advantageous to her:

He let me make up tests that I was not supposed to be able to make up... It just, like, fell in my favor. I don't know if he was doing that because he was scared, like I had power over him or what.

Exchange of Power

In this typical category, participants examined the exchange of power within their sugar relationships. This most often was characterized by an exchange of physical and emotional intimacy for monetary and non-monetary compensation. One sugar baby said, "It was pretty lucrative for me, and it was, you know, something he needed to." Several participants referred to a hierarchical system of valuation. That which sugar babies had to offer, both tangible and intangible, became power they could wager within the relationship. For instance, a sugar baby decreed that if physical interactions were expected, prices increased. Another sugar baby explained:

If they were... less attractive in my mind, it had to be a little bit more... If I was going to be like I had to spend a whole night or something versus just like a handful of hours or depending on what it required of me, how easily it was for me to fit into my schedule... I wouldn't do like a per-meet for less than \$350 and it was usually five hundred.

Sugar Daddy (Other)

Four cases outlined this variant category in which participants considered the ways in which their sugar daddies embodied power within their sugar relationships. One participant said that her sugar daddy revealed the relationship to her employer, although she suspected, "I don't think it was an intentional power move." This participant remembered questioning:

If this ends badly, what will he do? Because, like, he knows where I work. He knows essentially where I live, because he did. He found that out too. He knows who my friends are, he knows my daily routine. Is he going to be like a psychopath and like stalker and follow me like after this ends?

In particular, the participant that sugared in the late 70s/early 80s felt a sense of powerlessness, stating, "I had no power... with any of them, even the most nurturing."

Another struggled with being the first to be cut when COVID-19 strained her sugar daddy financially: "I'm the person who doesn't suck the life out of him, so, in some ways, I think I do deserve it more than other people in his life. But I was the one that was more disposable."

V. DISCUSSION

In an effort to better illuminate the understudied experiences of those within the sugar lifestyle, the researcher of this study asked the question, “What are the lived experiences of college sugar babies?” Although frequently scrutinized by the media, sugaring has largely been uncharted in academia. The researcher aimed to tell the stories of this population within a research setting, adding to the limited extant research on the topic. The typicality of the included data is an important factor in reporting the results of this study. Outlined within the discussion are cases qualifying with a frequency of general and typical (i.e., applying to a majority, if not all, cases) contending that there was a presence of theoretical saturation among this data set (Hill, 2012). If otherwise, the researcher denotes the typicality (i.e., rare = 1 case; variant = 2-3 cases).

Notable Findings

Below, the researcher examines the study’s notable findings related to (a) sugar baby motivation and benefits, (b) power structures, (c) defining sugaring as sex work, and (d) online sex work and intergenerational sugar babies.

Sugar Baby Motivation and Benefits

In evaluating sugar baby motivation, there is a lack of significant literature explaining what propels individuals, specifically college women, into the sugar lifestyle. The researcher of this study found that the most prominent motive behind the study participants’ decision to become a sugar baby was financial. Aligned with Daly’s (2017) findings, student sugar babies often noted the unparalleled ease of earning when rivaled against non-sugar work. Put simply, many questioned: why work minimum wage jobs when one can earn more for less work as a sugar baby? Financial benefits ranged from

rare altruistic inspirations (e.g., donating to social justice causes) to other variant drives (e.g., career building and closing the pay gap). A majority of sugar baby participants called attention to the fact that they deliberately avoided a dependence on the money they made while sugaring. Many participants distanced themselves from the stigmatized view of a sex worker who is desperate for money to survive. They also described working part-time and full-time jobs, on top of sugaring and school attendance, in order to intentionally keep the money made from sugaring supplemental. Some described entering the lifestyle with short-term funding needs, notably medical school applications. This aligns with Brents and Sanders (2010) concept of the *mainstreaming* of sexual commerce, in which sex work, and in turn sugaring, has become a more viable economic means for those in the middle class looking to get ahead versus a lower class vie for survival. The participants reported feeling more financially free and having more flexibility, often atypical of the college experience. A majority also pointed out that being a sugar baby allowed them to avoid burdening their family and/or gave them an opportunity to give back to their family, adding to the feeling of financial freedom.

A secondary set of motivation and resultant benefits of sugaring included elite access to matters of wealth, both from the act of dating a sugar daddy and funds obtained from sugaring. This supports Freundschuh's (2016) notion of sugar babies atop a demimonde class, that which is between the elite and otherwise. Sugaring gave the participants opportunities to connect with a more privileged class, with most detailing an ability to eat at more expensive restaurants and enriching their lives with higher-end products. Additionally, this finding supports Nayar's (2017) conclusion that sugaring can act as a means to access capital and social mobility. In fact, a majority of participants also

recounted earning social capital as a result of being a sugar baby. Sugaring gave them the ability to treat their friends to nights out or have ownership over the most interesting story in the room. Despite the heavy stigma surrounding sugaring, among close friends, participants described using their sugar baby status to their social advantage.

Another theme emerged from the data relating to a sense of safety that stemmed from the bounded nature of sugar relationships. Bernstein (2008, Chapter 4, Section 8, para. 4) has referred to the “bounded authenticity” of sex work relationships in which buyers seek realism and sellers manufacture (or feign) genuine emotional and sexual interest. This theme is reflected among the results of this study in numerous ways. First of all, participants often characterized their work as that of being an “actress,” often taking the form of sacrificed authenticity and compartmentalization. As an example, one participant stated, “I try to make it like a real relationship while we’re in the moment.” The contrived nature of the relationships was often noted as simply a part of the exchange. This was further evidenced by the variant subcategory in which sugar baby participants characterized a top sugar daddy desire: *the girlfriend experience*. This supports Bernstein’s (2008, Chapter 5, Section 4, para. 10) assertion that the girlfriend experience is one of the most sought-after features of sex work and is a standard “menu” option in brothels around the world. A participant in this study echoed this yearning: “This was...the easiest way for him to get those needs fulfilled without having to entertain an actual partner.” Additionally, the bounded nature of sugar relationships often operated as an appeal to become a sugar baby in the first place. A majority of participants found a sense of safety in the transactional, no-strings-attached connection. This is further indicated in the variant category of *significant other-related*, in which several sugar

babies recounted seeking out sugar relationships while experiencing a relationship loss (e.g., a breakup or death of a partner), limiting their emotional availability for a traditional romantic relationship. The bounded nature of sugar relationships allowed them to meet emotional, sexual, and physical needs without expectations for added commitment.

Additionally, the sugar baby participants in this study detailed using sugaring as a stepping-stone to other life goals, noting a sense of safety in their student status. Several student sugar babies were notably on the periphery of lifestyle. They were short-term visitors to the lifestyle, joining with intentionality towards their goals (i.e., medical school applications, tuition, excess money). This had subsequent implications for the sexual expectations within their sugar relationships. For the sugar babies who either did not or deliberately chose not to have sex with their sugar daddies, these participants anticipated the likelihood that sex *would* be expected if they continued sugaring. In addition, this marked a notable phenomenon, also described by Daly (2017), in which the student identity functions as a refuge, safe from fully internalizing a sex worker identity and the coinciding stigma. The experience is multifaced; for instance, most participants reported that sugar daddies commonly seek out sugar relationships in which they can mentor or that they have a strong preference for students. This speaks to the demimonde-like expectations of a sugar baby to be an intelligent companion to their sugar daddy. Zimmerman (2015) discussed this sugar daddy valuation of sugar baby intelligence and concluded that from the vantage point of the sugar daddy, intelligence implied an attractive element of free choice and facilitated the perception of an emotional relationship beyond sex, whether real or illusive. Therefore, student sugar babies often

had a motivation to market their student state: stronger economic appeal and more negotiating power. In addition, for this study's participants, the student identity became a socially acceptable justification for being a sugar baby in the first place. As echoed by Daly (2017), the sugar baby participants in this study grappled with identifying as sex workers. Two themes arose: (a) academic pursuits are often deemed by society (and sugar daddies) as a more worthy reason to participate in the sugar lifestyle and (b) being a *student* sugar baby alleviated the participants from identifying as altogether a sex worker. Of note, several participants scoffed at the societal confines in which this judgment stems. These findings resonate with those from both Zimmerman (2015) and Daly (2017) who found that sugar babies often distance themselves from an association with sex work as a way of separating from the stigma and distinguishing a more elite nature of the lifestyle distinct from other forms of sex work.

Lastly, the researcher of this study observed an intergenerational difference in how the student identity was represented among the participant who sugared nearly four decades ago versus more recent sugar baby participants. The former described using school as a way to get out of sugaring, whereas the latter described using sugaring to get through school, demonstrating a distinct difference in the way sugaring functioned within participants' lives. This specific example may be indicative of a spectrum between involuntary and potentially coercive sex work versus that which is led by free choice.

Power Structures

Themes of power and its interplay within sugar relationships arose from this research. Although a thorough philosophical look at power and its role within sex work is beyond the scope of this paper, aligned with extant research on sugaring, power – its

ownership and its exchange – were thematic within the study’s results. Cordero (2015) concluded that sugar dating operates within a larger structure of patriarchal subjugation and that a sugar baby’s power is predicated on first recognizing that “she isn’t in a position power” (p. 98) within the larger system. Zimmerman (2015) similarly asserted that sugar daddies have “economic and gendered power” over the “purchased” (p. 12) sugar babies. While this inequity of power may be true at a larger societal level, nearly all of the sugar baby participants in this study described a sense of power ascribed to their participation in the lifestyle. The researcher of the present study proposes that sugaring may be a means by which female sugar babies use existing dominant structures to subvert patriarchal power in order to gain social mobility and financial gain. In this way, the practice of sugaring may be upending traditional power structures. Although Cordero (2015) found that sugar baby’s self-proclaimed power lay primarily in their youth and beauty, the researcher of this current study found the existence of a large emotional component exchanged between parties that is often leveraged as power. In addition, the sugar baby participants of Cordero’s (2015) study resolved that sugar daddies ultimately had power on the grounds that they could end compensation at any time. Opposing this conclusion, some participants of the present study found that they often physically embodied the power, enabling them to take it away just as easily. Additionally, sugar daddies seeking power and control were only found among two participants, a small variance. A last critical finding is that, although the author of the present study argues that sugaring may function as a way of subverting present power structures, evidence still surfaced of sugaring existing within larger gendered paradigms. One example, explored below, is the participants’ adoption of rigorous safety and privacy protocols in efforts to

protect themselves from sugar daddies. Another is the fact that nearly half the participants of this study indicated fear of judgment from male figures in their life, most prominently from fathers and male significant others. This may be indicative of the larger societal and reputational power men personify over women. One participant aptly described the risky dynamic of sugaring: “It's men. It's men and money. Right? Two of the most dangerous things in the world.”

Despite this study's researcher assertion that a significant amount of sugar baby power is derived from participating in the sugar lifestyle, the constant risk of physical/emotional safety and threats to privacy may be evidence that sugaring does exist within a larger social construct that is predicated on the subjugation to women. A noticeable gap in the literature on sugaring, the researcher of this study found that risks to safety and privacy were a top hazard of the lifestyle. The sugar baby participants went to great lengths to ensure their safety and privacy – enlisting friends as “lookouts,” changing phone numbers, and de-identifying photographs. Although privacy concerns may be universal, sugar baby fears surrounding physical threats may be a signal of a persistent uneven power differential. Unlike Zimmerman (2015), who found little mention of sugar baby safety on SA forums, each participant in this study was resolute about the diligence they employed when sugaring. In fact, several participants made efforts to share lessons learned with fellow sugar babies, producing informal communities of peer support. Others mentioned getting tips from friends in and out of the lifestyle, further suggesting the creation of informal cohorts that pass down insights. A natural question arises as to whether sugar daddies feel the need to take such deliberate precautions. The risks of the sugar lifestyle to women in particular may suggest that sugaring sits within a larger

system of feminine oppression.

Defining Sugaring as Sex Work

The question of whether sugaring qualifies as a form of sex work is only partially answered by this study. The struggles of placing sugaring among other forms of intimate labor and sex work, even *work* itself, is documented in the existing literature. Cordero (2015) placed the space that sugaring occupies between that of online dating and commercial sex work. Sugar baby use and specifically SA's careful representation of traditional dating rhetoric make it difficult to categorize sugaring as work. Daly (2017) concluded that this romantic discourse distances sugaring from the stigma-strained sex work. In addition, the varying forms of expectations and intimacy involved in sugar relationships create complications in labeling it as sex work. These same hurdles were continually evident within this study. For instance, many sugar baby participants grappled with whether to identify themselves as sex workers, and several toggled back and forth. Similar to Daly (2017), all participants spoke about the existence of both an external and internal stigma underlining their decision to be a sugar baby. This stigma, coupled with a contradictory sense of empowerment many described, may explain why this is a fraught process of identification. Of note, half of the study's participants disclosed that they did not/had not yet had sex with their sugar daddies, similar to Scull's (2019) findings. Nevertheless, nearly all made apparent the emotional labor involved in having a sugar daddy, evident in the *emotional labor* category. This category was further subdivided into two parts, *companionship* and *general emotional labor*. *Companionship* was primarily represented by the bonds formed between sugar daddy and sugar baby as presumed partners, whereas *general emotional labor* denoted the continual work of

appealing to sugar daddy needs, sometimes as an “actress” and other times as “friends.” The *emotional labor* category showcased the true *work* involved in sugaring. One sugar baby participant joked about going to “clock in” at her sugar daddy’s house and plainly said, “It was work to me.” These findings suggest that sugaring qualifies as a form of intimate labor and possibly sex work. Additionally, the *dating activities* category included participant descriptions of taking part in courting-like behaviors with their sugar daddies with many sugar babies also considering themselves to be in dating-type relationships. Of the active (versus inactive/former) sugar babies in this study, all reported not currently dating outside of sugar relationships, possibly because sugaring fulfilled this capacity in their lives. The sugar baby participants’ identification with both *work* and *dating* suggests that sugaring may sit in a classification among itself – not quite a traditional form of dating, yet also not an established form of sex work. It further echoes the findings of Scull (2019) and Daly (2017). Notwithstanding this evidence, the researcher of this study resolved to rely on the self-identification of individual sugar babies as to whether they were involved in sex work and identified as sex workers. Thus, the identity of a sugar baby was defined *by* them, rather than *for* them, reflecting the constructivist underpinnings of CQR methodology (Hill, 2012).

Online Sex Work and Intergenerational Sugar Babies

Two anomalous cases presented among the sample: that of a participant who sugared in the late 70s/early 80s and another participant who was a sugar baby exclusively online (versus in-person). Although the cases were rare among the set, they may represent a valuable examination of the intergenerational differences of sugar baby experiences and a look into variances among in-person versus online-only sugaring.

These cases notably surfaced results that were more overtly negative than others, including abusive and unpleasurable sex and attempts at online doxing (i.e., an internet-based practice of exposing an individual's private information). The two cases were also the only to denote using funds from sugaring for more survival-based needs like rent and reported diminishment in their self-esteem.

Both cases reflected how the internet has reshaped sex work and sugar relationships. Investigating online sex work, Jones (2015) described the “ostensibly borderless workplace” (p. 560). In such an environment, sugar babies' access to an abundance of sugar daddy options may enhance their ability to better vet sugar daddies. On the other hand, the internet's facilitation of sex work is complicated by increased risks to privacy. The participant who sugared exclusively online detailed extreme lengths pursued in order to protect themselves and their peers from regular attempts at doxing. In addition, comparing the experience of the past sugar baby to those of current ones signals possible intergenerational shifts; that is, modern sugar babies may be entering the lifestyle as a way to seek excess money, be less dependent upon the funds for survival, and, notably, as a way to exercise power. On the contrary, the past sugar baby of this study reported an increased reliance on the funds for essential needs and often feeling disempowered. Given the limited scope of this study in relation to these two topics, more research is needed.

Limitations

Though the sample size of the current study aligned with recommendations for minimum sample size in CQR, it resulted in only small differences between categorical designations, a reason to be cautious and avoid overinterpreting the typicality of what

may be anomalies (Hill, 2012). Of note, small sample sizes are common in CQR studies, further calling for judiciousness when generalizing these findings to a larger population. The sample's homogeneity was sacrificed with two anomalous cases (i.e., one past sugar baby and one online-only sugar baby), further necessitating a limitation to generalizability. The researcher instead recommends considering the transferability of results to other similar settings and estimating the trustworthiness of the qualitative inquiry based on the richness of data collected (Hill, 2012). The study is also dependent upon the fallibilities of the data analysis process. The research team in this study deviated from the typical CQR process by solely coring the first three transcripts and relying on the domaining and cross-analysis of the rest of the cases. To mitigate this, the researcher sought to maintain the essence and rigors of the process through intentional consensus-building while coring. Of note, after running simultaneous cross-analysis processes among two separate teams, Hill (2012) found that despite an overlap in domaining and coring, both teams had divergent findings, indicating that the analysis in CQR is largely a reflection of team subjectivity. This subjectivity extends to that of the researchers' biases, noted within the methodology portion of the study. These biases and expectations were continually bracketed through a reflexive process of evaluating subjectivity (Hill, 2012). In addition, the research team lacked representative racial/ethnic diversity in comparison to the participant sample, resulting in potential blind spots with relation to the experiences of East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern participants, most notable among the sample. The inherent limitations of CQR were confronted in the study by continual revisions, returning to the data, dedication of the consensual process, and the use of external auditors. In addition, this study was limited to that of traditionally

gendered sugar relationship with female sugar babies and male sugar babies, limiting the perspectives to that dynamic. The sensitivity and stigma of the topic of sex work, combined with a potential for social desirability bias, may have increased the risk that participants were not fully honest in their recounting of experiences. In addition, the experiences detailed in this research are based on the retrospective recall of events, subject to the limitations of the human memory and the individuals' attribution of meaning (Hill, 2012). Although, important to note is that the intention of the researcher was to derive the meaning of the experiences explored, rather than the chronological recollection of one's life. Lastly, three participants agreed to take part in this study with no offer of compensation, while the others were offered \$50 per person (the first three participants were retroactively paid). This compensation likely increased participants' willingness to and reasons for partaking, potentially influencing the information they chose to share and risking the possibility of misrepresentation.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

Below are implications for theory, practice, and policy related to (a) challenging the narrative of disempowered women and embracing the unconventionality of sugar relationships, (b) mental health support for sugar babies, and (c) ethical responsibilities and policy implications.

Challenging the Narrative of Disempowered Women and Embracing the Unconventionality of Sugar Relationships

Nearly all sugar babies in the study described the largest downside of the lifestyle as the associated stigma, with many fearing public perception and impacts to their reputation. Many dreaded a potential collision between their life as a sugar baby and their

career aspirations. Others acknowledged the irony of using sugaring to further one's career when the act could, in fact, jeopardize their career. Ultimately, similar to Nayar (2017), the researcher of this study calls into question any notion that sugaring is inherently exploitative and cautions language use around the lifestyle. As with any institution, awareness of abuse and coercion is paramount, but broad-sweeping labels of sex trafficking and assumed victimhood may silence the identifications and stories of sugar babies themselves. In fact, fear-mongering storylines risk perpetuating a form of saviorism in defining oppression without including the targets of that oppression. This may be an argument for hegemonic oppression in and of itself. In addition, in this study, financial incentives were the largest motivator behind sugar baby participation in the lifestyle. Such a finding may prompt anti-sex work advocates to question the role of money and sexual coercion in sugar relationships. Zimmerman (2015) communicated this potential dilemma: the power differential coupled with an exchange of gifts/money may compel sugar babies to engage in sex, complicating the issue of consent. Although this is an important area for more research, it is worth noting that other, more intangible reasons were also largely influential in a sugar baby's motivation to participate in the lifestyle. For instance, the category typical *adventure* encompassed the many different reasons participants sought out sugaring beyond financial, including bending the status quo, sexual exploration, independence, and thrill. Also, imperative to note is that half of the participants in this study were explicit in stating that they maintained outside work separate from sugaring so to protect themselves from having to survive on income earned through being a sugar baby. This implies a level of choice and agency beyond coercive influence and desperation. Most sugar baby participants in this study also expressed how

the act of sugaring boosted their confidence, evidence that sugaring may, at times, be additive to one's life. Although an unconventional lifestyle, the researcher of this study calls for more efforts towards de-stigmatization and the avoidance of reductive assumptions in the hopes that it leads to better accessibility to information about sugaring and informed consent prior to entering the lifestyle. One sugar baby participant summarized, "There are so many real people who just are like me... [who] have these complex needs that somehow, sometimes get met by this arrangement."

Implications for Counselors: Mental Health Support for Sugar Babies

The sugar babies in this study described feeling largely disenfranchised, bound by societal stigma to keep quiet for fear of judgement and public shaming. Others wrestled with their own internalized sense of shame and guilt. Many discussed the fear of judgment and repercussions should others find out about their sugar involvement. In fact, almost all participants spoke about the lengths they would go to keep the lifestyle private. Secrecy perpetuates silence, which can impact one's ability to seek congruence and wellness (Trautner & Collett, 2010). Many participants described having only a few friends, if any, to confide in, leaving them with a lack of resources for processing the emotional toll of the lifestyle. These facts make the role of a counselor paramount to the health and wellness of those participating in the sugar lifestyle.

Counselor multicultural competency in working with this population is an essential part of adhering to ethical practice (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015). In fact, Ratts et al. (2015) built the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) framework in order to engage counselors in examining their own self-awareness and client worldviews. This process also requires knowing how the

intersection of counselor competency and client worldviews may impact the counseling relationship and selected interventions (Ratts et al., 2015). Although the definition of multiculturalism may not currently include sex work within the literature, the author of the current study argues that the marginalized status and disenfranchisement of sex workers may call for an expanded view of the term *multicultural* (Ratts et al., 2015). The following includes recommendations related to the core developmental competencies outlined in the MSJCC (i.e., attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and action) and how these can be used to competently work with sugar babies.

- *Attitudes and Beliefs:* The researcher of this study calls for all counselors, particularly those counseling college students, to examine their existing biases around sex work and sugaring as a form of multicultural education. Unexplored implicit biases can have a profound impact on a therapeutic relationship and its ability to serve clients, jeopardizing unconditional positive regard and empathy (Ratts et al., 2015). This exploration should include scrutinizing cultural conceptions of sex work through a process of introspection. Employing a self-reflective process may involve clinicians considering their personal thoughts, feelings, and sensations around topics such as: stereotypes in sex work, sex work versus prostitution, sex trafficking versus sex work, voluntary versus involuntary sex work, sex positivity versus sex negativity, and more.
- *Knowledge:* The author of this study asserts an urgent need for practitioners to increase their understanding of the sugaring phenomenon, encompassing both individual and societal implications. This process may also involve research related to sex work in general and the decriminalization versus legalization

dispute. Ratts et al. (2015) contended that recognizing the larger contexts in which clients exist is particularly important when working with historically marginalized communities. This becomes significant when working with student sugar babies and acknowledging their many intersecting identities. It also is crucial when distinguishing the negative effects of oppressive environments on mental health and wellness (Ratts et al., 2015).

- *Skills:* Counselors may also develop skills to help student sugar babies cope with the stigma and subsequent oppression related to being a sex worker. In addition, a part of acknowledging the intersectionality of sex worker identity involves a counselor not assuming that a client's presenting concern is related to sex work. Deciphering true presenting issues both independent from and within larger systems of oppression and how they relate to identity development is an essential counseling skill (Ratts et al., 2015). This analytical skill also extends to the ability of a counselor to know when to initiate discussions around identity, power, and oppression (Ratts et al., 2015). In addition, the development of relevant skills in working with sex workers also translates to the education, training, and supervision of counselors (CACREP, 2015). Counseling programs may choose to include the aforementioned bias training and skills development into general multicultural curriculum.
- *Action:* The MSJCC assert that counselors should advocate at "intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, public policy, and international/global levels" (Ratts et al., 2015, p. 11). Counselors, when bearing in mind their ethical mandate to advocate for social justice within the counseling profession, should

consider championing for sugar baby mental health and wellness as a part of this endeavor. In addition to examining their competence to practice, counselors can also help advocate at an institutional level for sex worker/sugar baby rights. By being an ally to those who choose to be a part of the sugar lifestyle, mental health professionals are instilling resiliency against larger societal stigma and fostering individual wellness.

Ethical Responsibilities and Policy Implications

Below are policy implications and ethical responsibilities specific to three domains: higher education institutions, sugaring websites, and federal/state policies.

Institutions of Higher Education. In line with Daly's (2017) findings, the sugar babies in this study often described entering into the lifestyle with little support or knowledge on how to best protect themselves, instead having to rely on informal venues for such information or worse, websites like Seeking Arrangement that have a financial incentive to promote sugaring. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to become allies to sugar babies. This ethical responsibility extends to offering neutral information about the lifestyle in order to better inform students' decision to enter and provide support while sugaring. Similar to harm reduction approaches versus moralistic abstinence, the researcher of this study recommends higher education institutions offer both practical (i.e., safety and privacy protection) and mental health support for students considering or already sugaring. Institutions of higher education also owe it to sugar babies to inform them of their resources in the cases where there is abuse and/or exploitation involved, helping them to avoid any fear of repercussions – legal or reputationally. Similar to Sagar et al. (2015), the researcher calls on higher education

institutions to foster a safe and inclusive space for sex workers, specifically sugar babies, in a way that respects their autonomy and specialized needs (e.g., heightened confidentiality, legal education, etc.). To reiterate Sagar et al. (2015), universities have an obligation not in “policing what their students do” but instead “in ensuring their well-being” (p. 410). Failing to acknowledge the growth of sugaring on college campuses is akin to sticking one’s head in the sand. During one of the most vulnerable times in their lives, colleges fail students by not supporting them as sugar babies and educating staff on ways to combat the stigmatization.

Sugaring Websites. The researcher of this study also acknowledges that sugar websites must also be held accountable for facilitating more risk education, better informed consent, and more conversation regarding safety precautions. Although Seeking Arrangement (SA) provides brief safety tips, the website is noticeably devoid of these precautions, particularly when also encouraging sugar babies to negotiate in-person with sugar daddies, a potentially dangerous activity (SA, 2019b). Zimmerman (2015) echoed this lack of conversation regarding safety on SA discussion boards. Websites like SA also have an obligation to outline the distinctions of human trafficking versus voluntary sex work and provide resources not only for those involved, but for those with knowledge of it happening (fellow sugar babies or sugar daddies). In fact, according to a report by the Urban Justice Center (2006): “Empowering sex workers to identify and assist people who have been coerced is the most effective way to combat trafficking into sex work” (p.19). Sugar websites have a financial incentive to avoid an association with sex work due to U.S. laws that hold them liable for sex work facilitated on their sites (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017). Despite this limitation, the

obligation to ensure participant safety is paramount.

Federal/State Policy. Another recommendation, albeit harder to reach and implement, is to generate more higher-paying work options for students, specifically women. Although not an assault on one's decision to sugar, choosing between minimum wage and what is often labeled sex work does not provide sufficient options for college women. Roberts et al. (2010) concluded, "There is clearly a relationship developing between sex work, student financial survival strategies and debt" (p. 154). Joined with Roberts et al. (2010), the author of the current study urges state and federal institutions to consider the inequity faced by students, specifically women, after they leave school (i.e., gender pay gap, wealth gap, investing gap, debt gap, etc.) and make efforts to care for this imbalance while students are still in school. This may also include initiatives such as comprehensive debt solutions and forgiveness, financial and wealth management education, paid apprenticeships for students, paid childcare solutions, required gender pay equity reporting among companies, job re-entry training for mothers, and much more. Particularly as the pandemic has forced women out of the workforce at staggering rates, aligning state and federal initiatives to meet women-specific needs is vital to avoid gender-repressive economics (Ewing-Nelson, 2020).

Future Research

The present study is merely the beginning of exploring a niche topic that has yet to be adequately investigated within extant literature. Further examination of the relationship between the college experience and sugaring is warranted. Important for further exploration is the role of culture in sugar relationships and the sugaring lifestyle. Half of the participants in this study identified as women of color, some offering unique

examples of fetishization and heightened cultural stigma around sex work. These stories are worthy of more consideration and the investigation of compounding oppression. DeSoto (2018) began a look into sugar daddy motivation, and the researcher of the current study reiterates a need for exploring the other half of sugar relationships. Future research may also consider looking beyond the male/female relationship dynamic included in this study and explore same sex, transgender, and gender fluid/queer sugar relationships. In addition, examining the sugar mama phenomenon may provide more insights into the gendered aspects of sugar relationships. The researcher of this study echoes Jones (2015) in calling for more research that incorporates the intersectional components (i.e., race, class, age, ability, etc.) that are often intertwined with sugaring and sex work. This may also take the form of probing into the intersection of kink and sugar culture, and the enhanced boundary-setting, negotiation skills, and communication they both entail. Future research on this topic should consider employing the CSQR-Modified (CQR-M) methodology in order to collect quantitative data from a larger quantity of participants while also collecting qualitative data via short answers to open-ended questions in a written questionnaires format. Such methods have the potential to provide broader-reaching findings while still facilitating the depth and richness sought through qualitative research. Additionally, the researcher of the current study recommends further assessment of the power structures existing with sugar relationships and how those sit within larger hegemonic constructs, extending the work of Cordero (2015). Another opportunity exists to investigate the use of sugaring as a way to close the gendered pay gap, a variant category found in this research, to see if it encompasses a larger trend within sugar culture. Future research might also examine the industry of

online sex work and its interplay with sugaring, particularly following the widespread social isolation of COVID-19. Several participants inquired about the relationship between trauma and sex work, with some questioning how it contributed to their own decision to sugar. More research might detail how trauma, experienced both inside and outside of the lifestyle, interacts with the phenomenon of sugaring. Lastly, more research is needed to explore the necessary clinical skills for counselors working with individuals in the sex industry. This includes tools for bias exploration, recommendations for in-session techniques, examination of empathy inhibition, and more.

Conclusion

By examining the lived experiences of college sugar babies, a topic and population largely untraversed within academia generally and within counseling specifically, the author of this study began to shade in the many unknown details of this growing phenomenon. Using the CQR methodology to investigate the stories of ten college sugar babies, the researcher explored several new aspects of sugaring. The researcher found that one of the primary motivations for sugar involvement was financial, but that other, more intangible drivers also existed, such as adventure and educational attainment. Other motivations and benefits included access to wealth and social capital, safety in the bounded nature of the relationship, and students' use of sugaring as a stepping-stone. The author of the current study also concluded that although sugar relationships sit among larger inequitable social constructs between men and women, the act of sugaring may, in fact, act as a form of usurping dominant patriarchal power structures. The author examined the many facets of sugaring that do and do not qualify it as sex work and its use of dating discourse, settling on a constructivist view of sex work

identification and sugaring. This study has implications for theory, practice, and policy. Firstly, the author scrutinized a common narrative within sex work discourse that the women involved in it are disempowered. The author confronted this notion and endorsed an approach that instead embraces the unconventionality of sugar relationships. This becomes important at both a societal and individual level. The author of this study called for the acknowledgment of the disenfranchisement of sex workers and sugar babies at large, in addition to recommending that all counselors, specifically those working with college students, examine their beliefs and biases around sex work. Integrating sex work advocacy at a systemic and micro-level is a vital tool in fostering ethical practice and multicultural competency (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015; Ratts et al., 2015). The endeavor to build an inclusive environment for sugar babies extends to all higher education establishments, which the author of this study contended have a responsibility to become allies to sugar babies, providing neutral information that propagate safe and informed choices in the lifestyle and mental health support at an institutional level. The author also acknowledged the obligations of sugaring websites in addressing sugar baby safety, in addition to federal and state policy implications as a result of the increase in students participating in the lifestyle.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Interview #1

The interviews were approximately 1-1.5 hours and conducted over Zoom video conferencing.

Rapport Building/Introductory Statement. “My hope is that this is an open space for you to talk about your experiences as a sugar baby. If at any point you feel uncomfortable and would like to stop or move on from a question, please let me know. I’ll start with a few questions and we may expand on a few topics here and there. As a reminder, the intention of this research is to shed light on the experience of college-aged sugar babies so that counselors, like me, can come from a place of understanding when supporting those within the lifestyle. My goal is to learn, and all questions stem from a place of inquiry and nonjudgement. Please also know that this interview will be recorded. All recordings will be deleted once the research is complete and kept for no more than three years following research. All efforts will be made to conceal your identity and preserve your confidentiality.”

Introductory Question:

- 1) Tell me about your original decision to become a sugar baby.

Main Topic Questions:

- 2) Tell me about your experience as a sugar baby.*
- 3) What is unique about your experience as a student sugar baby?*
- 4) Can you talk a bit about your sugar daddy(ies)?*

Decompression/Interview Completion:

5) Why did you decide to take part in this research?

Potential Prompts/Probes:

- Talk about ways that sugaring may or may not have changed aspects of your life.
- Probe into perception of power and relationship between sex and sugaring.
- Probe into the process of payment, negotiations, income, and money.
- Probe into: in-person or online meet ups; primary mode of communication; ppm versus monthly allowances.
- Probe into how sugaring compares to non-sugar (dating/work).
- What is one of your greatest fears? (exposure/stigma, etc.) What is one of your greatest joys?
- Discuss your friends in the sugar lifestyle or who have tried it out.
- Probe into the use of drugs or alcohol within sugaring relationships.
- What advice would you share with those considering becoming sugar babies?

Follow Up Interview #2

The interviews were approximately 30 minutes-1 hour and conducted over Zoom video conferencing. The second interview was comprised of customized questioning based on participant information or a need for clarification/expansion, in addition to the questions or potential prompts below.

Question:

- 1) Did you think of anything else you might want to share following our first interview?*

- Possible prompt: How does sugaring play into your long-term goals?

**Asterisk indicates question was provided ahead of time to participants for preparation; no notation indicates this question was not provided ahead of time in order to received immediate response and/or avoid politically correct answers.*

APPENDIX B

Table 1: Cross Analysis of 10 Cases Exploring the Sugar Baby Lifestyle

Domain	Category	Subcategory	# of Cases	Frequency
Process and considerations of the lifestyle	Negotiation/payment		10	General
		Unfamiliar process - oddity of pricing human companionship	7	Typical
		Sugar daddy-led	7	Typical
		Sugar baby-led	5	Typical
		General process of negotiation/payment	4	Variant
		Pay-per-meet	4	Variant
		Price setting	2	Variant
		Privacy protection	9	General
		Dating activities	9	General
		Emotional labor	9	General
	Comparison to non-sugar dating	General emotional labor	6	Typical
		Companionship	5	Typical
		Relational skill building	4	Variant
		Social justice education	1	Rare
			8	Typical
		More authentic/clearer expectations	5	Typical
		Decline in non-sugar dating	2	Variant
		General differences	2	Variant
		Less authentic	2	Variant
		Deception in relationships	1	Rare
	Benefits of the lifestyle	Vetting	8	Typical
		Secrecy	8	Typical
		Safety	7	Typical
		Peer support network	6	Typical
		Profiles built on specific relationship conditions	5	Typical
		Setting boundaries/non-negotiables	4	Variant
		Alcohol/drugs	2	Variant
		Exclusively online	1	Rare

Domain	Category	Subcategory	# of Cases	Frequency
Sugar daddy characteristics	Financial	General	10	General
		compensation	10	General
		Supporting family/avoiding burdening family	6	Typical
		Financial freedom	6	Typical
		Ease of earning	5	Typical
		Excess, not survival	5	Typical
		Essential needs (rent, etc.)	2	Variant
		Career building and closing the pay gap	2	Variant
		Social justice causes	1	Rare
			7	Typical
	Elite Access	Misc.	5	Typical
		Restaurants	5	Typical
		Shopping	4	Variant
		Travel	2	Variant
			6	Typical
	Social capital	Safety in transactional nature of relationship	5	Typical
		Excitement/fun	5	Typical
		Mentoring/learning	5	Typical
		Education support (monetary, time, etc.)	5	Typical
		Emotional and sexual outlet	4	Variant
		Empowerment	4	Variant
		Quid pro quo trade-off	4	Variant
	Motivations		8	Typical
		Companionship/loneliness	5	Typical
		Connection to younger women	2	Variant
		Power and control	2	Variant
		Sex	2	Variant
		Social capital	2	Variant
		Escape/outlet	1	Rare
			7	Typical
	Married sugar daddies		7	Typical
		Sugar daddy attractions/desires		
		Students/mentoring	5	Typical
		Girlfriend experience	3	Variant
		Kinks/fetishes	2	Variant
	Differences		6	Typical
		Older	5	Typical
		Social justice/political views	2	Variant
			5	Typical
		Respectful/supportive		
	Affluence/reputation		4	Variant

Domain	Category	Subcategory	# of Cases	Frequency
Self-perception and identity	Misc. characteristics		4	Variant
	Deception		2	Variant
	Similarities		1	Rare
	Disrespectful		1	Rare
	Internal stigma and shame		10	General
	Dissonance		10	General
		General cognitive dissonance	7	Typical
		Identity as a sex worker	7	Typical
		Sacrificed authenticity and compartmentalization	6	Typical
		Protective justifications: Safety in the student identity	5	Typical
		Guilt/shame	2	Variant
	Self-esteem		9	General
		Enhancement	7	Typical
		Disentanglement	4	Variant
		Self-understanding and acceptance	4	Variant
		Diminishment	2	Variant
Motivation/influence to participate in the lifestyle	Challenged/expanded worldview		5	Typical
	Financial incentive		10	General
	Peer network word-of-mouth		7	Typical
	Adventure		6	Typical
		Thrill	4	Variant
		Bending the status quo	4	Variant
		Independence	2	Variant
		Sexual exploration	2	Variant
	Educational attainment		6	Typical
	Comparison to non-sugar work		5	Typical
	Significant other-related		4	Variant
		End of relationship/loss	3	Variant
		Encouragement	1	Rare
		Escape	1	Rare
	Relational: Emotional and sexual outlet		3	Variant
	Trauma		3	Variant
	Pandemic-related motivations		1	Rare

Domain	Category	Subcategory	# of Cases	Frequency
Misc. code (ancillary information not fitting for other categories)	Advice - messages to potential sugar babies		10	General
		Know thyself	7	Typical
		Safety and privacy	6	Typical
		Education/informed process	5	Typical
		Don't settle/set boundaries	4	Variant
		Beware	2	Variant
		Have support network	2	Variant
	Incidental/participant-specific		9	General
	Reason for participating in research		9	General
		Normalization/fight the stigma	5	Typical
		Catharsis and ability to tell story	4	Variant
		Misc. reasons	2	Variant
	Sugar daddies versus sugar mamas		2	Variant
Sex and intimacy involved in the lifestyle	Expectations		9	General
		Expectation for sex	6	Typical
		No expectation for sex	5	Typical
	Setting sexual boundaries		6	Typical
	Fetish participation		4	Variant
	Pleasure		3	Variant
	Uncertainty/discomfort		3	Variant
	Abusive		1	Rare
	Camming		1	Rare
Negative effects of the lifestyle	Stigma		10	General
		Reputation and public perception	9	General
		Judgment from father/significant other	5	Typical
		Judgment from family/friends	3	Variant
		Cultural expectations	3	Variant
	Jeopardized safety and privacy		9	General
	Detrimental to life		4	Variant

Domain	Category	Subcategory	# of Cases	Frequency
Power dynamics involved in the lifestyle	Disillusionment with men and their power Scams/attempt to “out” identity Sexual health Fetishized		4	Variant
			3	Variant
			3	Variant
			1	Rare
	Sugar baby (self) Exchange of power Sugar daddy (other)		9	General
			6	Typical
			4	Variant

Note: General = 9-10 cases; Typical = 5-8 cases; Variant = 2-4 cases; Rare = 1 case; portions of transcript deemed no code necessary not included in table.

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