

‘A practical way to have a sex life’

Between the Rationality of Sex Work and the
Authenticity of Romance

*A critical discourse analysis of the affective practice of sugar
dating in Norway*

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Love is for poor people -Brandon Wade, 2012

That the mutual affection of the people concerned should be the one paramount reason for marriage, outweighing everything else, was and always had been absolutely unheard of in the practice of the ruling classes; that sort of thing only happened in romance – or among the oppressed classes, who did not count.

-Friedrich Engels, 1884

Abstract

The theoretical problem at the core of this thesis is that of the relationship between the subject and the society, specifically in digital spaces. I explore this through the emerging phenomenon of sugar dating. I have collected data from three interrelated discursive layers of this affective practice with the purpose to provide an understanding of what the *appeal* might be of becoming a sugar baby, sugar mommy, or a sugar daddy in the specific context of Norwegian society, with its strong norms of gender equality. These discursive layers are; (1) the national debates about sugar dating; (2) the interfaces and blogs of three popular sugar dating sites, and finally; (3) the personal narratives and perceptions about sugar dating produced by sugar babies and sugar daddies interviewed. I analyse and interpret these data through a combination of critical discourse analysis and some theories of the psychosocial. In the third and final layer I show how the opposing discourses about sugar dating from National debates, and interfaces are overcome, enacted, struggled with, performed, and made sense of.

Sugar dating provides possibilities for overcoming the *stigmatization* that we impose on sex workers and their clients. It does this by proposing a new language for an old practise (thus transforming the practise itself). However, this new language seemed to convince sugar daddies much more than sugar babies, and because of this the *emotional labour* of the sugar baby was intensified.

The appeal of sugar dating can be understood as located in its essence as a discourse coalition between the affective practices of romantic love and sex work, blending the authenticity of romance with the rationality of sex work. It can also be conceptualized as a *pornography of reality*, in which we are subjectified through tropes and themes from pornography as well as our shared ‘pop cultural imagination’.

Sugar dating is also guided by the sensibility of *postfeminism*, in which discourses of both feminism and anti-feminism are mixed. In particular, the postfeminist notion and insistence upon the existence of eternal essential sexual differences are central to the pleasure and appeal of sugar dating. In sugar dating the sugar daddy is defined by his chivalric behaviour, while the sugar baby should be non-threatening, ‘drama-free’, and with little friction, providing as little as possible emotion work for the sugar daddy. There is pleasure to be found in enacting and performing such uncomplicated gender norms and herein lies much of the appeal.

Finally, sugar Dating can be understood as a postfeminist and neoliberal *solution* to postfeminist and neoliberal material, emotional and relational problems.

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1 Introduction

In this introduction I present (1.1) the phenomenon of sugar dating as the subject of this thesis through the eyes of Emma Clare, the host of Norwegian documentary series *Innafor*, in which the perceived commodification of intimacy in digital spaces was questioned. Further, I account for (1.2) the purpose of this study, and then I (1.3) present my research questions. Finally, I account for (1.4) my own feminist viewpoint on the subject of sex work/prostitution.

1.1 Sugar dating: The sharing economy of love?

As with any technology used for communication, we have found romance and intimate connections with others through the medium of the internet since its invention, through dating sites, social media, and various more specialized ‘sex sites’. According to sociologists, the internet has become “a key site in which subjectivities are constructed”, and “we become who we are, at least in part, through our interactions in these kinds of spaces” (Brickell, 2013: 60). When we create our personal profile on a website hoping to develop relationships with others, be they professional, social or intimate, we *construct ourselves* in the very process, and we can only do this with the categories that are available to us through the affordances of the website (Stanfill, 2015). In this thesis I am interested in processes of *becoming* in digital spaces, and with the ways that these processes are always and paradoxically relational. I explore them through the emerging phenomenon of *sugar dating*.

The first sugar dating site, Seeking Arrangement was launched as far back as 2006. According to Brandon Wade, the creator of this website, he initially made it for his own benefit. In interviews he has stated that when he was young he was a ‘shy nerd’ that had serious problems with dating, and he got an advice from his mother: “To study very hard, because if I was successful later on in life, and I had the financial means, and I could be generous, then dating would be easier for me. I followed that advice! It worked out well!” (Brandon Wade in Edwards, Jim: 2012).

The relationship, or *arrangement*, that is promoted in sugar dating, is based on traditional gender roles. Ideally it consists of young and attractive sugar babies and older wealthier sugar daddies that agree to enter into a ‘mutually beneficial arrangement’, where intimacy is usually

expected and where gifts or money are received by the sugar babies. The arrangement could also consist of a sugar mommy, and a male sugar baby, or two people of the same gender. Seeking Arrangement became very popular and currently it has, according to their own accounts, more than ten million members worldwide. They market themselves specifically to students, and they claim to have more than 4,2 million students worldwide as current members. (Seeking.com, 2019) Because of the American debt crisis sugar dating has become a way of financing studies in the United States (Terrance, 2015; Motyl, 2013). There is now a plethora of websites available that facilitates sugar dating, and within the context of Nordic countries two sugar dating sites have created much public attention. These are the Danish site Sugar Daters, and the Norwegian site Rich Meet Beautiful. Together with the American ‘original’, Seeking Arrangement, these three sites are the objects of analysis in this thesis. All participants have been recruited through the site Sugar Daters.

Innafor, an investigative documentary series directed at young people has looked at the sugar dating phenomenon. The episode ‘Kjøp Meg’ (Buy Me) questioned whether “*new technology and sexual liberation has made it easier and more attractive to monetize on our bodies and on sex?*” The term ‘grey area prostitution’ was introduced, as a pun for the way that the different digital platforms and dating applications are perceived to be used in order to monetize on our sexualities with “less stigma, more anonymity and a bigger experience of control”

(Gabrielsen, 2017) The reporter for *Innafor*, Emma Claire, visited the offices of the Danish sugar dating website Sugar Daters where she was assured by one co-owner of the website, Rikki T Jørgensen, that sugar dating is not a form of prostitution and that it is better to see it as ‘the sharing economy of love’. “Something is exchanged, but it is still dating” he proposed, continuing; “it is not a bought relationship, but an equal relationship where both of us actively says yes”. Finally, he claimed: “A prostitute says; I want your money, but not you. A sugar baby says; I want you – and the money is just a bonus” (Gabrielsen, 2017). Staged in opposition to the prostitute, the sugar baby was produced as someone with an active desire for her sugar daddy; “This exchange relationship is already there in any relation between a man and a woman.” This last point has been noticed by Marxists as well as feminists and social scientists and some of them have chosen to name this particular system of exploitation; ‘the patriarchy’. (Higgins, 2018)

Sugar dating has been understood as part of the sharing economy by others than the entrepreneurs of these websites. The book *Sugar Daddy Capitalism*, written by the economist Peter Fleming (2019) is not mainly concerned with sugar dating, although it tackles it, but

neoliberalism and ‘the sharing economy’, also labelled ‘the gig economy’. He sees sugar dating as a metaphor for the direction our whole economy and the work within it is heading when it is deformed in various ways, and the worker becomes steadily more decollectivized (2019: 36-60). Thus, for Fleming, sugar dating is not the sharing economy of *love*, but the sharing economy of *sex work* (2019).

Perhaps they are both correct. In sugar dating, sex work and romance seem to have merged (Nayar, 2016). Because of this it is inherently contradictory. Its contradictions concerns gender, romance and sexuality. Sugar Dating becomes a prism through which we can examine how these social constructions, affective practices and institutions evolve, regress, or morph into new forms and affective practices.

1.2 Purpose of this study

This thesis addresses the merging of the discursive-affective realms of romance and sex work that occurs in sugar dating, and I am interested in what happens when this specific form of internet dating enters the Norwegian society, with its strong norms of gender equality.

According to World Economic Forum’s global gender gap index for 2018 Norway is ‘second best’, only preceded by Iceland: “The top four countries are all Nordic nations: with Norway, Sweden and Finland coming second, third and fourth respectively” (Whiting, 2018).

Sugar dating is firmly situated in popular culture, and it exists in close proximity to the discourses of pornography, building on, and borrowing from its themes, tropes and aesthetics (Kristiansen, 2018; Davis: 2015). Laura Kipnis (1999) has suggested that we regard pornography with more creativity than the simple dichotomy of freedom of speech vs. ‘putting a leash on obscenity’, insisting that there are other questions to be asked:

If you start out from the supposition that no complexity could possibly be found in ‘lower’ forms of culture, you will of course miss the complexity that does reside there. Pornography may indeed be the sexuality of a consumer society. It may have a certain emptiness, a lack of interior, a disconnectedness - as does so much of our popular culture. And our high culture It speaks to its audience because it’s thoroughly astute about who we are underneath the social veneer, astute about the costs of cultural conformity and the discontent at the core of routinized lives and normative sexuality. Its audience is drawn to it because it provides opportunities – perhaps in coded, sexualized forms, but opportunities nonetheless – for a range of effects, pleasures and desires; for the experience of transgression, utopian aspirations,

sadness, optimism, loss; and even the most primary longings for love and plentitude (Kipnis, 1999: xii).

Sugar dating could be perceived through the same anti-elitist perspective. According to Kipnis, pornography “is the royal road to the cultural psyche” (1999: 162), and the best way to understand it is as a form of cultural critique. It specifically confronts that which we are not allowed to articulate in a society, and this is the real reason for why we are so shocked and disgusted by it (1999: 162,163). I find studies of popular culture, particularly the very low forms, looked down upon by those who see themselves fit to judge the taste (and behaviour) of others interesting. These cultural forms, as Kipnis points out, can often tell us something about ourselves, and our society.

Popular phenomena are popular for a reason, but sometimes one needs a closer look, and this is what I intend to do with the emerging phenomenon of sugar dating. Why would it be attractive to redefine oneself as the sugar baby or sugar daddy in Scandinavian countries with their strong norms of gender equality? And why at this exact moment in time? If the emergence of sugar dating can be explained solely in terms of it facilitating the transaction of sexual services, why would not the prolific number of websites that more explicitly facilitate for commercial sexual encounters cover these ‘needs’ and fantasies? The fact that they do not, indicates that sugar dating articulates at least something more, or something else.

If one moves beyond the moral dichotomy inherent in the question of whether the sugar dating websites facilitate for prostitution or not there is no doubt that the gender norms exhibited here are regressive, with the male positioned as ‘provider’ and the emphasis upon youth and beauty as the main assets of the sugar baby. In Norwegian and Scandinavian culture, norms concerning gender equality have become quite strong in a relative short amount of time. Perhaps the emergence of sugar dating can be seen as an expression of nostalgia, a longing for a time when the relations between the sexes were less complicated? It might, of course, simply be understood as part of an ongoing backlash against feminism, in the terms of Susan Faludi (1991), and probably it is that too. But, as I will show in this thesis, it is also more complex.

In a term paper in 2018 (Kristiansen) I analysed the sugar-dating site ‘Rich Meet Beautiful’. I found that the subject positions offered by sugar dating was the entrepreneurial self and the *neoliberal feminist*. Thus, something that at first glance seemed to be the very expression of anti-feminism, containing overtly sexist ideas of gender, was at the same time carrying with it certain feminist discourses. It became clear that a term paper limited to ten pages could not do

justice to this phenomenon, and that a research project that looked at the actual uses and users of these dating sites in the specific context of Norwegian society might be warranted. The sugar dating sites have very strict user rules, and its interfaces guides us when we create our profiles towards *becoming* the sugar baby or the sugar daddy or mommy; These sites exhibit a profound normativity of design. It seems difficult to use them in order to start a conventional relationship, but users are also prohibited from explicitly conducting commercial sexual services here. As it seems, one *has* to become the sugar baby, the sugar daddy or the sugar mommy in order to use these sites.

Sugar dating is constructed in the language of the nuclear family; daddy, mommy, baby. Maybe, I proposed, it is not a coincidence that these subjectivities are manufactured in a time “when the nuclear family is dissolving, or at least it is no longer considered the only solution to the problem of how we should organize our sexualities” (Kristiansen, 2018). I noticed that there is a promise of *nurture* in this language, and that this could perhaps be connected to the deeply uncertain time we live in (in terms of financial, political, environmental, and relational). Another element that I addressed was the fact that, in sugar dating, there is also the possibility of a sugar mommy. Because of this, traditional gender norms could theoretically be subverted (Kristiansen, 2018). In this thesis I explore these elements further, as I look for potential *positives* of sugar dating.

Sugar dating is practically unresearched within the cultural context of the Norwegian society, as well as other Nordic countries. It thus represents a research gap. In this thesis I seek to redress this gap. I seek to contribute to research on internet dating, as well as the sociology of sex work. I also pay particular attention to the emotional labour of sex workers and how sex workers and their clients cope with stigmatization. Additionally, the thesis can be considered a contribution to the field of porn studies.

1.3 Research questions and structure of thesis

My initial idea for this thesis was, similar to what was suggested by Mel Stanfill (2015), to combine interface discourse analysis and ethnographic examinations of site visitors (1071), in order to understand how users, navigate, and possibly subvert, the disciplinary power of sugar dating. In this way one might not only learn something about the specific phenomenon of sugar dating, but also about the relationship between digital interfaces and the subject.

However, as became clear: The *public discourses* concerning sugar dating were also relevant for how sugar daddies and sugar babies perceived of sugar dating and their own role within it, and because of this I also provide an analysis of these discourses.

The analysis looks at three interrelated discursive layers of the affective practice of sugar dating. These are; (1) public discourses, (2) interfaces and blogs, and (3) netnographic examinations of site visitors of sugar dating sites and narratives created in in-depth interviews with three sugar daddies and six sugar babies situated in Oslo. I am interested in how and why one *becomes* the sugar baby or the sugar daddy/mommy. The overarching research question is as follows:

How can we understand the appeal of sugar dating within the context of Norwegian society (with its strong norms of gender equality)?

I shed light on this by answering the more specific and interrelated secondary research questions:

(1) In what ways is sugar dating imagined and made sense of in public discourse?

(2) How can the subject positions offered by sugar dating be defined, and what are their specific rules for feeling, courtship, and conduct?

(3) In light of the above, how do sugar daters see, define and experience themselves and their partners? And how do they make sense of their sugar dating activities?

According to Michel Foucault there is an intrinsic relationship between truth, language and power (Foucault, in Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 54). I pay close attention to truth claims regarding *gender, sexuality, and romance* on all three levels of the analysis. At the same time, following Kipnis (1999) I look for social transgressions, specifically if and how they occur in sugar dating. This thesis borrows from different, and theoretically conflicting, tools in order to best understand the appeal of sugar dating. For instance, I combine critical discourse analysis with psychosocial theory. In the theoretical and methodological part of the thesis I explain and defend these choices.

In chapter 2 I present previous research on the phenomenon of sugar dating, together with some other perspectives that are useful in order to understand sugar dating, such as processes of stigmatization, the emotional labour of sex work, the relationship between consumer capitalism and romantic love, and the economic and ideological system of neoliberalism. In chapter three I present the methodological framework of this thesis, which is basically the

philosophical question: What is the relationship between the subject and the society, and how do we become our self? I do not propose a definite answer to this question, but rather present and discuss some theories that will be useful in order to understand the phenomenon of sugar dating. In chapter 4 I present and discuss the methods, and in chapter 5 I present the three-part discourse analysis of public discourses, digital interfaces, and website users. Finally, in chapter 6 I summarize the analysis, discuss its implications, and make suggestions for further research. But first it is necessary to clarify my ideological viewpoint.

1.4 Feminist approach and terminology

The research field that tackles the issue of sex work/prostitution is inherently problematic due to its complex political nature. According to May-Len Skilbrei:

The field is heavily imbued with ideological conflicts, also among researchers. This makes other research difficult to apply, as it all too often is guided by efforts to promote certain policies. With the realization that there intrinsically will be other interpretations and points of view, it is particularly important to clarify which assumptions guide the analysis (2012: 245).

This thesis is written from a strong feminist perspective, but it does not share the perspective of currently hegemonic radical feminism, since this is a ‘feminism’ that, in its various coalitions with Christian-conservatives and populist right wingers (fighting pornography as well as prostitution), seems in fact to have abandoned the feminist project. Feminism is a form of humanism, while radical feminism is dependent upon a construction of female sex workers as devoid of agency, and as incapable of making choices for themselves. Because of this their voices are consistently silenced within the feminist movement. (Gira Grant: 2014; Pheterson: 1996; Mac&Smith: 2018; Fox: 2018; Doezeema: 2010; Bernstein; 2007). This feminism does not believe female sex workers (nor their clients) to be quite human. As Melissa Gira Grant puts it: “*If woman is other, whore is the other’s other*” (2014: 77, my emphasis).

In their book ‘*Revolting Prostitutes*’, Juno Mac & Molly Smith (2018), both sex workers themselves, warn against both the radical, *carceral view* on prostitution and the *liberal view*. Referring to the *carceral view*, they assert:

The mainstream feminist movement is correct in identifying prostitution as a patriarchal institution. They convincingly miss that policing is too. Attempting to eradicate commercial sex through policing does not tackle patriarchy; instead it continues to produce harassment, arrest, prosecution, eviction, violence and poverty for those who sell sex (2018:209).

According to the liberal view, on the other hand, sex work is solely a matter of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’:

This liberal perspective - that one person’s ability to profit off their own sexual objectification can magically overturn the status quo for all - leaves many feminist critics dubious. We too are critical of glib descriptions of ‘empowerment’ or ‘choice’. Whilst it is up to each sex worker to describe their own experiences (and knowing that such arguments are often a defensive response to stigma), we share the view of other feminists who observe that prostitution is generally contextualized by a *lack* of choices, not an abundance (Mac & Smith: 2018: 217, 218).

Mac & Smith assert that sex work needs to be understood *structurally*, and as a form of *labour*. As with all other forms of labour under capitalism, it can be enjoyable as well as ‘empowering’, but it can most certainly also be exploitive. But, as they argue; sometimes, for some individuals, at some points in their life, this is the best, and often the only, opportunity available within our economic system for the individual to maintain an income. And as long as this is our economic system, we should not make their conditions worse: “You don’t have to like your job to want to keep it” (Mac & Smith, 2018: 55). Personally, I adhere to this Marxist feminist view of sex work. However, it would be reductionism to assert that a phenomenon such as sugar dating can be understood solely in terms of the material, and a more critical perspective is surely needed.

According to Viviana Zelizer (2000), the relationship between intimacy and monetary transfers needs to be conceptualized not as ‘hostile worlds’ – the view that there is such a contradiction between the world of intimacy and the world of money that an intermingling between the two opposite worlds leads to contamination, nor as ‘nothing but’ – the view that they are nothing but marked exchanges or nothing but coercion, but as ‘differentiated practices’: “Each marked by a distinctive set of monetary transfers” (2000: 817) There is fluid relationship between different forms of intimacy, and different forms of payment:

Monetary transfers and erotic relationships, then, have actually coexisted and shaped each other for centuries. Every population that uses money at all adopts some set of distinctions between erotic relations; most populations mark those distinctions not with payment versus non-payment, but with distinctive forms of monetary transfers (Zelizer, 2000: 822).

In order to take sugar dating seriously, it needs to be put into this critical frame and understood as a ‘differentiated practice’.

Elisabeth Bernstein (2007a) argues that the sex industry always needs to be seen as part of wider societal and economic transformations (1-21). When dealing with the subject of sex work it is important to notice that other factors than gender is at work, such as class (both cultural and economic capital), ethnicity, race, and sexuality. Sex work takes diverse forms, and a distinction between voluntary and coerced sex work urgently needs to be made.

How we use words matter, and according to poststructuralist theory it is the very fabric of reality. The word prostitution denotes a crime, and the prostitute switches in public imagination between that of the deviant and the victim. The term sex worker (first used by sex worker/activist Carol Leigh); “refers to people who sell or trade their own sexual labour in exchange for a resource which is often money, but can also be drugs, alcohol, or shelter” (Mac & Smith, 2018: 1). It also refers to strippers, porn actors, camgirls/boys, and others that exchange the performance or enactment of aspects of sexuality against material resources. The terminology ‘sex work’ denotes that it *can* be a form of work (as opposed to merely an expression of individual deviance, or the radical feminist idea that one ‘sells one’s body’), and that this work can, in fact, be *consensual*. In this thesis I use the word sex work when this is the word that is used in the literature or by participants in the study, or in general when I can choose the terminology, but I use the terminology prostitute/prostitution when those are the words used by the referenced authors or participants. However, most of the time, I simply use the terminology of the discursive construction studied: Sugar baby, sugar daddy, and sugar mommy.

2 Literature review

In this chapter I assess previous research that are relevant in order to understand sugar dating. First, (2.1) I look at previous research on sugar dating. Then, since sugar dating needs to be seen in relation to processes of stigmatization I (2.2) account for the relationship between the Nordic model of prostitution policy, public discourse, and the whore stigma. Further (2.3) I present empirical research conducted on the specific form of sex work named ‘the girlfriend experience’ and the emotional labour that this implies. Then (2.4) I account for the intrinsic relationship between romantic love and consumer capitalism, and some of the problems and contradictions inherent to romantic love. Finally (2.6) I account for the relationship between neoliberalism and the ‘gig economy’.

2.1 Sugar dating: Previous research

There was not much research to be found on the phenomenon of sugar dating, and what could be found were most often located in the field of law, seeking to uncover whether the practice is criminal (Motyl: 2013; Deeks: 2013; Miller: 2012), or how it could possibly be regulated (Lindman & Andersson, 2019). There was also one study in the field of psychology that sought to uncover the perceptions of sugar dating in the population, through quantitative research. It concluded that to finance education through sugar dating was *not* currently socially accepted in the United States (Reed, 2015). There is not much research to be found within the field of cultural studies or media and communication studies, and the little there is comes from a north American context. The contributions of Illona Nayar (2016), Rachel Davis (2017) and Brittany Cordero (2015) are relevant here as they have provided insight into the relationship between sugar dating, emotional labour and stigma (Nayar), postfeminism and neoliberalism (Davis), and patriarchy, power and agency (Cordero).

Nayar (2016) has qualitatively analysed the discourse on a popular sugar dating blog, and she has argued that sugar dating differs both from explicit forms of sex work *and* romantic love. In her own words:

Discussed along economic and emotional dimensions, blog participants embrace the economic underpinnings of their instrumental uses of intimacy, but they also invoke romantic discourses

of chemistry, connection and personal choice and the morality of economic exchange, demonstrating a refusal to see their relations as work and solely driven by market logic (1).

Sugar Dating represents an intensification of ‘the girlfriend experience’, and it mirrors the bounded authenticity as introduced by Bernstein (2007), (See chapter 2.3.2). However, in sugar dating the; “bounds of the transaction is purposefully blurry in what is conceived of as a relationship” (Nayar, 2016: 6). In sugar dating the expectations of mutuality and authenticity that already is part of contemporary sex work, according to Bernstein (2007) is intensified, and criteria associated with late modern romantic love such as chemistry, attraction and connection are invoked. It is thus seen as a relationship, not merely a transaction. (2016: 7) At the same time sugar daters framed their practice as a form of barter, where “forms of capital flow in both directions” (Nayar, 2016: 7). Money and gifts on the one hand, beauty, affection and attention on the other. Still, and importantly, sugar daters insisted that this transactionality is inherent to *all* relationships. But, as opposed to traditional romantic relationships, the drama, pretence, self-sacrificing behaviour, unrealistic expectations and heartbreak of romantic love could be *avoided* in sugar dating: “Sugar daters expect and appreciate an intimacy that develops under reliable and controlled conditions, which stand in contrast to the unpredictable nature and emotional demands of late modern love”(Nayar, 2016: 6). Both sugar daddies and sugar babies approached the practice with certain distinctions. Sugar babies insisted on distinguishing themselves from professional sex workers and expressed disappointment in sugar daddies that disregarded the emotional norms expected in sugar dating; they did not like to be perceived of and treated as escorts. On the other hand, sugar daddies emphasised that they preferred to give gifts and separated the exchange of money from the sexual encounter. This was done to avoid thinking of it as payment for sexual service (Nayar, 2016: 8). Thus, even if these relationships were based on the exchange of money it was important for both sugar daddies and sugar babies that it was not conceived out of greed or desperation (2016 :8). Both sugar daddies and sugar babies faced reprimands from other users when the boundaries and egalitarian philosophy of this contractual relationship were not preserved (2016:9).

Nayar pointed out that even though sugar dating could and should be criticized for its neoliberal ethic of self-interest it should also be noted that it subverted “familiar narratives of self-sacrifice and the emotional management of others that typically shape female experience of traditional relationships” (2016:10). It encouraged women to put a value on the energy they expend on intimate encounters, and this reflected some of “Marxist feminism’s call to

recognize women's labour-power and the value of social reproduction" (Nayar, 2016: 10). In addition, sugar dating simultaneously challenged "assumptions that commercialization of sex is inherently exploitative or oppressive to women", and it questioned "the empowerment and fulfilment assumed of traditional relationships as well as the presumption that such intimacy is "free of economic and other demands" (2016: 10). In her conclusion, Nayar was critical to the moral distinctions that were made by blog participants between sugar dating and sex work and argued that this served to "further marginalize sex workers who's needs are systematically ignored or even disparaged by those who also benefit from legitimizing commodified forms of intimacy" (2016: 11).

Davis (2017) has looked at the relationship between the literary figure Lolita, the artist Lana Del Rey and sugar culture on blog communities on Tumblr, and the connections between these popular cultural motives and postfeminism. There has recently occurred an explosion of 'Lolitamania' in pop music, and Lana Del Rey has been identified as the most commercially successful of the current Lolita-inflected artists; "describing her image as a blend of nymphet and Femme fatale transported from the 1950s and 1960s into today"

(Bertand & Leving, 2013; Davis, 2017:17). Scholars of pop music has argued that the lyrics of Lana Del Rey are postfeminist in many ways; including an interplay between feminism and anti-feminism, through a combination of subversion and submission, and a prevalence of irony and knowingness (Kurstin, 2014; Davis:2017:19). The Tumblr communities provided "examples of the ways in which some young women participate and make sense of postfeminist, neoliberal social conditions" (2017: 41,42). Lolita and Lana del Rey were; "examples of a type of performative femininity" that they strive to embody, and sugar culture were "seen as a means of earning the money necessary to satisfactorily embody the type of consumer-oriented femininity exemplified by Lolita and Lana Del Rey"(2017: 42). Symbols of femininity such as pink roses, lollipops and heart-shaped sunglasses where combined with symbols of violence and melancholy, indicating discontent with the postfeminist, neoliberal conditions in which they live. And "the prevalence of posts expressing depressive, suicidal and self-destructive ideas indicates that these individuals may have experienced the failures of neoliberalism and postfeminism as personal or individual failures." (Davis, 2017: 43) Davis concludes with the idea that this can help feminists communicate with young people about issues of gender:

Rather than criticize them or lament their seemingly anti-feminist actions, feminists may have more success pointing out to these young people that the discontent they are experiencing is the result of a neoliberal system that sets them up for failure (Davis, 2017:46).

Cordero (2015) has conducted in-depth interviews with users of the website Seeking Arrangement, asking questions about how power and agency are exercised and practiced in their relationships, seeking to determine where it lies on the “spectrum of patriarchal discourse” (vi). The difference between sugar dating and traditional heterosexual relationships was, according to Cordero, only a matter of degree since:

Throughout history it has been accepted that men are the financial providers, and that women seek out men of financial means as ideal romantic and marital partners. It can also be argued that this is still the case, despite advancements for women in professional and financial spheres (Cordero, 2015:93).

Seen in this light sugar dating represented a continuation of the historical construction of patriarchy, with its oppressive gender roles. For the sugar baby, agency was “a direct reflection of her social conditions - what little bit of agency that is possible of attaining is precluded upon first recognizing that she isn’t in a position of power” (2015: 98). However, within the boundaries of the relationship, and at the same time as realizing that the sugar daddy ultimately had the power since he could end the relationship any time and take away her economic support “some female sugar daters felt comfortable setting boundaries around what they would do and not do for that money” (2015: 98). As opposed to the sugar babies, the sugar daddies expressed that “power in sugar dating is more balanced than it is in traditional relationships because everything is ‘out in the open’” (2015: 98). Further, in sugar dating, sugar daddies were considered valuable even as they aged, as opposed to sugar babies, who had to be “realistic, or aware that their value will diminish with time. This fear mimics that of the larger culture, where women in general are considered less valuable as their sexuality and beauty fade” (Cordero, 2015: 99). Cordero concluded with stating that:

Even if on the surface sugar dating [...] looks more like a john-prostitute interaction, it can also be stated that these patriarchal bargains are struck in marriages as well, thus making all three women – the sugar baby, the prostitute and the wife – ‘empowered’ subjects within an oppressive social construct (2015:99).

The contribution of Nayar (2016) is probably the most relevant in the context of this study, since it explores the relationship between stigmatization and sugar dating. It also framed sugar dating in terms of its emotional labour, and it looked at the distinctions between romance and

sex work that occurred in sugar dating. These elements are also central to this thesis. I am also interested in the relationship between sugar dating as ‘lived’ popular culture, as well as the relationship between sugar dating and neoliberalism/ postfeminism and the contribution of Davis (2017) is valuable here. And finally; that sugar dating is but a recent expression of the oppressive social construction of patriarchy (Cordero: 2015) is interesting, although perhaps, a bit ‘obvious’.

2.2 The Nordic model of prostitution policy and stigmatization

The Nordic model of prostitution policy is a policy that criminalizes the buyers of sexual services, but not the provider. It was first implemented in Sweden in 1999, and it was implemented in Norway in 2009. It is marketed by its proponents as a distinctly ‘feminist’ policy, and the most central arguments for implementing such policies is that it is seen as a useful tool to fight human trafficking, as well as the perceived patriarchal control of women by men, both in prostitution, but also in society in general (Skilbrei, 2012; Levy & Jacobsson, 2013). However, Amnesty International have documented the lived reality of sex workers in Norway and revealed comprehensive human rights violations against sex workers, mostly migrants. (2016a). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to go further into the details of the reasons for why such laws are problematic, but it is enough to mention that Amnesty International (2016b), UNAIDS (2012), the medical journal Lancet (2015), Human Rights Watch (2019), and the World Health Organization (2019), together with sex workers right organizations such as the Norwegian PION (2019), and the Swedish Rose Alliance (2014), all strongly suggest the abandonment of such policies, since research imply that they are damaging to sex workers, as well as contributing to the spreading of HIV. This is relevant in this context since such laws, as well as being ineffective and damaging for sex workers, also seem to contribute to the continued stigmatization of sex workers and their clients. (Skilbrei & Holmström, 2017)

2.2.1 The victim/villain-dichotomy: National debates

May-Len Skilbrei (2012) has analysed debates on prostitution in Norway from the 1970s until the introduction of the ban against purchasing sexual services. She has shown how the ban was the result of several discourses colliding:

As feminist and immigration concerns came together, thus linking discourses of ‘prostitution as violence’ and ‘prostitution as possible trafficking’ and ‘prostitution as public nuisance’ a discourse coalition was established (2012: 254).

It was not until the 1980s that prostitution in the Norwegian society started to be seen as a ‘social problem’ in itself, and as a problem first and foremost related to *gender*, since before this it was seen as a mere fact of life constituting essential gender differences (Skilbrei, 2012: 249). It was also not until this era that the ‘whore customer’ was formed as a problematic entity for the Norwegian society (Skilbrei, 2012: 251). In western societies, due to the double standard, this (as simply acting in accordance with his nature), has usually been the way a patron of prostitution has been seen. He could even be portrayed as potentially a *victim* of the criminal, deviant, and contagious prostitute, as shown by Hallgrimsdottir et. al (2008: 127). It was also in this era that prostitution started to be defined as, in its essence, a form of *violence* against women. This violence was seen as so immense that the *psyches* of the women was thought to be thoroughly damaged. (Skilbrei, 2012: 251) These discourses of fragile or ruined female sexualities have deep roots in our culture. Foucault named discourses like these “the hysterization of women” (1990: 114), and as these debates show; we still have an ambiguous relationship to how and where women can be sexual, without simultaneously being understood as pathological.

The stereotypes have shifted during these decades. From the prostitute as a deviant, contagious criminal, luring innocent men, to the client as the deviant criminal, luring innocent (young) women. But these stereotypes can swiftly shift: “Constructions of sex workers as passive victims lacking agency and self-determination are, it seems, not mutually exclusive from a construction of them as an immoral and deviant nuisance” (Levy & Jacobsen, 2013: 338). In the course of the 2000s it became increasingly difficult to debate prostitution without bringing *trafficking* into the equation (Skilbrei, 2012: 258). The contemporary discourses concerning trafficking in women can be seen as a re-emergence of the myth of white slavery; The ‘white slave panic’ was the notion that European white women were abducted by non-western men and forced or deceived to become enslaved prostitutes in ‘the orient’, South America or Africa. This has been proven to have been highly exaggerated, and in many ways the current panics about trafficking in women follows the same pattern, though the migration now goes the other way (Doezema: 2000). According to Doezema (2000): “Research indicates that today’s stereotypical ‘trafficking victim’ bears as little resemblance to women migrating for work in the sex industry as did her historical counterpart.” (24).

Current discourses of prostitution seem to have become completely conflated with discourses and myths, of human trafficking.

Finally, the radical feminist argument about prostitution as being in essence a form of violence towards women was never enough to justify the law, but the emergence of Nigerian women in street prostitution in particularly the streets of Bergen and Oslo “needs to be seen as a central reason for why criminalization of the purchase of sex came about” (Skilbrei, 2012: 253). The prostitute as an innocent victim was not enough to justify the law:

While women selling sex in the national debates were framed as victim’s society needed to rescue, the prostitution of Nigerian women was to a larger degree framed as a problem for society [...] made possible by the fact that the women was constructed as ‘the other’ in terms of their skin colour and by the ‘un-Norwegian’ way in which they practiced prostitution (Skilbrei, 2012: 253).

Thus, the stereotype of the aggressive, racialized street walker had to be put in to play.

2.2.2 Whore stigma

Western culture has possibly never been so sexualized as it is currently (Attwood, 2014; Gill 2018; Hawkes, 2000), but there are still imposed limits, especially when it comes to female sexuality. The ‘whore stigma’ is related to this ideological landscape. According to Hallgrimsdottir et al., stigmas of the sex industry are not constant, but “reveal themselves to be both deeply ecological and accommodating to a range of concerns about female sexuality and normative behaviour that are sensitive to historical time” (2008: 119). At this particular historical moment, the whore stigma seems to be upheld mostly by the currently hegemonic branch of radical feminism. According to ‘Filipa Fox’ (2018), a sex worker writing under a pseudonym due to anti-sex work stigma, there is being done an *epistemic injustice* against sex workers: “Durable epistemic injustices are those which occur when groups of marginalized persons fail to be recognized in the dominant social imaginary for long historical periods as *subjects who can speak for themselves*” (Medina, in Fox, 2018:197, my emphasis). And, she asserts:

We are understood as victims of violence whose knowledge is coerced and therefore untrustworthy. Those of us who refuse to be victims are seen instead as threats to the social order – illegitimate, criminal subjects unable to be assimilated into polite society (Fox, 2018: 198).

There are three types of stigma, according to Erving Goffman (1990); Those that stem from physical deformities, those that stem from some sort of ‘blemishes of individual character’, (he mentions addiction, homosexuality, mental disorder, unemployment and radical political behaviour among others), and at last there are the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion. (Goffman, 1990: 14) The sociological features of stigmatized individuals are that:

someone who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse processes a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him [...] By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances (1990: 15).

According to Gail Pheterson (1996), the prototype of the stigmatized woman is the prostitute (65). At the same time, this label (whore, slut) can be applied to *any* woman. The whore stigma is a complex structure that controls *all* women, not only prostitutes or sex workers: “Whereas a prostitute is made to embody the whore stigma and is – by definition – guilty, other women are suspect (‘where were you’) to accusations (‘you whore’)” (Pheterson, 12: 1996). Building on Goffman, Pheterson asserts: “For women, attributions of ‘shameful differentness’ invariably increase vulnerability to the whore stigma” (1996:66). She continues; “Women of colour, Jewish women, working class women, divorced women, fat women and battered women may be more vulnerable to the whore stigma than white middle-class, married, thin, and other supposedly unspoiled women” (Pheterson, 1996: 69). One example of this mechanism is the way Nigerian women was othered in the national debates outlined in the above.

The stated feminist purpose of the ban against purchasing sexual services was to change attitudes, so that it would no longer be seen as acceptable to objectify women by paying for their sexual services. The stigma was going to shift away from the prostitute, towards the client (Skilbrei, 2012: 254). From time to time the perceived successfulness of the Nordic model is celebrated in public discourse (Lie, 2018, en til) It is put forth that the sex purchase act has had an important normative function since it affects our attitudes towards prostitution. However, what these celebrations consistently forget to mention is that these attitudes, as well as now also being directed towards the client, are also directed harsher towards the (female) sex worker than before:

There is [...] scant evidence for the claim that the law has had its advertised effect on the perception of prostitution and people in prostitution. Even though surveys among the general

public indicate great support for the law, the same material also shows a rather strong support for a criminalization of sex sellers. This contradicts the idea that the law promotes an ideal of gender equality: instead, the criminalization of sex buyers seems to influence people to consider the possibility of criminalizing sex sellers as well. This rather confounds the idea that the 'Nordic model' successfully shifts the stigma of prostitution from sex sellers to clients" (Skilbrei & Holmström, 2013).

Currently, the sex worker is more stigmatized than before the implementation of the Nordic model, and another stigmatized individual have been manufactured; 'The whore customer'. We went from having one stigmatized group towards stigmatizing this group even more and created another stigmatized group in the process. And stigmatization, according to Goffman, is a form of dehumanization. It spoils individual identity and it destroys it, not only in the eyes of society but also in one's own. (1990: 57-128) A possible way of *managing* the spoiled identities of the prostitute and her client could be to re-name (or re-brand) them. Their new names could be sugar daddy, sugar baby, and sugar mommy, and in the light of stigmatization theory it becomes understandable if such processes occur.

2.3 Sex work, the service economy and the internet

With the emergence of digital technologies, it was no longer necessary for sex workers to engage in 'street walking', since it was now possible to advertise their services online. Since the internet provided sex workers with the opportunity to escape the streets with its inherent harassment and changing weather conditions, it should not be considered strange that they were some of the first to take advantage of the new technology of communication. According to Henry & Farvid (2017), twenty-first century digital communication and technologies has had a significant impact on the ways that we have sex, but also how we buy it. For example, the practice of 'camming' would not have been possible in any other times, using any other technology. This practice is completely mediated, involving no contacts between bodies, and this disrupts how sex work is discursively constructed in our culture. (Henry & Farvid, 2017: 119) According to Sanders et al. (2018), the distinction between direct and indirect sex work needs to be made. Direct sex work involves contacts between bodies while indirect sex work does not. Another key form of indirect sex work, besides camming, is the act of selling pictures and videos through applications such as snapchat (117).

Inquiring on the smile of the flight attendant, the term emotional labour was introduced by Arlie Hochschild: “I use the term *emotional labour* to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*” (2012: 7). In the service economy the management of feelings have become a crucial part of the labour, and here women are the (historically constructed) expert. Flight attendants, hairdressers, nurses, waitresses, secretaries, therapists and social workers, along with sex workers; what they have in common is the (highly gendered) work of managing, displaying, and creating emotions, both their own, and that of the customer, patient or client:

Not unlike the work space of a hospital ward, an aero plane or a beauty salon, where femininity is constructed and enacted as part of an occupation, prostitution is a site that enables women to emphasize and effectively manipulate aspects of heterosexual femininity in order to capitalize from this financially (Sanders, 2005: 335).

In the mid-nineties the ‘girlfriend experience’ (GFE), emerged as a specific sexual commodity, as sex workers started to advertise their services on the internet as ‘girlfriends for hire’ (Bernstein, 2007a: 4). To seek a meaningful GFE is to seek an emotional connection, as opposed to merely a physical experience. The GFE version of prostitution “fuses economic and affective dimensions; it does not demand unlimited emotional investment in the transaction, but it does conflate and commodify both the physical conduct and the emotional intimacy” (Constable in Milrod & Weitzer, 2012: 450).

2.3.1 Manufactured identity

Teela Sanders (2005) introduced the term ‘manufactured identity’ in a study on female sex workers providing the GFE in Britain’s indoor marked. She found that participants engaged in “a complex creation of a manufactured identity that consist of a character constructed only for the workplace” (337). The use of the pseudonym, an important stage prop for sex workers, is the starting point in the development of this character. This kind of ‘cynical performance’ is an important way of *protecting the self* (Goffman in Sanders, 2005: 331), and by constructing this manufactured identity, sex workers *avoided* an emotional relationship with their clients. At the same time the ‘manufactured identity’ created by these sex workers served the function of “calculated business strategy to attract and maintain high-paying customers” (Sanders, 2005: 331). There is a lot of work in maintaining such an identity. In order to make customers

return again and again the ‘realness’ of their identity had to be maintained: “Interviewees describe how they concentrate on remembering their story to avoid real information slipping into the conversation” (Sanders, 2005: 333). Sanders also identifies a range of different strategies that sex workers use in order to manage emotions and distance themselves from the client in order to avoid emotional relationships with them: These include having bodily exclusion zones, using the condom as psychological barrier, a preference for domination services (where intercourse is not expected), constructing a barrier between the sex they did as work (where arousal was ‘faked’) and their personal intimate relationships, where arousal was real (Sanders 2005: 334).

2.3.2 Bounded authenticity

Bernstein (2007) has also conducted empirical research on the GFE but she has shown how this often involves an *authentic* connection, aspiring to a ‘single self’ with no steadfast divisions between front stage and backstage or between public and private erotic domains (106). Drawing on fieldwork done between 1994 and 2002 that focused on the experiences of middle-class sex workers mainly in the San Francisco area, but also in European cities such as Amsterdam and Stockholm, she introduced the term *bounded authenticity*:

As with other forms of service work (therapy, massage), successful commercial transactions are ones in which the market basis of the exchange provides an important emotional boundary for both worker and client, but one which can also be temporarily subordinated to the clients desire for authentic interpersonal connection (2007: 483).

This, according to Bernstein, is related to our postmodern desire for *realness*: “Scholars of tourism have connected the rise of the tourist industry to the pursuit of the ‘authentic’ in a world in which capitalism is perceived to have rendered more and more quarters ‘artificial’” (MacCannell in Bernstein, 2007b: 483). There is a sense of distinction in that one is capable of appreciating that which is ‘untouched’ and accessible to only a few (2007b: 483).

‘Bounded authenticity’ is also a site where the authenticity of the emotional and sexual experience of the sex worker her, or himself, also becomes of importance; “In contrast to the ‘counterfeit intimacy’ that some sociological researchers have presumed to occur in the commercial sexual encounter, many sex workers depictions of their work exemplified the calling forth of genuine feeling” (2007b: 484). Thus, within the spatial, temporal and economic limits of the encounter a genuine connection can be allowed to occur. Notably,

when these limits were attempted exceeded by some of the sex workers, for example by offering their favourite clients ‘bargain rates’, the clients would terminate the engagement with the sex worker in question (2007a: 130).

Reflecting back on the assertion by the co-owner of Sugar Daters, that sugar dating was not prostitution because of its authenticity (the sugar baby should authentically desire her sugar daddy), we see how his argument is not valid, since it is precisely its *authenticity* that characterizes postmodern sex work – at least for the middle classes, and within the limits of the GFE.

2.4 The romantic utopia and its contradictions

In modernity, sexuality has untangled itself from love: “Thanks to the scientific discovery of nature in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and the development of the great materialist philosophies, feeling, and especially the feeling of love, came to be seen as merely illusion” (Kaufmann, 2012: 92). Ever since Freud, our sexuality has taken centre stage, and for him love is only a form of alienation (Freud in Kaufmann, 2012: 92).

According to Giddens (1992), sex has become central to the creation and expression of the self (15), and Bauman (2003) uses the metaphor ‘liquid love’ in order to describe how easy it has become to both enter and exit sexual relationships (vii-xiii). Thus, sex has emerged as a leisure activity in its own. (Kaufmann, 2012: 91-99) As the protagonist of Lars Von Trier’s 2013 movie ‘Nymphomaniac’ stated: ‘Love is just lust with jealousy added’. At the same time romantic love has come to take the place of the sacred after the death of God. According to Eva Illouz:

The longing for utopia at the heart of romantic love possesses deep affinities with the experience of the sacred. As Durkheim has suggested, such experience has not disappeared from secular societies but has migrated from religion proper to other domains of culture. Romantic love is one site of this displacement (Durkheim in Illouz, 1997 :8).

According to philosopher Simon May, love has come into its own because of a decline in religious faith, since love has filled the vacuum left by its retreat. “Around the time the formula ‘God is love’ became inverted into ‘love is God’, so that it is now the West’s undeclared religion – and perhaps its only generally accepted religion” (May, 2012: 2).

Perhaps, because of these contradictions ('love does not exist, only sexuality' vs. 'love is God'), love/sex is currently in trouble. (Kaufmann, 2012: 112).

2.4.1 The emergence of dating

Since Marriage, for most of history, was only a practical, political, and economic arrangement between clans and families, passionate love has, for most of western history, been considered a disruptive force for society, even a madness, and clearly something to be *avoided*. Because of this, stories of romantic love have had a strong revolutionary power, since in these stories, the lovers "affirmed their passion against an oppressive social order" (Illouz, 1997: 291). Seen in this light romantic love is a specific utopian narrative regarding *social transgression*.

Paradoxically this 'romantic utopia' only dreamed about in poetry and myths for centuries, finally became a reality only with the emergence of consumer capitalism. This economic system is entangled with the mythology of a romantic utopia through the "romantization of commodities and the commodification of romance" (Illouz, 1997: 26). This process started at the turn of the century with the promotion of commodity-centred definitions of romance by cultural entrepreneurs, and the transformations in courtship that took place in the era. The new movie industry, as well as the emerging advertising industry, was central to this development, as the mythology that we live our romantic lives by was – and is – narrated here. The practice of *dating* took over for the tradition of 'calling on a woman' in her home, and this placed the romantic encounter in the twin spheres of leisure and consumption (Illouz, 1997: 25-47).

Another important aspect with the modern practice of dating was that: "The old-fashioned practices of chaperoned courtship and calling had drawn clear lines between the worlds of men and women. Dating undid them" (Weigel, 2016: 29). This revolution created moral panics, since looking for love had not previously involved spending money or going out in public (Weigel, 2016: 11). These concerns even led to the arrest of "many early daters – the female ones anyway" Because; "In the eyes of the authorities women who let men buy them food and drinks or gifts and entrance tickets looked like whores, and making a date seemed the same as turning a trick" (Weigel, 2016: 12). At the turn of the nineteenth century women were entering the workforce in record numbers, but they were not payed nearly as much as men. This was because of the widespread belief that they were working only in order to supplement the earnings of fathers and husbands" (Weigel, 2016: 15). Thus, the practice of 'treating', with its 'charity girls' came about, as a practice between that of dating and

prostitution: “The key fact that distinguished a charity girl from a prostitute – and still legally distinguishes a prostitute from one – was that she did not take cash” (Weigel). The similarity between the 20th century practice of *treating*, and 21th century practice of sugar dating is striking. The sugar baby seems to be the new charity girl.

2.4.2 Romantic gender problems

Weigel (2016) points out how the modern practice of dating still suffers from a prostitution complex:

I have heard many debates about whether you ‘owe’ someone ‘something’ - meaning some act of physical intimacy - in return for an evening out [...] But it would be difficult to pinpoint what exactly makes sleeping with someone because he bought you dinner different from sleeping with someone because he paid you what dinner costs (23).

She goes on; “At the same time the very ambiguity that is supposed to make a date different from sex-for-money transaction makes people nervous. Who has not wondered: *Does he like me? Is he just using me? What is the other person really in this for?*” (Weigel, 2016: 23)

Since romance originally was a particular genre of fiction or poetry (as in courtly love), the point was not to develop a ‘relationship’ with the beloved, as we do today. According to Giddens (1992), in modernity: “Romantic love became distinct from *amour passion*, although at the same time had residues of it” (44). The relationship as such, is essentially a late modern invention, and according to Giddens (1992), it is dependent upon the sexual and emotional *equality* between partners, only recently achieved (in heterosexual relations), because of women’s claim to equality with men. Giddens names it the ‘pure relationship (1992: 2). This is dependent upon ‘plastic sexuality’, defined as: “decentred sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction” (Giddens, 1992: 2) Decentred sexuality, and the pure relationship is thus intrinsically connected to the spread of modern contraception. It also “frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus, from the overweening importance of male sexual experience” (Giddens, 1992: 3). As such it can be seen as a freeing force, particularly for women. Still, it is influenced by romantic love; “Romantic love presumes that a durable emotional tie can be established with the other on the basis of qualities intrinsic to that tie itself. It is the harbinger of the pure relationship although it also stands in tension with it.” (Giddens, 1992: 2) Some of the nature of this tension in the digital era is formulated by Miller:

If cybersex and online infidelity are contributing to the breakup of modern marriages and relationships, then such technologies would seem to be reinforcing the move towards more confluent or pure relationships and away from the permanence of romantic love. Indeed, the internet (both in terms of cybersex and more traditional dating web sites) presents us with a whole world of choice of potential partners, and the ability to continually evaluate these virtual relationships against those in which we are currently involved (2011 :181).

It is this abundance of *choice*, created by the plasticity of sexuality (and the implications of gender equality that this contains) that, alongside our continued belief in the redemption that only 'true love' can provide, that creates many of the problems of modern romance. One particular problem that occurs in contemporary romance is that of 'playing games':

There is a lot of confusion on dating sites: are the people who visit them looking for a 'soulmate', or just for a good time? [...] Our expectations have to fit into one of two categories ('fun' or 'serious'), and they involve very different types of behaviour" (Kaufmann, 2012: 123,124).

This creates ground for different forms of deception. In the realm of 'the manosphere' (a constellation of anti-feminist subcultures that has emerged in online spaces), the figure of the 'pick up artist' has crystalized, and he has offered solutions. The 'pick up artists' offers advice to other men concerning how they should 'play' this game in order to make women sleep with them. One such pick up artist 'Roosh V.' has published several books on the matter. Here is an example of the rhetoric from his website; "*Game teaches men a 9-step program on meeting and attracting women in an age when smartphones, feminism, and anti-masculinity propaganda have made connecting with the opposite sex harder than ever.*" (Quoted from the website of Roosh V.) This assumption that, because of the successes of feminism, the relationship between the sexes are currently in a crisis, and that this even leads to civilizational decline is central to such subcultures (Nagle, 2017: 89).

Women are also imposed by our popular culture to engage in game-playing. However, their game is not supposedly one concerned with attaining sex, but with attaining romance, since women are imposed by our popular culture to 'play hard to get', in order to attain this romance. Such advices rely on the sexist assumption that women essentially are (or perhaps should be) more interested in romance, while men are more interested in sex. (Farvid & Braun, 2014)

If there is currently such amount of romantic gender problems occurring in heterosexual relations, then sugar dating could be understood as presenting us with a solution, since it seems to re-establish some old ways of going about it.

2.4.3 Gentlemen

Acts of chivalry (such as opening the door for the woman, pulling out the chair for her, paying the restaurant bill, and general acts of protectiveness towards women by men), is essential to the figure of the Gentleman. Feminists have pointed out how this can seem like a good thing, but how it is in reality both patronizing and infantilizing, and how it is essentially an apology for patriarchy.

The code of chivalry is said to require protection of the weaker *by* the stronger. Yet a boss may bring flowers to his secretary or open the door for her only to make up for the fact that he gets openly angry at her more often than he does at a male equal or superior, and more often than she does at him. The flowers symbolize redress even as they obscure the basic maldistribution of respect and its psychic cost (Hochschild, 2012: 172).

Illouz (2014) has analysed the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy (The story of the relationship between a male ‘sexually dominant’ multimillionaire and a young female student that became a best-seller, and a later movie adaption, and was ‘slaughtered’ by critics), and she understood it as essentially self-help literature for women. She asserted that the popularity of such a novel should be understood in terms of the popular notion that feminism is finished, and that all inequality that remains is due to essential (biological, psychological) *differences* between the sexes. It provides, for its female readers, a guide on how to relate to this landscape, in which; “the feminist revolution has remained selective (affecting more women than men) and unfinished (the economic sphere and the family are still largely patriarchal)” (Illouz, 2014: 61). Because of these contradictions, she argued, love produces anxiety, negotiation and uncertainty. (2014: 61) According to Illouz: “Modern femininity has to face the still widely prevalent power of males minus the feudal code of protectiveness that regulated the inferior status of women” (2014: 60). The novels, she asserts; “mixes the emotional power of the traditional patriarch – economically powerful and sexually dominant – with the playful, multi-orgasmic, intensely pleasurable, and autotelic sexuality that is the hallmark of feminist politics” (2014: 62). We could view sugar dating exactly in this light since, as with Fifty Shades, It combines the notion of a ‘strong’ and ‘independent’ femininity – both the female protagonist of Fifty Shades of Grey, and the sugar baby are established as wanting ‘something’ in their life’s – with patriarchy and the pleasurable chivalry that comes along with it.

Patriarchy is a theory of social relations that can be used in order to explain why men have inhabited the highest positions of power in our societies (Higgins, 2018). It means ‘rule of the

father', and when confronting a dating site where there are sugar babies and sugar *daddies* it should be considered. Friedrich Engels argued that the invention of patriarchy was central to the development of class society. Simply because, when man possesses property, a legitimate heir needs to be produced. Because of this, according to Engels, the institution of marriage was established in the ancient world, and this represents the origin of the practice of monogamy. Within this institution, due to this need of producing a legitimate heir, the wife needed to be chaste, but the husband, notably, did not; And herein lies the origin, according to Engels, of the practice of dividing women into two dichotomous categories; one for reproduction, the other for passion. This represented "*the world-historical defeat of the female sex*" (Engels, in Higgins, 2018), and thus the origin of the historical construction of the Patriarchy. Perhaps Nordic societies should not be understood as patriarchal at the current moment, but the cultural phenomenon of sugar dating – as Cordero (2015) has shown – could possibly be understood as such.

2.5 Neoliberalism and the gig economy

The term neoliberalism dates back to the 1930's and the ideas of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. In an article in the Guardian, one problem with neoliberalism is described: "Imagine if the people of the Soviet Union never heard of communism. The ideology that dominates our lives has, for most of us, no name. Mention it in conversation and you'll be rewarded with a shrug" (The Guardian, 15.04.2016). And Further:

This Ideology sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that 'the market' delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning (The Guardian, 15.04.2016)

Even if its ideas were formulated in the 1930s, it was not until the Thatcher and Reagan - period of the 1980s that neoliberalism became a dominant force in politics and economics. And it is important to note that the leftist governments that followed continued its implementation. These processes have also occurred in the context of Norway (Staalsberg, 2019).

In neoliberal times our economic and political systems have changed. From a Keynesian economy that contributed to strong welfare states, towards the still ongoing process of

privatizing and downsizing our instruments of social mobility and stability (such as student grants and loans). And it is a situation in which ‘the sharing economy’, or the ‘gig economy’ have become ‘neoliberalism on steroids’, as it represents a “blurring of the formal-informal economic divide.” (Murillo et al., 2017: 73) The new economic class of freelancers that relies on ‘gigs ’ have been named ‘the precariat’ by economist Guy Standing, and it has been called; “our new *cyberized Downtown Abbey* society with a few big winners and a long tail of underclass” (2016; Murillo et al, 2017: 71) . It is within this socio-economic framework that the sugar dating phenomenon has emerged. As Fleming remarked in an interview: “*Even the world’s oldest profession is being uberised*” (Fleming: 2019b, my emphasis).

3 Theoretical Framework: The subject and society

The theoretical problem at the core of this thesis is that of the relationship between the subject and the society. Margaret Thatcher famously proclaimed that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families (as quoted in The Guardian, 2013). This statement goes to the core of neoliberal ideology. The notion that we are completely independent, atomized and separated from each other. The philosophical problem of the relationship between the subject and society is a complex one; which came first? Society consists of individuals, but in order to make sense of one’s self, and thus *become* an individual, *the other*, or a notion of a society is surely needed.

In this chapter I provide an overview of the different perspectives that are useful in order to understand the subject of this thesis: How and why does one become the sugar baby or the sugar daddy/mommy? First (3.1) I account for the poststructuralist perspective and discourse theory. Further, I (3.2) add some psychosocial perspectives on the issue. Then (3.3), I account for the specific forms of (gendered) subjectivity and sensibility that has emerged in neoliberal times, and finally; (3.4) I provide some perspectives on the relationship between the subject and digital technologies.

3.1 The poststructuralist perspective: Discourse theory

The term poststructuralism refers to that which comes ‘after structuralism’, implying both critique and absorption (Barker & Jane, 2016: 21). Structuralism is essentially concerned with

how meaning is created through signifying practices, and it proposes that there are underlying structures that fix meaning through binaries. According to theorists of *poststructuralism*, meaning is shifting and always in a process: “Meaning cannot be confined to single words, sentences or particular texts but is the outcome of relationships between texts, that is, intertextuality” (Barker & Jane, 2016: 21).

Foucault has showed us how subject positions, and thus individuals, are produced through history: “Foucault explores the genealogy of the body as a site of disciplinary practices that bring subjects into being. Such practices are the consequences of specific historical discourses of crime, punishment, medicine, science, and sexuality” (Barker & Jane, 2016: 23). According to Foucault, *truth and power* are two sides of the same coin. This is because power works through discursively constructed claims to truth. Power is everywhere because it is inherent to discourse:

Discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking and acting, but this is not simply repressive; it does not impose rules for thought and behaviour on a pre-existing human agent. Instead human subjects are produced through discourses. Our sense of our self is made through the operation of discourse. So too are objects, relations, places, scenes: discourse produces the world as it understands it. (Rose, 2016: 189)

Thus, for Foucault, power needs to be seen and analysed not merely in its juridical form as something that subtracts, but also as a productive force. We become ourselves through power/discourse, and as argued by Foucault, sexuality is one essential site where such processes occur.

3.1.1 The science of sex

As opposed to the belief that sex have been repressed, what we in reality have done is to create a science on the subject, a certain *scientia sexualis*, through the discourses of science, medicine and psychology:

When one looks back over the last three centuries with their continual transformations, things appear in a very different light: around and apropos sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion (Foucault, 1990:17).

The purpose of these discourses was to discover some intrinsic human nature within the realm of our sexualities. It also defined some forms of sexuality as normal and natural, and many other forms as deviant. In this obsession with sexuality, in imposing it to tell the truth about

ourselves, Western culture is indeed perverse, says Foucault (1990: 47). In earlier times, the practice of sodomy was sometimes a crime and sometimes not, but it never *defined* an individual's essence. The homosexual was an invention of the *scientia sexualis*, and even though today one might say that he is de-pathologized, he is still produced as a "hermaphroditism of the soul" (Foucault, 1990: 43), with his gender performance that draws on the feminine. The fact that we search for a 'gay gene', shows us that this science of sex continues to haunt our culture of now supposedly freed sexualities. The free sexualities of today are paradoxically put into boxes, such as polygamous, homosexual, pansexual, sapiosexual, masochist, promiscuous, monogamous, and the list goes on (and we might add to this the subjects of pornography, such as 'MILF'). Thus – as opposed to the idea of a sexual revolution in the sixties and seventies, implying that sexuality is already there within us, and that it just needs to be freed – there does not exist pre-social sexual identities simply awaiting liberation, since these sexual identities are generated by power/discourse themselves: "For Foucault, by identifying with any sexuality, whether the norm or any of its variations, we *rein scribe that norm*" (Taylor, 2009: 40) This is how normative power works.

According to Hawkes (2000) our increasing commodification of sex and its pleasures is in reality a continuation of what Foucault noticed in the late seventies:

A century after self-conscious pruderies hid piano legs from view, and single women alone in public were forcibly examined for signs of moral corruption, whimsical experiences of commodified pleasure is now not a problem for social order but operates as one of its foundations (180).

In the last parts of the twentieth century we have seen "a commodification of sex and its pleasures in ways that connected the sphere of profitability and self-identity" (Hawkes, 2000: 147). For centuries sex had been seen as threatening and disruptive to society but now it have become a "flexible and fluid wardrobe for self-expression" (Hawkes, 2000: 180). The sugar dating site could be understood as one such *wardrobe of self-expression*, in which the discourse of the *scientia sexualis* is continued, and we are invited to becoming ourselves through the construction of our sexuality.

3.1.2 The performativity of gender

Building on Foucault's theories of sexuality and discourse, Judith Butler (2007) introduces the concept of the performativity of sex/gender: She dissolves this binary, and asserts that sex,

as well as gender, emerges from the realm of the discursive, and does *not* consist of any essential core of the individual. She asserts that:

Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject that might be said to pre-exist the deed [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that gender is performatively constituted behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990: 34).

Using drag as her example, Butler shows how gender/sex is a form of citational performativity (175-193). Gender/sex is a speech act: "The assumption of 'sex', which is not a singular act or event but an iterable practice, is secured through being repeatedly performed. Thus, the statement 'it's a girl' initiates a process by which 'girling' is compelled" (Butler, 1993; Barker & Jane, 2016: 366). What Butler essentially shows us is that femininity and masculinity consist of a range of norms, and that these norms are mediated through history. We cannot escape gender, since without it we cannot develop self-identity. Even the androgynous person is defined by the *doing* of gender; as somewhere on the spectrum between the masculine and the feminine. The only way to resist normative power, according to Butler, is by reiterating or repeating the norm slightly different each time. For example, in the case of drag, by overdoing the norm of hegemonic femininity; done by bodies that are not expected to 'do' or perform femininity (Butler, 1990: 175-193).

With this in mind, consider the gender-performance of the 'prostitute'; In the (emotional labour) framework of 'manufactured identity', the GFE is understood as a certain *performance* or act that puts weight on the *aesthetic* of the prostitute; as a business strategy to attract regular custom (Sanders, 2005: 319). A woman 'plays the whore' in the Dutch language, and this game is, for sex workers; the true trade in sexual transactions; In Great Britain *game* means prostitution (Pheterson, 1996: 40). Virginie Despentes (2010) calls the process of enacting this aesthetic the 'femininity game':

When you're not expecting it, the effect produced by fetish items – suspenders, stilettos, push-up bras, or lipstick – seems like a huge joke. We pretend not to know this when we feel sorry for women as object [...] Fragility is actually on the men's side. It is as if no one have told them that Santa Claus doesn't exist – as soon as they see a red coat, they scramble to the fireplace with their wish lists (Despentes, 2010: 60,61).

Since Despentes considered her gender performance before (and after) this period in her life as 'unfeminine', identifying as a 'punk', she was very surprised when she discovered the effects that her 'femininity performance' produced on men. The ideal gender-performance of

the prostitute seems to entail an excessive version of hegemonic femininity. And because it is excessive it becomes possible to notice how it is, in its essence, a performance. By *doing* gender this way it becomes, in the same manner as with drag, a site in which its performative nature can be made visible. Perhaps we can even say that ‘prostitution’ can be understood as a drag-performance of femininity, most often (but not always) done by a woman. By consciously *overdoing* femininity the prostitute/sex worker seems in fact to escape the power of gender. And here we also see how discourse produces, and affects, bodies. The question then becomes how sugar babies perform their femininity – or play the ‘femininity game’ – as Despentès put it (2010).

If neither gender nor sex are essential traits of individuals but are rather traits of various subject positions mediated through history, then this does not only pertain to femininity, but also to masculinity. And, importantly, these constructions are constitutive of each other: “In particular, the association of rationality with masculinity involves the self-discipline, and distance from, the feminized language of emotions” (Barker & Jane, 2016: 375). Because of this, as it has been argued, men are currently in trouble. Since, according to Giddens (1992), there has occurred a *transformation of intimacy* that men to a large extent have been excluded from, and since intimacy is a matter of emotional communication: “The difficulties some men have talking about relationships, which requires emotional security and language skills, are rooted in a cultural constructed and historically specific form of masculinity” (Giddens in Barker & Jane, 2016: 377). This masculinity construction, as it has been argued, does no longer serve men. Since masculinity essentially entailed a promise of mastery, and a promise of conquest. “*The boy who has been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing*” (Faludi in Barker & Jane, 2016: 377, my emphasis). In sugar dating this boy may possibly regain some sense of mastery.

3.2 The psychosocial perspective

The poststructuralist perspectives on sexuality and gender are useful. Foucault showed how we are essentially *constructed* by discourse/power, while Butler showed how gender/sex is *done* through our constant repetition and reiteration of its norms, as opposed to an essential property of the individual (Foucault: 1990, Butler: 2007). The value in this context is that it provides a framework in which sexualities and genders can be understood as historically situated and shifting entities, and the ways that this always and inevitably involves power.

The discursive construction of sugar dating and its subject positioning can be understood using this framework. But the poststructuralist view is limited in that it does not provide a good enough understanding of emotions, affect, feeling, and how and why we oftentimes contradict ourselves. How can we understand the irrationality of individuals if there is only discourse? The individual and her or his specific experience and embodiment in the world becomes difficult to account for, and in the final part of this analysis an understanding of the relationship between the subject and society that takes this into account is called for.

As opposed to poststructuralism where everything seems to prevail on the surface, the basic assumption of psychoanalysis is that there is an *unconscious* that is "the source and repository of the symbolic workings of the mind which functions with a different logic from reason" (Barker & Jane, 2016: 267). This view of what it means to be a person suggests that "what we do and what we think are not the outcome of a rational integrated self but of the workings of the unconscious which is not available to the conscious mind in any straightforward fashion" (Barker & Jane, 2016: 267). *Psychosocial* theory combines this idea of an unconscious mind with the social; we are thus psychosocial beings. Studies of the psychosocial ask to what extent the irrationality of subjects can be explained in terms of our "shared social circumstances, as opposed to something irreducibly unique to them as individuals" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 14). Thus, because of the contradictions of the various discourses that we encounter in our everyday lives, psychic conflict can occur. But these conflicts can be traced, since they are (re)produced in discourse, and crucially: They can then tell us something about our society (since we share the social).

Sugar dating, as pornography, exist at the borders of what is culturally acceptable, and crossing that border, according to Kipnis, involves pleasure and danger. This is because: "These edges aren't only cultural: they're the limits that define us as individuals. We don't choose the social codes we live by, they chose us" (1999: 167). Thus, such a phenomenon as sugar dating can be understood, and interpreted, as articulating the borders of the acceptable in our society as a whole.

3.2.1 Affective-discursive practices

There are two main ways of perceiving of discourse: Either as mediating between a reality that lies beyond discourse, or the poststructuralist insertion that; "*there is nothing outside of the text*" (Derrida in Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 44). In this thesis I adopt the primary view;

That there *is* something beyond discourse. This something could be bodies, feelings, emotions, and even the unconscious self. But, as Margareth Wetherell (2012) argues, it is still only through the *discursive* that such things can possibly become knowable to us:

Given the sustained critique of discourse theory found in the turn to affect, what is surprising, in fact, is how applicable some of the key concepts of eclectic social psychological discourse analysis (such as interrogating subject positions, dilemmas, moments of trouble, repertoires, etc.) remain for analysing affective practice (Wetherell, 2012: 20,21).

By affect, Wetherell refers to: “*embodied meaning-making*. Mostly, this will be something that could be understood as *human emotion*” (2012: 4). An affective *practice* is by Wetherell defined as a pattern for flows of emotion: “Something, in other words that comes into shape and continues to change and refigure as it flows on” (2012:15). Wetherell enables in this way a *connect* between discourse theory and theories of the psychosocial. For Wetherell, the affective and the discursive arrive *together*, and they flow through us as *affective-discursive practices*: “It is the discursive that very frequently makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides for affect to travel” (Wetherell, 2012:19).

In the same way as with discourses of sexuality and gender, affect is mediated through history. The ways that we are permitted to express our self emotionally, and thus *feel*, are restricted by the norms and rules of the time, and the society in which we exist. *Love* is a perfect example of an affective-discursive practice. The way that we have perceived of love, and subsequently; the ways that we have in fact *actually loved*, has radically shifted through history. Romantic love was considered a disruptive force for centuries before it came into its own in the beginning of the twentieth century (Illouz: 1997). And it was not until that same period that sex became separated from love, and even from reproduction (Kaufmann: 2012; Giddens: 1992). The GFE could also be seen as a specific affective-discursive practice, and as Bernstein (2007) has shown, its *feelings* can be authentic, also for the provider/worker, although always within limits. Hochschild’s theory of emotional labour can be understood as discursive-affective practices, regulated as they are by *feeling rules*. These are unwritten rules that guide emotional labour/work: unwritten and most often unarticulated norms for how to appropriately *feel* and thus, how to behave in a given encounter, situation or relationship (Hochschild, 2012: 56). In sugar dating these rules are discursively *available* to us in its interfaces and blogs, and thus possible to map.

As in Foucault’s discourse theory, *power* is central to the idea of affective-discursive practices. According to Wetherell: “power works through affect and affect emerges in power”

(2012:16). We can thus ask the questions: Who can take up the affective subject position of the sugar daddy? What are the limits of affect and feeling in sugar dating? And how are feeling, emotion and authenticity (re)conceptualized by sugar babies and sugar daddies?

3.2.2 The defended subject, language games, and symptomatic responses

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 2008) introduced the defended subject as a subject for research: “It is a fundamental proposition in psychoanalytic theory that anxiety is inherent in the human condition, specifically, that threats to the self, create anxiety” (299). Stigmatization should certainly be an example of one such threat to the self. The whore stigma affects both the provider and the client of sexual services and it becomes necessary for the individual to make sense of their own participation: “Defences against such anxiety are mobilized at a largely unconscious level. This idea of a dynamic unconscious which defends against anxiety is seen as a significant influence on people’s actions, life’s and relations” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008: 299).

According to Wittgenstein language is a *tool*; “used by human animals to co-ordinate their actions in the contexts of social relationships” (Barker & Jane, 2016: 113). The meaning of a word is its *use* in language (Wittgenstein in Barker & Jane, 2016: 113). This is useful in order to understand psychosocial processes:

In emphasizing the way in which meaning arises from a process that is simultaneously specific (language as it is used in concrete interactions) and general (expressive of wider forms of life’ or world views’), the concept appears to occupy a position on the boundary between the individual and the social (Bereswill et al., 2010: 233).

Thus, language is a bridge between the individual subject and the social – or the discursive. In an interview situation, (as in any interactions between human beings), we can never know for sure that we understand the exact intended meaning. We can only suggest some interpretations. In this way, language is subjective. But at the same time, language is the best tool that we have if we want to understand each other. In sugar dating we can ask what language games are played, both in the interactions between sugar daddies and sugar babies, but also between participants in the study, and the researcher conducting it.

For Lorenzer, according to Krüger (2016), what is interesting about such ideas is the places where larger social contradictions become difficult for individuals to articulate, and the individual thus fail in re-enacting or performing them. When there is too much tension

between individuals and social institutions ‘moments of dissonance’, can occur, and these contradictorily articulations, can be understood symptomatically since; “despite subjective differences, individual symptomatic responses to the same institutional pressures often prove sufficiently similar so as to appear coherent at a cultural level” (Lorenzer, 1986 in Krüger, 2016:16).

These psychosocial theories then, about defended subjects, language games and symptomatic responses can be applied in order to understand some of the contradictions that arise when the individual is forced to relate to socio-discursive contradictions, and in sugar dating these are plentiful.

Although I am aware of the contradictions between poststructuralist discourse theory in which everything is surface, and theories of the psychosocial which presumes that we inhabit an inner world, I have chosen to add these psychosocial theoretical tools to my poststructuralist starting point. These tools provide ways of understanding how we relate to and live with discourse and the power that is always implied in it.

3.3 Neoliberal subjectivity and sensibility

Ulrich Bröckling (2016) puts forth that the ideal subject of neoliberalism is *the entrepreneurial self*: In the neoliberal era the contradiction between self-realization and economic success has dissolved and we have become entrepreneurs of our own selves (25).

The language of economy has seeped into our understanding of the individual, and in neoliberal times all human relations are understood in terms of the entrepreneurial:

Essentially, in neoliberalism the ideal subject is rational, calculating, economical and always concerned with what it can ‘get’ from their relations with others. As critical theorist Byung-Chul Han put it:

As the entrepreneur of its own self, the neoliberal subject has no capacity for relationships with others that might be free of purpose. Nor do entrepreneurs know what purpose-free relationships with others would even look like. Originally, being free meant being among friends. ‘Freedom’ and ‘friendship’ have the same root in Indo-European languages. Fundamentally, freedom signifies a relationship (2018:2)

The neoliberal, entrepreneurial self is in thus understood as a fundamentally lonely subject.

Postfeminism, according to Rosalind Gill (2007), is a complex phenomenon that includes the discourses of both feminism and antifeminism. It is best understood as a distinctive sensibility, made up of interrelated and highly contradictory terms:

These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference (147).

Gill notes that there was a short time in the 1970s and 1980s that; “notions of male and female equality and the basic similarity of men and women took hold in popular culture, then this was resolutely dispensed with in the 1990s” (2007: 158). Since then the notion of ‘natural sexual differences’ has been thoroughly resurrected: “These discourses of *sexual difference* were nourished by both the growing interest in evolutionary psychology and developments in genetic science which held out the promise of locating a genetic basis for all human characteristics. (Gill 2007: 158) There occurred an explosion of self-help literature that addressed the ‘battle of the sexes’, as the Mars and Venus text (men are from Mars and women are from Venus and this explains why they cannot properly understand each other), written by John Grey: Here the supposed sexual difference was (re)located in the psychological (Gill, 2007: 159). These discourses, she asserts, serve to de-eroticize power relationships between men and women; “These discourses of natural gender differences can be used to freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable and – if read correctly – as pleasurable” (Gill, 2007). The Fifty Shades of Grey-narrative – as shown by Illouz (2014) – is a recent example of this construction of *pleasurable difference* ().

The postfeminist notion of feminine sexuality “represents a shift in public discourses from a heterosexual femininity constituted through passivity, whose sexuality was placed as inferior to her male partner, towards a more active, confident and autoerotic sexuality.” (Evans et al, 2010: 115). Authenticity is crucial to the postfeminist sensibility. She ‘is herself’ and importantly; she ‘pleases herself’. This is reminiscent of the sexuality of ‘bounded authenticity’, and thus sugar dating, as shown by Nayar (2016).

Paradoxically, the obligatory sexiness of the postfeminist self is always freely chosen. These contradictory discourses of feminine sexuality and feminism is “both experienced as pleasurable and liberating, and yet reproduces an image that appears objectifying” (Gill, 2007: 153). This has led to debates concerned with the issue of agency: “Women who engage in the sexualization of culture are positioned as either cultural dupes (as a form of false

consciousness) or as agentic ally engaged in their own liberation. (Evans et. al, 2010: 115)
This latter observation is relevant in public discourses about sex work, as well as sugar dating, in which an in-between position on the subject seems to become difficult to comprehend.

In a more recent article, Gill (2018) argues that the sensibility of postfeminism have become hegemonic; “Compared with a decade ago, it is much more difficult to recognize as a novel and distinctive sensibility, as it instantiates a common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism” (606).

Finally, a *neoliberal feminism* admits that there exist structural inequalities between men and women, but puts forth that internal barriers are the most important ones faced by woman today. Thus, shifting the feminist responsibility from the collective to the individual. The book ‘Lean In’ by Sharyl Sandberg is, according to Rottenberg (2014), exemplary:

The book can be read as marking (and marketing) a change in current articulations of mainstream liberal feminism and as participating in the production of a new feminist subject. This subject willingly and forcibly acknowledges continued gender inequality but, as I show, her feminism is so individuated that it has been completely unmoored from any notion of *social* inequality and consequently cannot offer any sustained analytic of the structures of male dominance, power, or privilege (424,425).

Thus, the neoliberal feminist objective has become, for individual women, to climb the power hierarchy, leaving behind all notions of a collective. The entrepreneur is all that is left. This entrepreneur is called upon to be “successful and content”, and in order to achieve this; “efficiency, innovation and a cost – benefit calculus are paramount” (Rottenberg, 2014: 429). Neoliberal feminism seems to be at the core of sugar dating, and the question becomes if this is reproduced by *Norwegian* sugar babies, and sugar daddies.

3.4 Digital technologies and processes of becoming

In the eighties and nineties, the emerging digital technology of the internet was characterized in terms of its utopian possibilities. It was perceived of as a space where the Cartesian cogito would finally escape the body and thus escape the “markers of gender, race, disability and class that tend to mark out ‘others’ in a society” (Miller, 2011: 164). In ‘cyberfeminism’:

Decentred, fragmented identities were seen as a liberation from a body-based subjugation of women, as well as ethnic and racial groups. Without a body based ‘identity’, the online self

could be seen as inherently transgendered and therefore held the potential for the demise of patriarchal (as well as other) forms of oppression (Stone in Miller: 2011: 164).

The ethnographic research of Sherry Turkel on ‘Multi-User-Domains’ (MUDs) found that MUDers; “engaged in a significant amount of identity play [...] and invested a lot into the particular online personas they had created” (Tutel in Miller, 2011: 162). As it seems, the internet did not turn out the way it was imagined, at least not the current mainstream version of it, and because of this there has been a shift in how we talk about it.

There has been a tendency to perceive of the internet either in extremely positive, or extremely negative terms: A utopia (as in the above accounts), or a dystopia. The dystopian vision of the internet was that of the Orwellian nightmare: “In this view, digital technology was a tool for Big Brother-style centralized surveillance and control” (Barker & Jane, 2016: 462). As it turns out, both the dystopian and the utopian visions of how the internet would become, seems to have gotten *something* right. It is arguably a place where we can find information that would be difficult to attain otherwise, connect with others that we would not connect with otherwise, and so on. But it has also become a space where we are surveilled and controlled. The platforms that we use in order to connect with others are first and foremost *not* public spaces, and this should have a consequence for who we might possibly become here. But importantly: “To better understand the vast and differentiated nature of the online world we must move away from the sorts of digital dualism that present the cybersphere in either exclusively utopian or dystopian forms” (Barker&Jane,2016:463). This is essential, although difficult, to keep in mind.

3.4.1 The subject and the interface

Currently our social media personas have to a high degree become ‘us’, or at least we seem to believe so. On social media, and professional platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn we are imposed to perform *one* identity (van Dijck, 2013. 212), but what we do not seem to notice is that these platforms – through the normative power of their interfaces – take part in shaping us as subjects:

Interfaces are important mechanisms of identity formation whose steering mechanism (algorithms, protocols and default settings) are inscribed in deceptively simple buttons and innocuous calls for transparency and authenticity [...] After all, social media are not neutral

stages of self-performance – they are the very tools for shaping identities. (Van Dijck, 2013: 213)

Currently – and as opposed to the utopian visions of what the internet was to become – we seem to have integrated our ‘online’ and ‘offline’ lifeworld’s. Thus, there is little room for identity play and decentred identities (Miller, 2011: 182). But as opposed to the current version of the internet, the internet of 1996 was an anonymous, text-based space (Miller, 2011: 182). It must also be noted that it was not a space, or a technology, that was used by the majority of society, as it is currently, and it had not yet been colonized by commercial interests. It is thus a *different internet*; the Web 2.0. This web is a ‘technology of the self’, since through it we develop a self-constitution. According to Bakardjieva and Gaden (2011) there is a complex interplay here between liberation and domination. On the internet: “The self quivers and changes as it rubs symbolically against other people (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2011). Since we (re)present ourselves to each other through the interfaces of webpages, they have a strong (normative, disciplinary) power over who we might possibly be(come) through their architectures (Stanfill: 2015).

Stanfill (2015) shows in an article concerning the normative power of web interfaces how productive power works in new media, and how we can analyse it. Paying attention to possibility, Stanfill asks the question of when and to what technology say yes? Inherent in the design of any website meant for social uses, particular behaviour becomes ‘correct’ or ‘normal’. Interfaces, according to Stanfill, following Nakamura (2008 in Stanfill 2015: 1062) and White (2006 in Stanfill 2015: 1062), structures knowledge about categories and belonging (2015:1062). Thus, however liberating these technologies might be, they are also not neutral. They contain power (and monetary interests), and when we find each other through its interfaces the normative and disciplinary power of these – mostly commercial spaces – play a big part in our identity constructions as well as how we can possibly develop relationships with others. Sugar dating seems to me as the ultimate example of such power, since its possible uses, as I have accounted for in the introduction, seems very restricted. And because of this it is a perfect example to test such theories of ‘digital becoming’. Is there any freedom of expression left here? And is it possible to subverts its normative power?

3.4.2 Textualization of subjectivity: Internet dating

According to philosopher Alain Badiou (2009), (romantic) love is currently under threat. In the book 'In Praise of Love' he compares an advertisement for a dating site with propaganda for the American army, promoting the idea of 'smart' bombs':

It's all rather the same scenario. 'zero deaths' war, 'zero risk' love, nothing random, no chance encounters [...] After all, it's not very different to an arranged marriage. Not done in the name of family order and hierarchy by despotic parents, but in the name of safety for the individuals involved, through advance agreements that avoid randomness, chance encounters and in the end any existential poetry, due to the categorical absence of risk (side).

Illouz (2007) has expressed a similar sentiment. For her, the irony of internet dating lies in its inherent duality:

In cyber-writing the body was often referred to as the 'meat,' the dead flesh that surrounds the active mind which constitutes the 'authentic' self [...] Yet if that is the case, from the standpoint of a sociology of emotions, this should pose a special problem because emotions in general and romantic love in particular are grounded in the body. Sweaty palms, quickening heart, reddening cheeks (75).

Attraction, she asserts, is turned on its head in internet dating: "if attraction usually precedes knowledge of another person, here knowledge precedes attraction" (2007: 78) When dating through the internet it becomes necessary to (re)present ourselves through text and photographs, and we encounter these *representations* of the other first and foremost; "Despite the disembodiment aspects of the internet, beauty and the body are ever-present" (2007: 81). Because of this, 'textualization of subjectivity' the individual paradoxically needs to work on maintaining her/his self-presentation and live up to it in the encounter with the other. Illouz further points out how the process of self-commodification is baked into the very structure of internet dating:

The internet structures the search for a partner as a market or, more exactly, formalizes the search for a partner in the form of an economic transaction: it transforms the self into a packaged product competing with others on an open-ended market regulated by the law of supply and demand (2007: 88).

The rather dystopian future visions regarding the decline of (romantic) love in internet dating is perhaps exaggerated. For example, on Tinder, the ultimate 'hook-up app', romantic love seems to live on, since LBRTD applications (Location-Based Real-Time Dating), such as Tinder, reinstalls the body and the sense of 'gut feeling' through the logic of its interface, and

its emphasis on playfulness. Despite the strongly commodifying tendency of Tinder, and despite its intentions of keeping users on the platform, paradoxically romantic love lives on through it, simply because here it can catch them by surprise. (Krüger & Spilde, 2019). However, the worries expressed by Badiou, Illouz and many others did not concern Tinder and other LBRTD applications, but the *dating website* as it emerged in the mid-nineties, such as Match.com and others. The sugar dating site, in its form, resembles this older version of internet dating, rather than the LBRTD-application. And in order to participate the ‘textualization of subjectivity’, through certain discourses about gender, sexuality and romance is necessary.

3.4.3 Pornography of reality

The distinction between representation and reality is central to modern media theory. It rejects simple “cause-effect relationship between media stimuli and human response.” (Hardy, 2014: 4) However, according to Hardy (2014: 4), these distinctions are becoming blurred in the digital era, especially when it comes to the genre of pornography: “What we see is less a case of pornographic representation affecting lived reality as a situation in which this reality itself is now available to be transformed into pornographic representation” (2014: 12). In an article he names this “the pornography of reality” (Hardy, 2008: 60). The genre of pornography has always been about ‘discovering the real’. But, in the current situation of amateur porn, gonzo and ‘cyberporn’ a transformation is occurring:

Taken together, these new forms seem to mark a decisive shift towards the pornographer’s long-standing goal of greater realism, such that it is more than mere rhetoric to say we are entering the era of reality porn (Hardy, 2008: 60)

As Attwood (2014) puts it: there is “a broader tendency in contemporary Western societies in which sex and technology are stitched together so that we become sexual cyborgs” (xiv).

However, today’s ‘do-it yourself porn’, or ‘reality porn’ (such as YouPorn and others) might seem like a space where normative conceptions concerning sex and gender can be contested by alternative sexual representation, but they rather enable “their reification of their gender ideology through a denial of their imaginary dimensions” (Van Doorn, 2010: 411). Since pornography carries with it the promise of the real, of uncovering some “previously undiscovered ‘Truths’ of gendered (predominantly female) bodies it is equally inscribed by the desire to know the ‘reality’ of sex.” (Williams in Van Doorn, 2010: 416) This, according to

Van Doorn (2010), shows that internet pornography is; “just another form of visual inquiry, deploying a ‘*scientia sexualis*’ in order to understand, label, codify, and cure sexuality” (Hansen, Needham, Nichols in Van Doorn, 2010: 416) Thus:

The proliferation of sexual bodies and desires (both off and online) should not, according to these authors, necessarily be taken as a liberatory process that escapes the power structures of a hegemonic moral authority, but may rather be understood to function as an extension of its disciplinary power (Van Doorn, 2010: 416)

Turning these considerations about ‘reality porn’ towards the subject positions of concern in this thesis; the sugar baby, sugar mommy, and sugar daddy, we can see how there is most likely pleasure to be found in identifying with these subject positions, but that when we do we allow the normative framework of the sugar dating site the power of defining who we are, or who we can possibly be(come) through it. Here we are back at the philosophical problem of subject/society. What came first? The sugar dating site or the sugar baby?

4 Methods

In the theory chapter I accounted for some perspectives on the relationship between the subject and society. According to the poststructuralist view we *become our self* only by entering subject positions and discourses that are available to us in the specific place and time in which we exist: We are thus historically constructed beings. The norms and discourses of sexuality and gender have become central to how we understand our self as individuals, and in sugar dating these norms are strong. Currently, subject positions are increasingly mediated through digital interfaces and our social media and dating sites have thus a strong normative power when it comes to who we might possibly be(come), through them (Stanfill, 2015; van Dijck, 2013).

In neoliberal times we are often produced through currently hegemonic postfeminist and entrepreneurial discourses. I have shown how this is most certainly the case in sugar dating (Kristiansen, 2018). However, since I also became interested in the emotional labour of sugar babies, as well as the relationship between stigmatization and sugar dating, it became necessary to apply an understanding of emotions, affect and feeling, and Wetherell’s theory of discursive-affective practices is useful here, since she understands affect and feeling as mediated through history. But in order to understand some of the perceptions of sugar dating accounted for by the participants in this study, as well as some of their contradictions, it

became necessary to understand them as *psychosocial*: Thus, simultaneously psychic and social. On this level of the analysis I diverge from my poststructuralist starting point, since according to this theoretical understanding of the individual there *are* some mental mechanisms beyond the conscious self, the social, and the discursive. Thus, there is something behind our social performances (although this something is not necessarily any eternal essential gender or sexual entity).

I have examined three discursive layers of sugar dating; public debates, interfaces/blogs, and finally; its uses and users. In the following I (4.1) account for the method of critical discourse analysis and why it might be a useful approach in order to understand popular culture, such as sugar dating. Further I account for how I have applied this method in order to understand (4.1.1) national debates, (4.1.2) interfaces and blogs, and (4.1.3) the narratives about sugar dating produced through semi-structured in-depth interviews with sugar daddies and sugar babies. Then (4.2) I account for how I have collected data through the method of Netnography, and (4.3) some methodological strengths and limitations, and finally (4.4) some ethical problems will be discussed.

4.1 Critical Discourse analysis

Dunn and Neumann suggest that popular culture is a site where discourse analysis might be a useful approach:

One of the assumptions scholars of discourses make is that discourses are the product of power by which hegemonic interpretations are seemingly naturalized and internalized, but also resisted and contested, within the social realm. If true, then one would expect the realm of popular culture to be rife with analytical potential, for popular culture fixes reality for a public that is broad by definition (2016:13).

Sugar dating is one such popular cultural realm, worthy of study simply because many choose to engage with it, both in terms of (for example feminists) engaging in public discourses about sugar dating, or journalists making documentaries about it, as well as of the actual sugar dating site users; becoming themselves through its architecture. Sugar dating builds on themes and tropes collected from a century of popular culture and in this way, it captures our ‘pop cultural imagination’.

For Foucault: “*Discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak*” (Foucault in Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 18). Surely, there would not be many sugar

babies and sugar daddies if it were not for the sugar dating website(s). In order to critically examine the ways in which truth, affect and discontent (concerning gender, sexuality, prostitution, and romance) is produced, reproduced, and possibly subverted through sugar dating, critical discourse analysis is used. It is a method that is concerned with language, power, and the ways that our social reality is created by discursive claims to truths. Following Wetherell, we can also use discourse analysis in order to understand how affect travels through us:

Analyses of affective practice [...] will take as their subject how these practices are situated and connected, whether that articulation and intermeshing is careful, repetitive and predictable or contingently thrown together in the moment with what else is at hand. Affective practice is continually dynamic with the potential to move in multiple and divergent directions. Accounts of affect will need to wrestle with this mobility (Wetherell, 2012: 13).

Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA, diverges from poststructuralist discourse analysis in that it; “assumes that there are two realms: The discursive and the extra-discursive” (Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 35), and that there thus is in existence a realm that is beyond language. This reality; “might be fixed and timeless, but because this realm is accessed through language – which is fluid, contingent and temporary – the interrogation and analysis of language is an essential activity” (Dunn&Neumann,2016,35;Coyle,2995:243;Wetherell et al,2001:11). The poststructuralist discourse analyst and the critical discourse analyst diverge in their ontological position since, for the poststructuralist, all that exist is text, discourse or language, but their methods are still quite similar, and they both claim Foucault as a touchstone (Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 39).

Foucault rejected that there exist any essential ‘human nature’ behind or beyond discourse, but within the ontological framework of CDA it *can* exist; It is just that, due to our shifting truths, we can never know for sure what then it really is (but perhaps it is only human nature to speculate on it anyway). In the final layer of this analysis I diverge from this ontological position since it becomes necessary to understand the participants of the study as inhabiting an unconscious self in order to interpret their contradictions and inconsistencies. Still, I use critical discourse analysis, since these contradictions can only be articulated through the discursive.

4.1.1 Critical Discourse analysis of Public Debates

In the literature review I accounted for debates about prostitution in Norwegian society, and the contribution of Skilbrei (2012) was my main source. In her analysis Skilbrei looked at news articles about prostitution from the last three decades, and at what choices are made in terms of vocabulary and comparisons; “ understanding that this is not only as inventions on the behalf of the individual journalists but as an expression of how prostitution is thought about in different times” (245). She perceived of politicians making statements concerning prostitution not as authors of statements but as *carriers of discourse*. (2012:245,246). In the analysis of sugar dating debates, I look for patterns in the way that sugar dating is seen by debaters, and I show how previous discourses about the conflated constructions of trafficking and prostitution, victims and villains are carried further into the 21st century in the discourses about sugar dating.

4.1.2 Critical Discourse Analysis of Interfaces and Blogs

Stanfill (2015) has shown how we can understand the normative power of new media, through the method of discursive interface analysis. By examining “functionalities, menu options, and page layouts for the structures at work within them” (1016). An affordance is what the website *provides, offers or furnishes* (Hartson in Stanfill, 2015:1062) Building on Hartson, Stanfill identifies three types of affordances relevant to analysing virtual interfaces: cognitive, sensory and functional: “functional affordance’ – what a site can actually do; ‘cognitive affordance’ – how users know what a site can do, and; ‘sensory affordance’ – which enables the user in sensing (e.g., seeing, hearing, feeling) something” (Stanfill,2015:1063). The question of what a website’s particular affordances constitute is important since; “they reflect and help establish, cultural common sense” (2015:1061) Following Stanfill:

What furniture a room contains tells us something about what kind of room it is and thus, how we are supposed to use it; It is difficult to sleep on the kitchen bench and it is problematic to make a meal in the bedroom. In the same way it is difficult to use LinkedIn for dating, and we are not expected to use Tinder for our online portfolio (Kristiansen, 2018).

In my previous analysis I also looked at the blog that the sugar dating site was attached too, and I noticed that this blog resembles the women’s magazine, providing tips on beauty and

the 'sugar lifestyle'. This blog is a perfect example of disciplinary normative power, since by following its tips and tricks we *become* the sugar baby.

According to Illouz, Women's culture such as women's magazines, self-help manuals, romance novels and talk shows" is in its essence a form of *self-help*. (2014: 28,29). This particular mode of popular culture has, according to Illouz, become our dominant cultural mode and it represents "a fundamental way to organize modern subjectivity" (2014: 27). And Further; "popular texts are likely to be precisely those texts that encode and *address social contradictions*" (2014: 28). The blogs of sugar dating can be analysed in this way.

The concept of feeling rules is also interesting here. These rules, as Hochschild (2012: 56), describes them, are unwritten and unarticulated norms for how to appropriately *feel* and thus, how to behave in a given encounter, situation or relationship. But, in sugar dating, these rules are explicit and articulated, specifically in its blogs: We might ask, building on the concept of affordances; What are the particular modes of feeling and affect that are afforded by the interfaces of sugar dating? According to Wetherell; "it is the discursive that very frequently makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides for affect to travel." (2012: 19) Through the interfaces and blogs of sugar dating affect is transported discursively by its clearly stated rules for feeling, language, conduct, courtship, and gender norms.

4.1.3 Critical discourse analysis of narrative interviews

According to Tjora (2010) the goal of in-depth interviews is "to create a situation for a relative free conversation that circles some specific themes that the researcher has decided beforehand."(113) The approach is different from the survey in that, instead of using closed questions, with predefined alternatives for answers, it uses open questions that give the participants a chance to go in depth where they have a lot to tell. This interview is an *intersubjective situation*, created in participation between the researcher and the informant, and in this situation, there is a chance of allowing and even invoking themes and momentums that the researcher have not considered beforehand (Tjora, 2010: 117).

Referring to Barthes who inserted that "there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives" (in Hollway & Jefferson:2008: 303), the focus on the *narrative* in qualitative research interviews is insisted upon by Hollway & Jefferson. It is only through narrative that we can possibly understand ourselves and develop self-identity (2008: 303).

I had this in mind when performing the interviews. There were some themes that I wanted to circulate into, such as my hypothesis that sugar dating allows the individual to overcome stigmatization, as well as the frameworks of ‘bounded authenticity’ (Bernstein 2007) and ‘manufactured identity’ (Sanders, 2005). I also had my previous analysis in mind and made sure, at the end of the interviews, to engage the participants in a conversation about feminism (Since, I wanted to know if they shared the worldview of a neoliberal feminism) But before arriving at this point I allowed for them to talk as freely as possible, and I avoided closed questions. In this way I provided for them a situation in which they could narrate their stories, as well as invoking elements not considered beforehand.

In most of the interviews I saved my questions and simply asked them to introduce me to sugar dating in their own words. I asked: ‘What was the circumstance in which you made your profile in Sugar Daters?’ The story about the day they made a profile (perhaps alone, perhaps while sharing a bottle of wine with a friend) on the sugar dating site would be the starting point for their personal narrative about sugar dating. I had an interview-guide that consisted of a whole range of questions for me to ask them. (appendix B) However, most of them had a lot to tell me before I arrived at the point when I had to look at my pre-formulated questions. So much so that most of my questions were answered before I had the chance to ask them. I made sure that the conversation circled into the subject of emotions, and whether they could possibly be ‘real’ in sugar dating. I also asked what they thought was the *best* part of sugar dating, and what was the *worst*. These questions were completely open, it gave them the opportunity to talk about what *they* saw as important in sugar dating. This strategy of making them tell their narrative as freely as possible proved useful. For example, the starting point of the story that five out of the six sugar babies told, was their discontent with the dating app Tinder, and how (badly) they considered themselves treated by men they had met through it. This disappointment was a big part of the reason for engaging in sugar dating for many of them. This was not anticipated. However, most of the time they circled into my pre-formulated themes on their own. For example, I did not need to ask any direct question on the subject of prostitution. Perhaps because of the negative public attention sugar dating has received, they had already given this question considerable consideration, and they presented their thoughts about it without me having to ask specifically.

The interviews lasted between an hour to two hours. I would typically turn off the tape recorder after about three quarters or about one hour, but then our conversation would circle back into the subject. Perhaps it became more informal when turning off the tape recorder, and

this allowed for them to ‘open more up’. Sometimes I took notes of this, other times I turned on the tape recorder again, and asked them to repeat what they had just said. The interviews all took place in cafes and restaurants in Oslo, and this provided a relaxing atmosphere where confidence could be established. Some of them had not spoken about this subject to anyone before, while others did not have many people that they spoke about sugar dating with. I believe that the situation of the interview provided a space for them where they could finally speak about it, like a confession or a therapeutic encounter of some sort, and because of this the material is rich and in-depth.

According to Stanfill “the interface makes a normative claim: It is not an omnipotent system. Not every site visitor responds in the same way, but to understand the norms sites produce, analysis must consider which responses becomes the path of least resistance and how” (2015:1061). In pointing to this, notions of technological determinism are rejected. This method resembles Stuart Hall’s approach to the problem of the ‘couch potato’ in the age of television, in which the idea of the audience as passive consumer was challenged. There are dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings of the hegemonic discourses of television (Hall in Barker & Jane, 2016: 429). When translated to our current digital technologies, we can understand the interface analysis as only grasping the *dominant meanings* of interfaces, but that through the analysis of user profiles, chats with users, or interviews with users we can learn if and how *resistance* to the ideological or discursive hegemony of the website is possible, and if so how. Stanfill suggests that:

Future work might productively combine discursive interface analysis with ethnographic examinations of site visitors themselves [...] in order to enrich the understanding of how interfaces reflect cultural common sense and produce norms” (2015: 1071)

In this thesis this is what I do, but I provide an additional cultural level as I also analyse national debates about sugar dating. Discourses compete for hegemony; Some discourses are dominant in a society, while others are competing, maybe we can render them ‘up and coming’, and the ‘winning discourse’ at any time always has something to do with the truth/power nexus:

The most powerful discourses, in terms of productiveness of their social effects, depend on assumptions and claims that their knowledge is true. The particular grounds on which truth is made – and these shift historically – constitute what Foucault called a **regime of truth** (Foucault in Rose, 2016: 190).

I understand public debates about sugar dating as one regime of truth, and the interfaces and blogs of sugar dating as another: Some assumptions (for example, that prostitution is an inherent negative) they share, while others are disagreed upon (such as the question of whether the *sugar baby* is possibly a prostitute). These contradicting regimes of truth then, needs to be overcome, understood, defended against, attacked or subverted by the individual, (and defended) sugar baby or sugar daddy.

In the third and final part of the analysis it became necessary to make sense of some of the inconsistencies of sugar daddies and sugar babies interviewed. I deploy the idea, from Hollway & Jefferson (2000, 2008) of the defended subject, specifically in order to understand how the participants cope with stigmatization and the contradicting discourses about sugar dating in public discourses and interfaces.

I am also interested in some places where, as it seems, public discourses about sugar dating are re-enacted, or reproduced in strange ways. I notice some of the inconsistencies and contradictions within their narratives and propose some interpretations as to how they have come about. The narratives that were produced in the interview situation is analysed, not necessarily as objective claims to truth, but as the *narratives* that they are. This, of course, does not mean that I do not ‘believe’ the participants, just that this is the level in which I am interested, since this is the place where various social discourses are reproduced and made sense of. I interpret these narratives in order to understand how the sugar babies and daddies see, define and experience themselves and their partners, as well as how they make sense of their sugar dating activities. I use findings from netnography in order to undermine some of my claims and interpretations.

4.1 Netnography

I have recruited participants for this study through the Danish website Sugar Daters. I made one profile as a sugar baby that was interested in both sugar daddies, and sugar mommies, and another as sugar daddy. However, through this profile I was seemingly also visible to male sugar babies, and some of them contacted me thinking that I was a sugar mommy. When making a profile one is invited to write about oneself. It was my intention to state my purposes here; that I was interested in reaching potential participants for a study about sugar dating. However, this was not possible, since this text was moderated – it had to be validated before it was approved. It was not allowed to discuss “the concept behind or the content of

SugarDaters”. Because of this I could not state my purposes. I tried to signal my purposes with the profile names: Researcher123 as a sugar baby, and Researcher456 as the sugar daddy/mommy. I also put a picture of my (smiling) face on my profile, because I considered it more likely that the sugar daddies and sugar babies would feel relaxed in interacting with me if they could see a picture of me. (appendix D)

Many sugar daddies blocked me when I initiated contact with them while others declined politely to participating in the study. A few others said yes to participating, but when it was time to schedule the time and the place for a meeting with them, they suggested that we meet in a hotel room, where we could be ‘private’. I explained to these men that I could not do that because of safety-precautions. I tried to schedule appointments elsewhere with them (proposing to meet in a private meeting room in the university library or at a café of their choosing), but in the end these men did not meet me for the interview. It seemed like there was a certain will, for some, to participate, but that they were worried about their privacy. I explained to them that this project was approved by the NSD, and that I was not interested in (demographic) information that would in any way put their privacy and anonymity at risk. Still, I did not get a ‘yes’ from anyone. Giving up on the sugar daddies, I decided to try to recruit some sugar babies, and this turned out to be easier. I also had some conversations (chats) with male sugar babies. They had initially thought that I was a sugar mommy, and they expressed disappointment when I told them that this was not the case. I asked them to participate in the study, but they declined. I searched for sugar mommies to interview, but at the time when I was logged on to these webpages (February and March 2019) I could only find sugar mommy profiles that had not been in use for more than a month, so I did not try to contact any of them. I ended up with six interviews with sugar babies, and three with sugar daddies. I would have preferred to have had more interviews with sugar daddies, but they were very difficult to convince. This could be interpreted as the result of stigmatization, as well as a result of the fact that sugar dating borders on the illegal for the sugar daddy. The three sugar daddies interviewed here initially contacted me, possibly in the belief that I was a sugar baby, but even if I stated that I was not a sugar baby in my answer to them, they agreed to meet me for an interview.

I would have liked to interview a few more sugar daddies, and it would have been interesting to interview some of the male sugar babies. However, I realized that the chatting that I had engaged in that did not lead to interviews, and the messages that I had received, still was findings that could be interpreted, and that in this way I did not have to consider it a waste of

time. I use these findings in order to undermine some of my interpretations of the interviews. It was also a finding in itself that there were no sugar mommies (currently) active, but that there were some male sugar babies active. The reluctance of the sugar daddies in meeting me, as well as the attempt that many of them did in convincing me to become a sugar baby, was also a finding. I had immersed myself in the sugar dating discourse when I made my profile. Even if I tried to avoid it, I had been mistaken for a sugar baby on the one hand, and a sugar mommy on the other, and because of this I received the messages that a sugar baby and a sugar mommy would have received.

Netnography draws together the term's 'internet' and 'ethnography'. Building on the methodology of ethnography, it is a method in which the researcher immerses herself "into the computer-mediated context of the study" (Kozinets et al., 2014: 262). Further:

Its interpretations can be built from a combination of elicited and, more often, non-elicited data. These data emerge and are captured through the researcher's observation and participation with people as they socialize online in regular environments and activities." (Kozinets in Kozinets et al, 2014: 263)

Through 'lurking' in online environments, the researcher "can gather vast amounts of data without making their presence visible to cultural members" (Kozinets et al, 2014: 263). I 'lurked' in the semi-private online environment of sugar dating, gathering data for this thesis. But I was not invisible, and because of this I also engaged in conversations with sugar babies and sugar daddies that, for the reasons explained above, I did not end up meeting for 'face to face', IRL (in real life) interviews, nevertheless creating data in the process: "Elicited data refer to content that is co-created by the researcher and members of the social media community through processes of social interaction"(Kozinets et al., 2014: 264).

Kozinets et al. also notes that there is a "false distinction between online and offline social 'worlds'" (2014: 264). Since social worlds cut across "complex networks of face-to-face and technologically mediated communications, the use of Netnography, as with the use of any single method or focus offers an incomplete view" (2014: 264). In an increasingly "computerized and mobile internet world – many social activities cut across both online and offline worlds." Because of this "'pure' netnographies, that is, Netnography without an offline component, should be reserved for phenomenon which are happening strictly in the online world." (Kozinets et al., 2014: 270) Sugar dating seems to be restricted to the online world for some. The sugar babies that I interviewed stated that they had come across many 'unserious' sugar daddies that were only interested in 'chatting', and forever postponed the actual

meeting. This was also my own experience when trying to arrange meetings with sugar daddies. Many gave the impression that they would meet me for the interview, but soon after had deleted their profile. Perhaps this ‘chatting’ with sugar babies provides enough excitement for many. Giving sugar babies the impression that they would eventually meet in person gave them the opportunity to continue the chat. Some of the sugar babies expressed frustration about this, since for them this meant much ‘pointless’ chatting. But, for others, the purpose of creating personal profiles on a sugar dating website is to seek out an emotional, sexual, or even intellectual connection that exists ‘IRL’.

4.4 Methodological Strengths and Limitations

This thesis deploys strictly qualitative methods in order to understand the appeal of the phenomenon of sugar dating. Its strength is thus its depth, and its limitation its restricted width, or generalizability. Qualitative research is often devalued because of its supposed lack of objectivity, but this is a false distinction since; both strictly mathematically elicited data and qualitative research needs to be *interpreted* by the (subjective) researcher, and the answers and assertions that have been given by an informant in a survey versus the qualitatively informed interview is equally subjective and open for interpretations (Tjora, 2012: 30). The difference is that, when conducting a quantitative survey we would be able to systematically connect the data collected with demographic variables, such as gender, age, education and geography. However, using a quantitative method, we would not learn or understand anything about how and why they answered yes or no to a question, or expressed their opinion on a scale from one to ten on a subject. By contrast, in the qualitative interview this is possible; the possibility of depth, and the possibility of answering the more complicated ‘how’-questions.

Discourse analysis asks questions concerning the production of norms in our societies and it looks at how (raced, classed, gendered and sexual) *difference* is socially constructed, insisting that “human subjects are produced and not simply born.” (Rose, 2016: 188) Thus, discourse analysis is, by its nature, *political*:

Analysing discourses reveals how we come to take a certain phenomenon or an entire social reality for granted, and what kind of effects it has to naturalize *that* reality rather than another” (Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 2, my emphasis).

Discourse analysis shows how the social world and its subjects are constructed historically and always in flux, and because of this it also shows us how our social reality could, and possibly even *should* be different. It rejects the objectivity demanded by positivist methods. But it also asserts that this objectivity was not possible in the first place (Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 28).

In the book, 'Brain Storm: The flaws in the science of sex differences', one neuroscientist set out to investigate the assumptions made by other neuroscientists conducting research on the differences between female and male brains (brain organization research). One of the things she found was that the world's leading scientist in this field, upon asked, did not have any concept about what female and male sexuality actually *was defined by*, even as this was the subject of their research. As the rest of us, they assumed this to be 'common sense', and this strongly impacted the results that came out of their research (Jordan-Young, 2010: 109). And, as Jordan-Young shows, assumptions in research about what exactly masculine and feminine sexuality consists of has dramatically changed throughout the last centuries (2010: 109-143). This is a detour, but it goes to show the impossibility of objectivity, not only in the social sciences.

Because of the difficulties in attaining objectivity *transparency* becomes important. In the introduction chapter I stated my personal views on the controversial subject of sex work. These views probably have had an impact on the analysis and interpretations that I made. If a radical feminist had access to my transcriptions, she would perhaps look for traces of 'damaged sexualities' in the accounts of the sugar babies, since this is the narrative of this branch of feminism, and she would thus interpret the material completely different than I did. Perhaps she would also find something interesting that I have missed.

There is also the question of one's own role in the interview situation and how that might affect the results: "Defences will affect the meanings that are available in a particular context and how they are conveyed to the listener (who is also a defended subject)" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008: 299). This has consequences for research that uses the method of qualitative interviews. It becomes necessary to realize that; "the story told is constructed (within the research and interview context), rather than a neutral account of a pre-existing reality" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008: 303). My own role, as a woman, is interesting here, since the specific narratives that the sugar daddies told me about sugar babies might have been affected by this. Perhaps, to a male researcher they would have told a completely different story; both about themselves and the sugar babies that they had met. Likewise, the sugar babies might

have felt more confident revealing *their* stories to me, as a woman, than they perhaps would have, with a man. In this way, my own particular gender performance may probably have both limited and strengthened the research.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Since sugar dating is highly stigmatized and breaks with norms in our society as well as involving possible illegal activities, the privacy and anonymity of participants was crucial to attain. If personal information about the participants had come out it could have had serious consequences for their personal lives, their future careers and their relationships and marriages.

This research was approved by the NSD (Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata) (appendix C) on the grounds that it should be completed in line with that which I promised in my application. In my application to NSD I asked for permission to attain personal data that would involve the names of participants (since they had to sign a consent form), audio recordings, and some background information of the participants. I specified that I would be interested in the categories of ‘philosophical viewpoint’ and ‘sexual relations and orientations’, but that my focus was:

not on my interview partners as individuals but in the ways that identity is constructed and negotiated in the sociocultural framework of sugar dating. It will not be possible to identify any specific individuals in my research. The information that I receive shall serve my analysis of the culture, not the person. I am interested in the social effect of sugar dating. Background information such as gender, age, employment position, and sexuality are only necessary in order to place them in a general demographic framework. It will not be possible to identify anyone from this research. I am not interested in concrete positions, but rather salary level as a class indicator. (quoted from my NSD-application, December 2018)

I developed a consent form for the participants to sign. (appendix A) I made it clear to them that they could withdraw their consent at any time; both during and after the interview. Before each interview I went through the points in this consent form with the participants so that they were informed about the purposes of the research. Thus, informed consent is provided.

I used a tape recorder during the interviews. One of the sugar daddies expressed that he wanted me to delete the recordings as soon as possible. In the application to the NSD I stated that I would store the recordings on the hardware of the university, but the sugar daddy

expressed that he did not want his data stored, and I promised to transcribe the interview the same day or the day after and then delete the recordings. I did this, and I repeated the procedure with the rest of the interviews. I transcribed them as soon as possible after the interview was completed. After transcribing the interviews, they were printed, and the files were deleted, leaving no digital traces from the interviews. In these transcriptions participants were anonymized. I kept them until project was finished, and then destroyed them.

As mentioned, I undermine some of the claims from interviews with findings from Netnography. Here the problem of informed consent appears, since I have not asked the people that I chatted with to sign such documents as I did with the participants. It would have been impossible. And, as mentioned, due to the websites stated rules I could not state my intentions on my profile. Because of this, misunderstandings could arise, and they did. I was understood to be both sugar baby and sugar mommy by users of the website. Because of this, I believe, I received the same types of messages as I would, had I been an actual user of the sugar dating site. These messages, as I realized, were also findings. Research ethics in digital spaces is a complex affair: "Since social media blend the public and the private into a novel hybrid form, netnography demands novel thinking and methodological innovation on issues of risk and privacy"(Kozinets et al., 2014: 268) The sugar dating site is clearly an example of such a dual space. Many, especially sugar babies, provided a profile picture on their profile, for all to see. There were fewer sugar daddies that had 'open' profile pictures, but some did. The ones that did not, had pictures that could be opened for someone particular. This, as it seems, is a common way to start a conversation on the site Sugar Daters; The sugar baby receives a message that tells her that a profile picture of a specific sugar daddy has been opened up for her, and from this starting point a conversation can occur, and possibly a relationship (or, as in this case; an interview). Thus, within the space of the sugar dating site they seemed to perceive themselves 'safe' from the judgements of our wider society. But I was an intruder.

There are three major ethical problems with my own participation in this space; The first is the impossibility of attaining informed consent. The second is the risk of identifying anyone. As Kozinets remarks; the ethnographic tradition of protecting identities should, in digital spaces also apply to their pseudonyms online, since they might be known by their pseudonyms, in the 'real' world (2014: 268). However, this problem did not arise since I did not have a need to name them in any way. I do not know the identity of any of the men and women that contacted me on the sugar dating site (except participants, which are anonymized

and gave me informed consent), and in the one case where a quote from a sugar daddy that contacted me is used in this text, I do not provide any other information that might identify him, such as his pseudonym that he used on the site. I quote this message that he sent me because I found it ‘typical’. Elsewhere, when I refer to netnography, I do not directly quote anyone, but rather provide general observations about what kind of messages I received.

Another problem with this method of ‘lurking’ and participating in their space, was the deceit of it. Although I did not mean to, I pretended to be someone I was not (a sugar baby or a sugar mommy). But I made sure to immediately state my purposes to everyone that wrote to me, so that there would be no misunderstandings. As mentioned, all three sugar daddies interviewed were men that initially contacted me on the site, rather than the other way around. Although I stated clearly that I was not a sugar baby, it needs to be taken into consideration, ethically; the possibility of me ‘using’ my femininity in order to attain data for this research. But I did state clearly to them that the *interview* was my purposes, and nothing else, and I believe that they all understood this.

5 Analysis, findings, interpretations

How can we understand the appeal of sugar dating within the specific context of Norwegian society, (with its strong norms of gender equality)?

In this chapter I (5.1) analyse the national debates about the sugar dating phenomenon following the launch of the sugar dating website Rich Meet Beautiful by a Norwegian entrepreneur. Then, (5.2) I build on my previous interface discourse analysis of the sugar dating website Rich Meet Beautiful, adding two other sugar dating sites (Seeking Arrangement and Sugar Daters) in order to undermine and strengthen my claims. I define the subject positions of sugar dating, and I examine its specific feeling rules and rules of conduct, courtship as well as how gender norms are (re)constructed here. Finally, (5.3) I present the findings from netnography and semi-structured interviews in which these various discourses are negotiated by actual sugar daddies and babies, and I propose some interpretations of their narratives. I attend to (3.3.2) how they deal with stigmatization, (3.3.3) the nature of their emotional labour, (3.3.4) the relationship between chivalry, romance, and feminism, and finally (3.3.4), I show how porn tropes and discourses of sexual difference are reproduced in sugar dating.

5.1 Sugar panics: National debates

(1) In what ways are sugar dating imagined and made sense of in public discourse?

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) reverted to (Cohen in Doezema, 2000: 40).

In September 2017 the new dating site Rich Meet Beautiful, created by the Norwegian entrepreneur Sigurd Vedal was launched with a commercial campaign that was being rolled around the streets of Oslo on a trailer. It showed a picture of a woman in the process of taking off her bra and it read: “*0 students’ loan? Date a sugar daddy*” (appendix E). Not long after this it was concluded by the Norwegian bureau of consumer protection that the commercial broke with equality between the genders and it was deemed illegal. This happened after several complaints, among them the radical feminist group Ottar and an organization working against trafficking called ‘Freethem’ as well as the Christian Democratic party, KRF (Sivertsen, 2017). One could speculate if this was the intended outcome of the campaign. By causing such controversy they certainly got publicity. Perhaps the creators of the campaign anticipated the stir it would cause, understanding that even though it would cause moral outrage, it would also generate the attention needed to make us aware of the existence of these webpages and the sexual and financial advantages of becoming a sugar baby or a sugar daddy/mommy. This mechanism was noticed by Stanley Cohen, and it was central to his moral panic theory: “under certain conditions, moral panic led to deviance amplification – an increase in the amount and intensity of deviance” (Cohen, 2011: 239).

The victim/villain – discourses concerning prostitution and trafficking, outlined in the literature review re-occur in the national debates about sugar dating; the victim is here the sugar baby, and the villain is the sugar daddy. Notably, it was a group dedicated to fighting *trafficking* that first reported the commercial campaign about Rich Meet Beautiful to the Norwegian bureau of consumer protection. (Misje, 2017)

The first Norwegian newspaper that covered the commercial campaign was the students paper Universitas, in September 2017 (Bergo, 2017), and VG followed the day after with the heading “Urges female students to date rich men” (Misje, 2017). Many news outlets published articles about the campaign in the aftermath of the controversy, including NRK (Huglen Revheim 2017), Aftenposten (no author specified, 2017) and Dagbladet (no author specified, 2017). These articles follow a distinct pattern where the campaign is introduced through expressed worries raised by certain groups and individuals – the ‘socially credited experts’ in the terminology of moral panic theory – and then in a follow-up article sugar babies are interviewed, as well as some more socially credited experts. These experts consisted in one article from VG (Misje, 2017) of the feminist group Ottar, the organization Freethem, a politician from the Christian democratic party (Kjell Ingolf Ropstad), as well as the spokesperson for the bureau of consumer protection at the time; Elisabeth Lier Haugseth. This discourse coalition between religious/right-wing concerns and feminist concerns are familiar from discourses about prostitution (Skilbrei, 2012). The spokesperson said that this commercial would have created attention even in the fifties and that it was deeply problematic with regards to gender (Haugseth in Misje, 2017). The leader of Freethem, Jeanette Kalmar Frøvik expressed worry because of the “vulnerability of those that end up in the prostitution market”, and she also claimed that they often have been exposed to abuse earlier in their life. She stated that; “The commercial is especially dangerous for those, that perhaps is in a difficult situation, both economically and socially, from earlier in their life’s” (Frøvik in Misje, 2017) The pathologizing construction of the sugar baby as a victim, in the need of protection, and possibly *rescue* is established here.

The article concluded with Sigurd Vedal, owner of the company Digisec Media and creator of the website as well as the commercial campaign, defending his creation. Echoing the entrepreneur of Seeking Arrangement and the spokesperson for SugarDaters he stated that: “We are totally against prostitution, and if any of our members breaks that rule, they are thrown right out. Everything that happens at our website, also sex, should be voluntarily- as in any relationship.” (Vedal in Misje, 2017) He also stated that: “Our vision is to offer beautiful women a love relationship to a mature, intelligent man that takes care of them and that they can have as partner, conversation partner and mentor.” He asserted that the women that are members of their website are over eighteen and that at this age they are allowed to vote, buy alcohol and make decisions about themselves; “These are resourceful women that know what they want” (Vedal in Misje, 2017). Thus, ironically, the only person featured in this article

that imagined the sugar baby as inhabiting agency were not the feminists and socially credited experts interviewed, but the businessman and self-proclaimed libertarian Sigurd Vedal. This is reminiscent of the postfeminist ‘agency-pendulum’, in which an in-between position on the subject of female agentic sexuality becomes difficult to imagine. (Evans et al, 2010)

Some days later the article in VG was followed by another in the same newspaper on the subject, and the anonymous sugar baby ‘Oda’, 26 years, was interviewed. The heading read: “‘Oda’ is a sugar babe: - One becomes dependent of the luxury” (Birkeland & Misje, 2017). The dependency-inducing luxury of her life as a sugar baby was emphasized: the price of the Givenchy-purse that she was wearing was 25 000 NOK and we learned that she had travelled with men all over the world, always flying business class and only living in five star hotels. But in daily life, it was pointed out, she was “just like any other woman”, and she had “a steady job in the cultural sector”. These concerns that the sugar baby/prostitute ‘could be anyone’ was present in the discourses about prostitution since the nineties (Skilbrei, 2012: 251).

The sugar baby interviewed in this article also pointed out a certain double morality:

It is quite strange really. To have a one-night stand with someone you meet on town is widely accepted today. It is totally ok to have sex with someone you have only known one hour or two in an intoxicated state of mind. But, as in my case, where I spend time on getting to know the men that I meet, where it is little feelings involved and where we might sleep together: that is a thing that many have prejudices against. We are very selectively morally liberal (‘Oda’ in Birkeland & Misje, 2017).

She also stated that even though she considered herself very liberal and that she thought that prostitution should be legal, she did not see herself as a prostitute: “It is not an agreement about sex beforehand, or any agreement about payment. I would never have had sex with anyone I did not want to have intercourse with.” (‘Oda’ in Birkeland & Misje, 2017)

The article from VG followed with several interviews with different types of experts: One was a professor of law. He informed us on how this practice could be punishable for the sugar daddy since the penal code frames obtaining sexual intercourse through remuneration, not money. Another expert was the ‘matchmaker and dating-counsellor’ Ane Hagen, who considered the practice an exploitation of young people. The third expert was the psychologist, Peder Kjøs, known to us from a popular TV program on NRK: (Jeg Mot Meg). According to Kjøs sugar dating was ‘glorified prostitution’ and he expressed worries that sugar dating normalizes prostitution. He also expressed a worry that it could become difficult

to engage in ‘normal’ intimate relationships after engaging in sugar dating and stated that; “It is not fun to think back on the fact that you financed your studies with being a prostitute” (Kjøs in Birkeland & Misje).

In a more recent article from NRK the dating expert (Ane Hagen) was interviewed again. The sugar dating phenomenon was framed with the statement: “many wishes to live the luxury life of Kim Kardashian” (Hagen in Ersfjord & Vollan, 2019). Here, another psychologist was interviewed, and he claimed that research from other countries shows that this form of dating can lead to psychological problems (Lian in Ersfjord & Vollan, 2019), echoing the discourses about prostitution as inducing a form of damage to the psyche that will be difficult, if not impossible, to restore.

In this article a more apologetic sugar baby than the one interviewed in VG was interviewed: “I felt like a hostage. I was not scared, but I felt like they owned me since they gave me money. You lose a little bit of your soul.” (‘Pernille’ in Ersfjord & Vollan, 2019) In this article a screenshot of messages exchanged between a sugar daddy and a sugar baby was presented. The sugar daddy was looking for a ‘submissive girl’, that would “accept a round of spanking, sometimes for play, but for punishment when needed”. The sugar baby replied with the question of whether there was “also reward in the picture”, which was confirmed by the sugar daddy (Ersfjord & Vollan, 2019). This picture established the sugar daddy as inhabiting a spectacularly deviant sexuality, and it also helped in framing the sugar baby as a victim of the encounter. But, at the same time as it seemed to condemn these practices: With their evident connections to the ‘real’ in the form of these screenshots it could be argued that the article itself morphed into pornography, since pornography as a genre is essentially concerned with a discovery of the real (Hardy: 2014; van Doorn, 2010).

From these news articles, even if the sugar babies as well as the entrepreneur of the website claimed otherwise, we were left with little doubt that the sugar baby was in fact a prostitute. The notion that prostitution is a problem, both socially, but perhaps mostly individually (for the sugar baby, and her fragile psyche) was (re)established through interviews with different social credited experts, from the field of law to the field of psychology; The sugar baby was constructed as initially innocent, but slowly corrupted and/or victimized by this form of dating and the sugar daddy was presented as an immoral, corrupting agent.

Since prostitution already have been established as psychologically damaging and morally unacceptable in previous debates, it was not necessary in the debates about sugar dating to elaborate on this. The debaters all, even the entrepreneur of the website, agreed on these

terms. The disagreement did not concern the morality/immorality, or legality/illegality of *prostitution*. The discussion considered whether *sugar dating* was prostitution or not, and the always underlying premise was that, if it was; that would be a problem. In this way the stigmatization of sex workers and their clients were continued both by Vedal, as a representative of the sugar dating site, *and* the social credited experts, although in different ways. Sex workers/ prostitutes are explicitly *not* welcome on the sugar dating platform although this platform encourages the exact thing that sex workers do; to exchange performances of sexuality, or sexual encounters for material resources. The socially credited experts, on the other hand, continued to tell their familiar story of villains and victims.

Moral panics concerning sexuality, especially the sexuality of women and the young, comes to the surface in our societies from time to time, and the recent ‘sugar panics’ is another example. Female sexuality according to our moral gatekeepers, should (still) be kept strictly romantic or reproductive, and if it is not it is assumed to be damaged. Male sexuality, on the other hand, is perceived of as a threatening force. Prostitution/ sex work, in these debates continues to be framed as expressions of individual deviance and persistently *not* as an expression of economic inequalities.

5.2 Subjectification in sugar dating

(2) How can the subject positions offered by sugar dating be defined, and what are their specific rules for feeling, language, and conduct?

In my previous interface discourse analysis of the phenomenon of sugar dating I looked at the Norwegian sugar dating site Rich Meet Beautiful that caused such controversy. I argued that the ideal user (the sugar baby, daddy or mommy) was subjectified, in sugar dating, as *the entrepreneurial self*, (Bröklings, 2016) and that this self was paradoxically constructed in accordance with the discourse of *neoliberal feminism* (Rottenberg, 2013). In the following I build on my previous interface discourse analysis of Rich Meet Beautiful, but I expand this analysis with two more popular sugar dating websites; SugarDaters and Seeking Arrangement (appendix F), and its attached blogs in order to further explore its possible appeal and broaden the analysis.

5.2.1 Previous analysis: Entrepreneurial neoliberal feminist

In my previous analysis I suggested that the emergence of sugar dating should be understood as a way for its entrepreneurs to monetize on our increasing economic inequalities “and the way that they do it is by playing with and reconstructing the norms and narratives that already is available there in popular culture: the trope of the older rich man and the younger, pretty girl is pervasive” (Kristiansen, 2018). The product sold on the sugar dating site is the sugar baby herself, since on the internet, “If you are not paying for it, you are not the customer, you are the product being sold” (Mejias in Kristiansen, 2018). On the sugar dating site there is no advertising. The sugar baby can create her profile for free. It is the sugar daddy/sugar mommy that generates profit for the sugar dating site, and he or she is thus the customer. And, I proposed; “Now all that remains for the sugar dating website is the ideological work of fabricating these babies” (2018). I went on to show how this was done through the disciplinary power of its interface and blog.

I suggested that the sugar baby was ideally a *courtesan* of our times, drawing on Simone De Beauvoir’s distinctions between the streetwalker and the courtesan, or as in antiquity; the *pornai* and the *hetaerae*. In ‘The Second Sex’ De Beauvoir traces the subject of the courtesan back to antiquity and the *Hetaerae*; in many ways the freest of women in the highly patriarchal ancient Greece. As opposed to the wife, the courtesan where highly educated and skilled in the arts, and in ancient times this practice was not sanctioned, nor limited by society. Simone De Beauvoir uses the term *hetaerae* to signify all women that “treats not only their bodies but their whole person as a capital they can exploit.” (1949:670) Following this I asserted that the sugar baby was, ideally, a courtesan, or a *hetaerae* of our times, and that, as in antiquity, this courtesan can also be male. (Kristiansen, 2018)

This courtesan is constructed in the contemporary language of *neoliberal feminism*, since she, in addition to her beauty, youth and personality, necessarily and essentially needs to have *ambition*. Because of this ambition she might be in need of a *mentor*. The sugar daddy is constructed as this mentor, or sometimes; investor. Thus, the sugar daddy becomes a tool for the ambitious neoliberal feminist, and not (only) the other way around. Importantly, according to blog-discourse, the sugar baby should not talk about her monetary expectations on the first date: she should not be a ‘gold digger.’ One blog post was dedicated especially to this subject: “What is the Difference between a sugar baby and a gold digger?”, was asked, and elaborated

upon. This is echoed in the rules of the website in which it is specifically not allowed to “promote escort services or prostitution”, or one is expelled from the website.

The sugar daddy, the sugar mommy and the sugar baby are hailed as *economic actors* by the interface since it imposes the sugar baby to answer questions of ‘life-style expectations’ when making her profile, ranging from ‘negotiable (I don’t have a set budget)’ to ‘high/more than \$10.000 monthly’. The same is asked of the sugar daddy and sugar mommy; questions of ‘net worth’, and ‘annual income’ is positioned front and centre of its interface, implying that the proposed relationship is based on a neoliberal ideology that imposes economic considerations onto all aspects of human life, also the sphere of the intimate. At the same time, I noted; “The fact that it also encourages women to become so-called sugar mommies indicates that traditional gender constructions in which the male is expected to be the provider might be reformulated in sugar dating” (Kristiansen, 2018). This sugar mommy was constructed as an empowered liberal feminist, that takes “full responsibility for her own pleasure”. Since she has already achieved (economic) success she can now reap the benefits; A ‘Toy Boy’ is constructed for her pleasure, as the male version of the sugar baby. I proposed that the construction of the sugar mommy might be understood as an answer to the feminist critique of sugar dating (2018).

I also noticed how we are subjectified through categories from pornography in sugar dating. These pornographic categories are often racialized constructions, such as ‘Asian’, and ‘interracial’, and these categories re-occur in sugar dating, however with the label ‘Caucasian (white)’ as the primary option, rendering the other categories as forms of ‘otherness’ (Kristiansen, 2018). Questions about the degree of our sex-drive are asked as well as the specificity of our turn-ons. Categories such as; ‘being dominated’, ‘blindfolding’, ‘schoolgirl’, ‘sex toys’ and ‘piercing’ are used. I connected this with the popularity of the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy, in which the practice of BDSM was mainstreamed. And, importantly; the narrative of Fifty Shades of Grey also resembles the ideal narrative of sugar dating as it depicts a relationship between a millionaire and a student (Kristiansen, 2018).

5.2.2 Hypergamy: Discourses of sexual difference

In sugar dating men (sugar daddies) and women (sugar babies) are constructed as essentially sexually *different* from each other. This can be exemplified by the functional affordance of a

button at the bottom of Seeking.com named *Hypergamy*. When clicking on this button a new page opens up with information about the meaning and morality of the practice of hypergamy. There is also a video in which Brandon Wade discusses it. He states that he “came across this word when discussing human nature in relation to dating, together with some friends” (Wade in Seeking.com). Hypergamy denotes, as perfectly explained by the website; “the action of marrying a person of a superior class or caste”. And, it is continued with a truth claim that connects sugar dating to science;

Hypergamy is the term social scientists use to refer to the phenomenon of women prioritizing wealth or social status in mate selection. Hypergamy is commonly referred to as trading or marrying up. There is a great deal of research that supports the notion that hypergamy plays a big part in female mate selection. (Seeking.com)

Following this introduction, two explanations for this pattern of female mate selection are introduced; one from evolutionary psychology, the other from social learning theory. Further it is stated that; “Data exists that support explanations from both evolutionary psychology and social learning theory.” However, in what follows, the explanation from evolutionary psychology, that; “hypergamy is a psychological tendency created by evolutionary adaptation.” And, that; “females are naturally predisposed to find males of higher social or economic status more attractive.” seems to be preferred. The neoconservative Canadian psychology professor Jordan Peterson is cited;

Dr. Peterson described hypergamy as a brilliant market-oriented solution to the problem of mate selection, further adding, that it ‘appears to have driven our evolutionary departure from chimpanzees’ (Peterson in Seeking.com).

Here we also come across, again, the intrinsic connection between sugar dating and neoliberalism, as the (social construction of the) *market* is imagined as an eternal force to the point of driving our evolution as a species. Further, the morality of hypergamy is discussed, and it is concluded:

Moral outrage in response to hypergamy is a short-sighted response towards a naturally occurring and largely beneficial phenomenon. There is nothing wrong with an adult woman acting upon her natural preference for successful men, and there is nothing wrong with an adult man enjoying a relationship with a woman who is attracted to his status. (Seeking.com)

These discourses are familiar from our wider popular culture, in which theories about gender and sexuality, plucked from evolutionary psychology, are simplified, popularized and

presented as *scientific truth*, and thus as eternal truth (Gill, 2007). To (re)construct oneself as a sugar baby in this framework is only ‘human nature’, as Wade would put it.

In sugar dating, the sugar baby and sugar mommy are produced in ways that resonates with discourses of feminism, and although there is much to be criticized when it comes to these constructions, they are contemporary constructions. But the subject position of the sugar daddy seems not to provide much new elements for contemporary manhood. What it does, however, is to provide a site in which a reassurance about the *timelessness* of manhood is (re)asserted, through discourses of sexual difference. Because of the successes of feminism men are no longer perceived to be needed by women in the same ways as before. As argued by Giddens (1992), this creates anxiety. In one post on the Sugar Daters blog this anxiety is directly attended to in the specific context of Norway:

The gender roles in Norway have become quite egalitarian, and it can be difficult to feel as the strong man within a relationship. As a sugar daddy you have more money, experience and maturity, something that means that you will always be the man in the relationship, that show generosity and care without the woman threatening your territory. (Sugardaters.no)

Simone De Beauvoir (1972) explain the emergence of the Lolita in movies of the sixties and seventies: “The adult woman now inhabits the same world as the man, but the child-woman moves in a universe which he cannot enter. The age difference re-establishes the distance that seems necessary to desire” (10). In sugar dating *the distance that seems necessary to desire* is re-established through discourses of (eternal) sexual difference.

5.2.2 Popular cultural and pornography tropes (Hugh Hefner revisited)

In modernity, according to Foucault, we have positioned the truth of the self within our sexuality (1990). In sugar dating, we are invited to ‘become ourselves’ through pornographic or ‘kinky’ categories, popularized in the book and movie adaptation *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Kristiansen, 2018). In the following I explore this idea of sugar dating as a pornography of reality a little bit further, as I look at some of the other popular cultural and pornography tropes that it is based on.

The slang term sugar daddy was first used in the 1920s about older wealthy men that married and/or supported younger women economically. Since then, the sugar daddy became a

popular cultural trope that travelled through a century of popular culture, crystalizing itself both in the form of ‘real life’ sugar daddies and fictional ones. Our culture is rife with sugar daddies and sugar babies; The current American president, Donald Trump, is perhaps some kind of sugar daddy with his much younger, and former model, wife. A fictional version of the sugar daddy can be found in the movie *Pretty Woman*, in the form of Richard Gere. Hollywood has fostered many versions of the sugar baby, from Audrey Hepburn’s funny and elegant Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, to Marilyn Monroe’s ‘dumb blonde’ in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and *How to Marry a Millionaire*. And in ‘*Breakfast at Tiffany’s*’ Holly Golightly’s new handsome, but poor neighbour, also has a sugar mommy (Kristiansen, 2018).

Currently there is one trope in pornography that seems to be very popular, namely that of the MILF. This figure and the sugar mommy are reminiscent of each other. MILF stands for ‘Mother I’d Like to Fuck’, and in popular culture it can be traced back to the 1999 movie *American Pie*. (Friedman, 2014: 50) Since then it became a very popular trope in pornography. This trope, however, is much older than the movie *American Pie*:

The archetype of the older sexual adventuress involved with a naïve young man is well established in literature, film and theatre. Example range from Mozart’s ‘*The Marriage of Figaro*’, written in 1786, to the 1969 film ‘*The Graduate*’, to contemporary representations on television shows such as ‘*Desperate Housewife*’s (Friedman, 2014: 50)

At first glance, according to Friedman, this trope seems to “stand as an antidote for the desexualisation of women who become mothers” (2014: 49). Upon closer scrutiny however it fails us in such a task since a MILF is essentially a woman who is sexy *despite* being mothers (2014:57). Friedman argues that; instead of positioning women as sexual subjects the MILF positions them as “raced, classed, and sexed” sexual objects (2014:51).

In the fifties and sixties Hugh Hefner presented a new masculinity to American men that was based on seduction and chivalry; the ‘Playboy’. Although an arguably conservative expression of it, this playboy was still and essentially an expression of the sexual revolution of the sixties. The possibility of *not* aiming first and foremost for a monogamous marriage, also for men, was encoded in this version of masculinity; In an interview with ‘the Hollywood Reporter’ the controversial feminist and art scholar Camille Paglia regrets the decline of the Hefnerian playboy: “We can see that what has completely vanished is what Hefner espoused and represented — the art of seduction, where a man, behaving in a courtly, polite and respectful manner, pursues a woman and gives her the time and the grace and the space to

make a decision of consent or not”(Paglia in Pyun, 2017). Perhaps it has not vanished; The aesthetics and ethics of the playboy are re-branded in the creation of the sugar daddy, and in a post on the blog of Seeking Arrangement, Brandon Wade even states that Hefner represents his main source of inspiration;

Since my discovery of its existence, the magazine has played a big role in my sexual development. But even more than the healthy dose of adult fantasies Playboy had inspired in me, Hef’s creation taught me something even more important—how to respect and appreciate women. It is this foundation that eventually led me to create seekingArrangement.com. Hef took his own passions and ideologies and turned them into his *Playboy* empire, becoming a legend in the process. But for all of us at Seeking Arrangement, Hef is also the inspiration that led to the creation of this website which has *allowed modern men the ability to turn the fantasy of being a ‘Sugar Daddy’ into reality*. (Seeking.com, My emphasis)

The playboy was imagined as polyamorous, playful, and chivalric and the same can be said about the sugar daddy. But, when the playboy was imagined as an eternal ‘commitment-phobic’ bachelor, the sugar daddy can – and seems in fact ideally to – be married, according to sugar dating blogs. The sugar daddy is produced, on the three sites examined, as (mostly) married, although (sometimes) too preoccupied with his busy career to engage in serious relationships. Thus he ‘sugars’, as it is called in the language of sugar dating. However, this married sugar daddy is not imagined as being in a *consensual* polyamorous relationship, as his wife is imagined in the blogposts as ignorant to the fact that he is a sugar daddy (And, importantly, the sugar baby is imposed to accommodate for, and have understanding for this).

According to Paglia, from the same interview referred to above, the sexual universe of Hugh Hefner was not particularly ‘dark’: “Hefner created his own universe of sexuality, where there was nothing threatening. It’s a kind of childlike vision, sanitizing all the complexities and potential darkness of the sexual impulse” (Paglia in Pyun, 2017). And further: “Hefner’s sexual type was the girl next door, in other words, the corn-fed, bubbly American girl who stays at the borderline of womanhood but never crosses it” (Paglia in Pyun, 2017). Paglia also remarked that the symbol of the bunny (a prey) tells us something about the psyche of Hefner:

He recreated the image of women in palatable and manageable form. I don’t see anything misogynist in that. What I see is a frank acknowledgment of Hefner’s fear of women’s actual power. I think you could criticize the bunny image that Hefner created by saying it makes a woman juvenile and infantilizes her. But the type of animal here is a kind of key to Hefner’s sensibility because a bunny is utterly harmless (Paglia in Pyun, 2017).

Camille Paglia is often criticized by other feminists for her gender essentialism, but her analysis of Hugh Hefners creation of the playboy bunny is interesting since, as it seems, she might as well have described the sugar baby. The wording *Sugar baby* denotes, in the same way as *bunny*, an essentially unthreatening femininity. Perhaps the playboy bunny became so successful exactly because of said sexual revolution. This version of a woman, as pointed to by Paglia, does not invoke anxiety to an anxious masculinity. And neither does the sugar baby.

5.2.5 Rules for feeling, courtship, conduct

Feeling rules are what guide emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges (Hochschild, 2012: 56).

First and foremost, in sugar dating it is not allowed to buy or sell sexual services. This is not a feeling rule, it is a rule of conduct, or perhaps more accurate, simply a language rule. When I made my profiles on the website SugarDaters in order to recruit participants I had to sign the following statement, which indicates that in sugar dating they are very serious about their claim that sugar dating is not prostitution;

Due to some recent cases of users trying to misuse our website for buying/selling sexual services, we are taking on more strict measures regarding the content of user profiles. Please make sure you read the latest regulations on 'conditions for the content on your profile' and create/update your profile accordingly. The profiles not meeting our Terms and Conditions are going to be suspended without a warning. Please remember that in case you notice any inappropriate information on other profiles regarding selling-buying sex services or pictures, you should report the profiles using the button labelled 'rapporter profil' on the profile in question. Let's keep SugarDaters a safe and appropriate place for all of us. (Sugardaters.no)

(And here we are also imposed to surveil each other for potential deviance).

When I created my profiles, I had to wait about 24 hours for each of them to be approved, which indicates that the SugarDaters site do in fact manually check if the 'Terms and Conditions' are met, in terms of 'appropriate' language. This rule about how to use language is connected to a central sugar dating feeling rule, namely (rule 1) *Be authentic (and don't be a gold digger)* Chemistry, connection and reciprocity, are central to sugar dating, as was also

shown by Nayar (2016), and the sugar dating blogs examined flourish with advice on how to attain this, as well as the insistence upon the morality and importance of it.

The next rule modifies rule one, as it seems to say that it is essential to not *overdo* this authenticity. In sugar dating there is no such thing as irrationality, and in a neoliberal spirit everything can be calculated. These blogs also contain plenty of advice for how to best *end* the relationship when it no longer serves one's needs. (feeling rule 2) *Communicate your needs, don't play games and avoid drama*, as one post on SugarDaters stated (Sugardaters.no). And, as it says on the front page of seeking arrangement;

Goodbye Traditional Terms: Many traditional relationships fail because there is not enough give, and too much take. Let's face it. It's hard to find "your other half". Things would be much easier if goals and starting points were already set forth before entering said relationship

The premise of such discourses is the notion that conventional relationships are essentially deceitful; That *all* relationships are in fact guided by self-interest, but that in romantic love we are hypocritical not to admit this. The essential idea of romantic love as a disruptive, irrational force is thus completely discarded with in sugar dating, and everything is understood in terms of the entrepreneurial, and as something that can be planned. The sugar dating blogs are filled with advice to sugar babies on how to 'communicate one's needs' in terms of the financial (without stating it directly), but also in terms of the *emotional*. A post on SugarDaters asks how one can know if one is in the right relationship, and the first indicator according to this post is that 'no games are played' (Sugardaters.no). Another indicator is that 'The communication is open, honest and clear'. It needs to be noted that these advices of communication, as any relationship therapist would assert, are probably not so bad advice.

The third rule seems to be to *know your place and (gender) role at all times*. As a sugar daddy one should know the expected codes and norms of *chivalry*. Within the discourse of the Seeking blog a sugar daddy that does not understand that he should 'give something back', in financial terms are referred to as a 'salt daddy'. He should also 'mentor' the sugar baby as noticed in previous analysis. (Kristiansen, 2018) The sugar baby, on the other hand, is imposed by several blog posts to understand her place as essentially a mistress or a courtesan, providing the intimacy needed by the sugar daddy and perhaps; not expect too much back in terms of the emotional. As summarized by the latest post on the Seeking blog;

The Sugar Baby (SB), gets the financial inducement and companionship she wants and the Sugar Daddy (SD) gets the physical relationship and emotional support he desires. SDs

provide more than just a financial incentive; they can also mentor their SBs, open doors to areas the SB would never likely get through otherwise, or simply provide companionship when needed. SBs provide the emotional and physical companionship that the SDs need at that time. It's a mutually beneficial relationship. (Seeking.com)

Thus implying that conventional relationships are essentially *not* beneficial for all parties involved. Sugar dating takes, according to its interfaces and blogs, place in the realm of the romantic utopia. There should be dates, there should be gifts, there should be leisure activities and there should be travel. But the affective practice of romantic love is inherently irrational and unruly. Sugar dating, with its rules for language, conduct and feeling is an attempt, or perhaps a prescription for how to overcome this. But with its rationality, transactionality, and entrepreneurial ethos, it seems like it rather kills it. Perhaps we can understand it essentially as preserving the *form*, but not the *content* of romantic love.

5.3 Findings and Interpretations

(3) In light of the above, how do sugar daters see, define and experience themselves and their partners? And how do they make sense of their sugar dating activities?

In the following, I present the narratives created in the interviews and I propose some interpretations of these. I use netnography in order to undermine some of my claims.

5.3.1 Participants

I have interviewed three sugar daddies and six sugar babies. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, I do not provide other demographic information about them than what follows.

The sugar daddies were all in their fifties. All had well-paid jobs, and they had higher education. I simply call them Daddy-A, Daddy-B and Daddy-C. They had very different motivations for sugar dating. Daddy-A was single and stated that he was searching for a romantic relationship through the sugar dating site. He said that on other dating websites it was very difficult to receive answers from women, but that on the sugar dating site, this was much easier. He also said that he had not been intimate with any sugar babies, but that he had dated a few. Daddy-B was married, and he stated that he was probably not a typical sugar

daddy since he was doing research on the sugar dating phenomenon himself. He said that, because of his profession he liked to pay attention to new things that was happening “on the internet” and in popular culture, and he perceived of this curiosity as the reason for his professional success. He said he wanted to meet me because he thought that perhaps we could learn from each other’s research. He wanted to tell me what he had learnt from his encounters with sugar babies. Still he admitted that it was exiting for him to chat with young women on these websites and that this was probably also a dimension of why he was there. As he said: “It can be titillating for a man in his fifties to speak with a young girl that has ... intentions ... you know.” He had also met two sugar babies for dinner. Daddy-C, was also married, but he said that he had been sugar dating “on and off” for two or three years. He was developing sadomasochistic sexual relationships (in which he always played the ‘dominant’ role) through the website with young women that he supported financially. He stated that he never “payed per meet”, but that he would give his sugar babies a monthly allowance, and/or pay for things that they needed. He would meet his sugar babies about once a week and he thought they “had a very good deal” with him (he said he gave them Between 5000 and 9000 NOK each month, plus more if they needed it). Even though these three men seemed almost to inhabit three different worlds when it came to their perceptions of sugar dating, there were some striking similarities between them, and the ways that they viewed sugar babies.

Two of the sugar babies interviewed was in their thirties, three were in their twenties, and one was under twenty. Two sugar babies were working full-time jobs, and the rest was students. Three of the students said that they supported themselves through sugar dating, while one stated that she did not. I have named them Baby-D (under twenty, student), Baby-E and Baby-F (early twenties, students), Baby-G (twenties, full-time job, bachelor degree), Baby-H (early thirties, full time job) , and Baby-I (thirties, student) Most of the sugar babies were currently single, but one of them had recently met someone that she was now in a consensual polyamorous relationship with, and another was currently dating someone that was not a sugar daddy. In the same manner as with the sugar daddies, there were substantial differences between sugar babies concerning perceptions of sugar dating and their personal reasons for sugar dating, but at the same time there were some striking similarities. The biggest difference between them was that there were some that used these websites to finance studies, and they talked about sugar dating as *work* in various ways, although there also seemed to be ‘fun’ and pleasurable parts for all of them, to sugar dating. Others who were in full time jobs stated that they did not sugar date because of the financial aspect, even though they received substantial

sums of money from their sugar daddies. Baby-H, for example, received more than 20 000 NOK each month from one sugar daddy that she had met for a few years, and she was saving most of it, since she earned enough through her job to support her. Baby-G was working in the same sector as many of the sugar daddies she met and for her, and much more important than the money she received, was that she perceived that she could learn something related to her job from her sugar daddies. A common trait between the sugar babies was that they had recently ended long-term relationships and were not interested in entering new (serious, binding, or romantic) relationships yet. Most of the sugar babies had decided to try sugar dating after an initial disappointment with the dating app Tinder. Thus, sugar dating for the sugar babies existed on a continuum; from work to fun, from labour to pleasure, while overlapping between these modalities.

The interviews are all of Norwegians, except one sugar baby that was from another Nordic country. Since I write in English I try to translate as well as possible when I quote them, but sometimes I make sure that the correct meaning is understood and so I add the Norwegian word in parenthesis. In order to not lose sense of the meaning, the quotes are written here as they appeared in the transcriptions, and three dots mean that they are pausing.

5.3.2 Overcoming Stigmatization

For the sugar daddies interviewed the stigma of the ‘whore customer’ was to a high degree overcome, since they conceptualized sugar dating as ideally something other than ‘prostitution’ – more in alignment with the discourse of the sugar dating interface. The sugar daddies also reproduced the ‘feminist’ discourses of prostitution/sugar dating as essentially damaging to the psyche, while paradoxically staging themselves as the ‘rescuers’ of sugar babies. By contrast, most of the sugar babies conceptualized sugar dating *precisely* as prostitution, although they reclaimed their agency by imagining the pathologized and victimized sugar baby produced in public discourses as someone other, and in many ways more fragile, than themselves.

5.3.2.1 The sugar daddy: Rescuing and parenting the sugar baby

According to two of the sugar daddies interviewed, Daddy-A and Daddy-C, sugar dating was (ideally) not ‘prostitution’, although, as noted, they expressed very different ideas about what

then, it ‘really was’, since Daddy-A was searching for romance, while sugar Daddy-C was developing BDSM arrangements with sugar babies through the site. However, they both still said that they compensated their sugar babies with money. According to Daddy-B, however, it *was* prostitution, but since he was on the sugar dating site as a researcher and not a sugar daddy this was not relevant to him, but only to imagined others. I have to point out here that I did not ask any of them specifically about stigmatization and how they felt about it. I rather interpret their insistence that sugar dating was *not* essentially prostitution, as part of a strategy for overcoming this stigma. (Since, if sugar dating is not prostitution, then objections against it by feminists and others in public debates are not valid). It was the sugar daddies themselves that brought up this subject in the interviews. This indicates that they had at least considered the possibility of sugar dating being prostitution, before deciding that it was not. And for Daddy-B – the insistence that he was on the site Sugar Daters solely as a form of researcher – inquiring on the state of popular culture, was enough to tell me that he did not consider himself a ‘whore customer’. As he said; “I have another approach than most others.” However, this self-conceptualization as *unique* or different from other imagined sugar daddies was a trait that all three sugar daddies interviewed exhibited. As stated by Daddy-C:

I think that ... most men... most would ... behave way more badly (være kji) against these girls. I have never ... I treat them fucking great. (jeg oppfører meg jævlig okey med de) I am very honest towards them, and I have clear conditions. (Daddy-C)

The example he put forth in order to explain to me his care for his sugar babies was that he “allowed them to have a boyfriend.” But he added that this was only as long as this boyfriend was a “decent guy”. He told me how he had, on several occasions, orchestrated meetings with the boyfriends of his sugar babies. These boyfriends remained unknowing that he was the sugar daddy (and ‘BDSM-dominant’) of their girlfriends. The point of meeting the boyfriends was to validate them: “It should not be an idiot!”, he stated. In this remarkable and deeply problematic way, he took *care* of his sugar babies. Here we see how social discourses that are quite impossible to combine can come together and create strange re-enactments by individuals.

Even if the sugar daddies insisted that sugar dating was not, or should not ideally be, prostitution, they told me stories about women that they had come across and that seemed to be trying to sell sexual services through the website. These sugar babies were perceived as ‘having issues. These issues ranged from serious mental illness, to ‘daddy issues’, to being corrupted by a materialistic culture. As sugar daddy B put it; “But it is actually girls in there

that ... eh ... wants to have a ... wants to ... let's call it their daddy!" (kall det pappaen deres!). He connected this tendency with "dysfunctional families", and he said that many "lacks that steady point in their life, and they have probably (lacked it) for quite some time (mangler faste holdepunkt i livet)". He also connected sugar dating with the "current media situation", in which; "Our cell phones have begun to take over, and it has become the society of ... egotism." This had to do with the following:

we have gained so much wealth in this country, relatively fast ... and the material have taken over for the joy of sharing experience, contact, closeness, love ... between people. so that we ... we have to exhibit ourselves all the time. (Vise oss fram) Our homes have become exhibition-arenas. (Daddy-B)

As a result of this, according to sugar daddy B, there has emerged "a new form of poverty". Importantly, this poverty was not imagined as an *actual* poverty; "more people experience themselves as poor ... in the global context they are at the top, but in the Norwegian society they go about feeling different." This 'new poverty' was thus, only a *perceived* poverty that came about by comparing oneself with the ones that were better off, although, as he admitted; these perceptions did have root in actual increased social differences. Sugar daddy C expressed similar sentiments: Poverty in the context of Norway was not "absolute", but "relative", and according to him, it was not a real but only an *experienced* poverty, paradoxically created by too much wealth.

Sugar dating for these sugar daddies, seemed to make it possible for them somehow, to provide a patch on these problems that they perceived our culture to be ridden with (both the perceived 'daddy issues' of the sugar babies and 'the new poverty'). The lyrical way that Daddy-B described the short-comings that was induced by our 'materialistic society' (I repeat; "sharing experience, contact, closeness, love"), could be interpreted as a longing, not for being nurtured, but for *nurturing another*, and it should perhaps also be interpreted in terms of *his* needs of 'closeness, contact, love', etc. Daddy-B was acutely aware of the fact of increasing economic differences within Norwegian society, although at the same time he denied that poverty could possibly be 'real' in any *material* sense in Norway. But, since he himself was at the better end of this economic divide, then perhaps what he expressed was an (unarticulated) wish to make amends for the inequality of increasing economic difference, even while at the same time not admitting that increasing inequality can actually become a problem in a society.

Daddy-B had met in total two sugar babies for dinner, but not for intimate reasons, as he made sure to state, and he had not paid them for having dinner with him (,while expressing shock and disbelief in the fact that some sugar babies demanded 5000 NOK solely for having dinner with a sugar daddy). In one case he had given advice about the sugar baby's career, since she was working in the same sector as him, and the other sugar baby had; "needed some sort of human 'mentor' ... a grown-up in her life", and so he had helped her with that, advising her about; "choosing paths (veivalg) in her life" (Daddy-B).

These rescue discourses, or perhaps we should even call it parenting discourses, re-occurred in the interviews with the two other sugar daddies. Daddy-C said he had sent several sugar babies to the doctor, and he had also sent them to therapy and payed for their sessions with psychologists. He said that he did not choose to engage in relationships with the sugar babies that seemed to have the most "serious issues", but that he "sorted them out", in order to "avoid too much chaos." But, if he saw in them a sense of having a "will to self-control", he would engage in relationships, also with the ones he perceived as having "issues". He said that he thought that he; "could seriously add something" to their life's, in the sense of not only their material well-being, but to their psychological health. At the end of the interview we returned to this subject, as he explained to me the meaning of being a (sugar) daddy:

The girls that I end up with over time, experience me as ... as very reliable (trygg) ... They say it again and again ... they start to rely on me ... ask me about advice ... the daddy represents that... taking-care-of-character. (Daddy-C)

Thus, he saw it as relationships in which he brought some sense of 'parenting', and emotional safety to the sugar baby. The other sugar daddies had similar stories about helping or guiding the sugar babies they met in an emotional way. For example, Daddy-A had spent an entire weekend with a sugar baby that had told him her life story – which he characterized as "very rough". This had been such an emotional strain on him that he was now trying to avoid such "episodes." again. He also stated that no intimacy had occurred during this weekend, although it needs to be noted that the sugar baby was payed to keep him company.

According to Daddy-A; "there are women there (on the website), that quite clearly are prostitutes!" When I enquired about his opinion about this, he answered that "I do not like it, of course", although he stated that he did not judge them since he did not "know the details about their particular circumstances". Further he told me that he thought he had managed to talk one sugar baby out of the initial idea she had about "selling herself." – as he called it (bringing to mind feminist discourses about prostitution, in which it is seen as a way of selling

one's body, and even one's self as opposed to merely providing an act, or a performance). He had been sure that this particular girl was under legal age, and he hoped that he had succeeded in talking her out of this idea, thus 'rescuing' her from prostitution.

Daddy-C, on the other hand, did not have a (moral) problem with prostitution in itself, but it was simply not what he was looking for on the website SugarDaters. One way of avoiding prostitutes was to avoid women of colour:

I don't have a problem personally with buying a prostitute. It doesn't cost me anything ... but for me ... it is just that I ... it doesn't give me anything. it is completely meaningless! ... You have some ... you have those ... the African prostitutes that are in there ... they are probably not prostitutes all of them, but for *me* they are all prostitutes ... this is simply in order to sort out.
(Daddy-C)

Thus, the sugar baby is necessarily something other than a prostitute (as hypothesized). And here we are also confronted again with the problematic discourses that was central to the debates that led to the implementation of the Nordic model in 2009; women with dark skin tone were more likely to be perceived by this sugar daddy as 'real' prostitutes.

Thus, all the sugar daddies interviewed repeatedly narrated themselves in one way or the other as the *rescuer* of sugar babies – and even the provider of the *parenting* that sugar babies were perceived as not having had enough of in their lives. This, together with the perceptions of themselves as unique (*other* sugar daddies where imagined as the mean and deviant 'whore customer' familiar from public discourse), can be interpreted as an attempt of *re-humanizing* themselves when faced with the stigma of being a sugar daddy, or possibly even a whore-customer. At the same time, the way that they perceived of (most) sugar babies; as psychologically damaged – perhaps by a bad upbringing, perhaps by the superficiality of popular culture – represents a re-narrating of public discourses. The Kardashians, for example, was perceived both by Sugar Daddy B, and one of the social credited experts in public discourses as a major influence on sugar babies. Thus, they found the possibility of redemption within the available discourse, and created a socially accepted, and even virtuous position for themselves. According to Hollway and Jefferson; "The idea of a defended subject shows how subjects invest in discourses when these offer positions which provide protections against anxiety and therefore supports to identity" (2000:23). For these sugar daddies, certain available discourses about the sugar baby as fragile, psychologically damaged, and in the need of support, care and even rescue, was used to support an identity construction as responsible and caring, since they saw themselves as providing the care and support that the

sugar babies that they had met were perceived as lacking. But in this deeply ironical way the discursive construction built by radical feminism of the sexually damaged prostitute, or in this case the sugar baby, as a victim in the need of rescue was reconstructed by the sugar daddies, and they re-invented *themselves* as their rescuer.

Perhaps the sugar daddies that I interviewed represented, in some ways, the exceptional cases that they perceived of themselves to be. (While it is also possible that they censored themselves, since I am a woman.) But, in addition to the interviews, there is also results from netnographic investigations. Since I was present on the sugar dating site for two months, and even if my profile had no information on it, I received several messages from sugar daddies, looking for a date or a relationship, mistaking me for a sugar baby (as stated in methods part, I immediately cleared mistakes like this, I explained to them why I had a profile on SugarDaters, and I proposed interviews). None of these messages, however, contained the simple proposition of ‘sex for money’. I received many simple ‘hello’s’ and ‘do you have a good day?’ – type of messages. These are the kind of messages that are sent and received on conventional dating applications and dating sites all the time, just as a way of enquiring if the other is interested. I also received a few extended messages, in which the sugar daddy explained to me what kind of relationship he was looking for, as well as his personal reasons for sugar dating; one had a sick wife, another had a very busy job, and no time for a conventional relationship. These messages were polite and coherently written. They expressed this same need for ‘taking care of their baby’ as the interviewed sugar daddies, and they put weight on having not only ‘chemistry’, but also expressed a wish for an ‘intellectual connection.’ One example, from the sugar daddy that had too busy a career for a ‘normal’ relationship is typical. It contains, not only feminist rescue discourses, but at the same time re-narrates the whole concept of sugar dating, as imposed by the websites (as Brandon Wade, or Sigurd Vedal would probably describe it themselves):

Since I have a job that takes very much of my time, I don’t have the time and opportunity to nurture a ‘normal’ relationship. Further, it is such that I have always liked the thought of ‘taking care of my babe’, I am probably a bit old fashioned when it comes to this. For me sugar dating is about mutual respect and trust. Your amazing looks is a plus for me, and my economic situation can become one for you. But the most important is that there is chemistry between us; So that your wish is to be with me because of my personality and looks, and my wish is the same with you. Because you are worth so endlessly much more than that I (or someone else) can just ‘buy’ you. It is totally out of the question for me to pay for dates, sex, snap, etc.

Here it is insisted upon ‘not buying’ the relationship, and the insistence that “you are worth so endlessly much more”, again, resembles radical feminist discourses that prostitution is by definition degrading for the woman, by putting her worth down. At the same time, what is described here, is that which, in the sociology of postmodern sex work is named the GFE (the girlfriend experience). What is searched for is an authentic connection, but with spatial and temporal limits. But this sugar daddy asked to have this experience seemingly free of charge – and he used ‘feminist’ rhetoric in order to persuade, or perhaps court, his potential sugar baby.

5.3.2.2 Sugar babies: Reclaiming agency

As with the sugar daddies I did not ask sugar babies explicitly the question; ‘is sugar dating prostitution?’, but there were two questions that I asked all of the participants near the end of the interview: What is the most positive aspect of sugar dating?, and; what is the most negative? The answer to the latter, was (according to five out of the six sugar babies interviewed) something like; *that it is in reality prostitution*. Further, when asked the follow-up question; “and why is that bad?”, many of them admitted that they had not really put thought into this, since sugar dating seemed to have been a mostly positive experience for them. The answer to the question was eventually that, even if it was not negative for themselves, it could be negative for an imagined *other* sugar baby.

There was one exception to the description of sugar dating as prostitution. Baby-G said that, although she perceived of it as very close to prostitution, it was not quite prostitution (in her case), since she thought that it was only prostitution if one *depended* on the income. (Baby-G was in full time job) The point about her own sugar dating not being prostitution was important for her and she emphasized the importance of being able to relate to one’s self, and that one should look at is “a form of trade”. Further, she went on to discuss how sugar dating probably would have been problematic if she had been *younger*, and she expressed worries for other sugar babies that were too young:

And then someone told me that they had met someone (through sugar dating) that was like ... sixteen ... like ... very young! and that freaks me out really because then it’s like ... don’t start with that now! It ... I have a thing with ... Too young people do it to be able to pertain to the buying pressure (henge tritt med kjøpepresset) (Baby-G).

Thus, these perceptions, familiar from public discourses, of *other* sugar babies, as too young, too fragile, or too affected by a materialist culture was narrated in one way or the other not

only by the sugar daddies, but also by many of the sugar babies. Many of the sugar babies said that, in order to sugar date, one should have an especially “strong psyche”, and they perceived of themselves precisely as inhabiting this strong psyche. This can be understood as a defence against, but also an internalization of public discourses. This story was to some extent also told by those that perceived of sugar dating as prostitution and even saw themselves as prostitutes or sex workers. The stigma of the ‘whore’ was perhaps not exactly overcome, but a sense of *agency* was taken back, since the fragile, weak, and psychologically damaged sugar baby was imagined as *someone other than themselves*. Because of this the sugar babies were highly ambivalent about the morality of sugar dating; Not because of a worry on account of themselves, but a worry about others. As Baby-H (also in full time-job and not depending upon the money she received) said:

H: I think that ... I have never experienced anything negative ... but I think that one can become dependent on money ... and I think that some can continue to do it on a regular basis even if they have bad experiences ... if they cannot handle it ... but do it anyway ... that they feel that they cannot stop.

Researcher: Why can't they stop?

H: If they become dependent on money, and ... people that don't work, you know... they have become so comfortable ... because money comes in... I have a friend, and she goes to social services (går på NAV), and she feels that she needs the money... so that is clear... then ... one can stretch one's limits. And that is totally wrong! (Baby-H)

These perceptions of other sugar babies as too fragile/young/affected by materialist culture was connected to the perception of themselves as *unique* in one way or the other, especially when it came to their sexuality. The sexuality of other women was perceived as the romantic, reproductive and fragile entity that is so often imagined, not only in debates about sugar dating, but also within popular cultural accounts of the nature of female sexuality. Their own sexuality was described as “limitless” (Baby-H) or, “more like male sexuality” (Baby-G).

Baby-G explained her own sexuality in terms of her history as a ‘Tomboy’; When she grew up there were only boys on her block, and she perceived that because of this she spoke the ‘male language’ better than other women. she had more male friends than female ones also as an adult. She said that her girlfriends would much more easily form ‘attachments’ with someone they only had had a ‘one-night stand’ with, but that she would not normally form such attachments; This explained why she could ‘handle’ sugar dating, but (imagined) others could not. This is coherent with the poststructuralist view of gender; as learned. However, since she perceived of herself as an *exception*, and that female sexuality was not ‘really’ and

essentially as hers, she contradicted herself. This narrative of not quite inhabiting the essentially 'female' sexuality was told by several of the sugar babies, as they saw themselves as more 'limit-breaking' than what was perceived to be 'normal' for a woman; Some perceived of this as a positive, others as a more negative trait. Thus, however much they reported enjoying their sexual experimentation, another 'voice' in their heads seemed to be telling them that they were not quite like other women, and that they not were behaving and feeling as women *normally do*, in an essential way. I interpret these discourses of exceptionalism as an expression of their need to justify, or at least make sense, of their sexuality and gender performance, since our hegemonic understanding of female sexuality is (still, and contradictorily), that female sexuality is essentially romantic or reproductive.

Baby-I, however, although she also conceptualized herself as a bit different from other women in terms of her 'sexual curiosity' brought the public discourses about sugar dating into the conversation, and she thoroughly reclaimed her own, and other imagined sugar babies' agency, with no ambiguity, or splitting of the self:

It is a very strange presentation of it ... because ... girls are presented as ... that it is like, poor her, you know...you expect that I will come here wearing something like ... fishnet stockings with holes in them ... and, I don't know ... you have a picture of that person like you have to feel sorry for that person ... And I do not claim that there is no one in real life that don't have it like that, but ... I am doing this voluntarily, and I have done a conscious choice here! It is such a strange presentation... always the man who becomes the mean one... the ugly, horrible businessman. It is not like that! (Baby-I)

Finally, in relation to the subject of stigmatization I noticed one interesting thing. I asked the sugar babies if they could imagine themselves in conventional romantic relationships with their sugar daddies, and beside the fact that many of them were not looking for a relationship at the current moment, their answer was persistently that they could *not* imagine this. In the words, again, of Baby-I:

you think a little bit like ... insane that he has to pay this much in order to ... you judge, you know ... you have, of course your thoughts ... this is a major drawback! And ... Personally, I would never be unfaithful against someone I was married too, but that is my personal belief you know... that is my personal belief, that I never would have done it! but it is weird anyway, and I never say anything, but that does not mean that I do not think it. (Baby-I)

The sugar babies, although they did not use that word, did not want to have a conventional relationship with a 'whore customer'. In this ironical way the whore stigma has really been

turned. Historically this has been the way that men have divided women, and ‘the loose women’ or ‘whore’, were forever spoiled when it came to marriage. In sugar dating it is the sugar daddy that seems to be the (romantically) ‘spoiled’ one, or at least he is *also* spoiled.

5.3.3 Emotional labour and femininity performance

None of the sugar babies interviewed (as far as I know) were dependent on social services in any way, but many (four out of the six interviewed) were students, and sugar dating was their de-facto part-time job. According to Hochschild (2012) emotional labour is something that is done within an occupation, but if it is a private relation it must be defined as *emotion work* (7). These modes probably exist on a continuum, and in an economy where the lines between the private and the public are becoming increasingly blurred it (Fleming, 2019a) is not always so easy to define where they are on this spectrum. For Baby-D, Baby-E, and Baby-I sugar dating represented a substantial part of their income, and I use mainly their accounts of sugar dating in the following. Emotional labour is essentially a form of acting and it is by Hochschild divided into *deep* and *surface* acting. In surface acting “it is the body, not the soul that is the main tool of the trade”, but in deep acting, “the acting of passions grows out of *living them*” (2012: 37,38, my emphasis). Bounded authenticity is essentially understood as deep acting, while manufactured identity is understood as surface acting. (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders, 2005). Sugar dating can first and foremost be conceptualized as a form of deep acting, since one is invited here to ‘be one’s self’, and develop an authentic relationship with the sugar daddy, but there are also traces, in the accounts of sugar babies, of more surface acting and this can be interpreted as attempts to distance oneself emotionally from the sugar daddy.

5.3.3.1 ‘A website for stupid men’: Disintegrating boundaries

When asked the question of what kind of a website Sugar Daters is, sugar baby E answered that; “Well ... it is really a website for stupid men”. We went on to talk about how she first made her profile on Sugar Daters, but later in the interview we returned to this notion of stupid men (in the meaning; ‘delusional’ men);

E: They are probably there in order to feel that they are not buying ... a whore you know. in a way. Try to justify it for themselves.

Researcher: They have a need for that? To justify?

E: Yes. they think a bit like ... they love it if you are a student, because then it is a bit like ... I help her ... she only does me a favour. And then they ask a lot, like ... how is school ... How is work ... they are concerned with you having future plans ... and that it is like ... that it is not only *this* that you do..

Researcher: But what about ... when you chat with them upfront ... can you say it directly ... what you are there for?

E: No ... when they ask ... what do you expect to receive ... then you cannot simply answer a sum. You have to, in a way ... I... expect that sum .. but then you have to wrap it in a little with ... it is not because you only buy *that* you know ... you also get my company in a way ... and things like that ... and that ... that sum ... makes it so that ... there is no drama ... because then you have kind of a deal you know ... but that ... you have to make them understand that you are not only with them because of the money...

Researcher: But if you do not wrap it in like that, what happens then?

E: yeah, then they stop answering. because then ... they feel that it is only about that. (money)
(Baby-E)

As I have shown, sugar daddies were very invested with making me see that sugar dating *not* essentially equals prostitution, at least for themselves. But the sugar babies that uses the sugar dating site as a way of providing income learn this about sugar daddies, and they adapt to it. And even if they themselves see their practice of sugar dating as sex work or prostitution, they seem to understand that they have to ‘wrap it in’, as sugar baby E explained in the above. Importantly, money should be made to seem as if it is *not* central to the encounter/relationship, and if the subject of money is clearly outspoken the ‘deal’ is in fact broken. This is undermined by findings from netnography in which euphemisms such as ‘I am looking for someone that can spoil me’ or; “someone that will treat me as the princess I really am”, or simply; “seeking investor”, were frequently used in the self-descriptions of sugar babies on their profiles. This is not strange, since it is not allowed to state explicitly that one’s purposes is to trade sex for money in sugar dating. Thus, the working sugar baby needs to become creative with her language. Because she cannot articulate exactly why she sugar dates she needs to use the available discourse in order to communicate her needs, and the available discourse is that of ‘spoiling’, ‘princesses’, and ‘mentoring’. One of the sugar babies that I contacted in order to recruit participants declined with the following statement: “I am not a sugar baby, but a prostitute, and I use the site in order to sell sex.” But her profile contained exactly the same discourses of ‘spoiling’ as other sugar baby profiles. Thus, an essential part of the labour of sugar dating seems to be its conscious semiotic labour, or perhaps its

‘language-games’. It seems like sugar daddies need to believe that sugar babies believe that they themselves are, in fact, princesses.

Contemporary sex work, especially the GFE is, at its core essentially an authentic connection, but at the same time it has bounds. These bounds consist of spatial, temporal and monetary limitations (Bernstein, 2007). But in sugar dating, as Nayar (2016) has found the bounds are built significantly down. As Baby-I explained, the worst thing is a price/time-list:

I: I try to maintain a mix of ... between business and a little bit more ... like personal. I am not the one that comes with a pricelist, and just ... okay ... now the clock ticks, you know. Because I know that many ... many have told me that it is the worst thing they know, you know, when it is I like 2000 for this, 1500 for that ... and many have told me that this is what they like about me ... you know I talk very little about things like that .. I just trust that it will work out .. perhaps there is a few sentences when I say ... okay 3000 ... 4000 ... and that is okay ... and then we don't need to talk about it again.

Researcher: And that works well?

I: It has always worked out fine for me ... and it ... you know, it destroys the whole experience ... they don't want to think that it is a transaction ... you make it seem natural ... and many times, they have even sent me the money on Vipps hours after I left the hotel room ... You just have to maintain trust. (Baby-I)

The sugar babies expressed that, even though it presented more work, this was also the way that they themselves wanted it, because it made it more personal, as well as *safe*. Baby-D was the only one that also had used escorting sites. I asked her about the difference between sugar dating and escorting and she pointed at precisely the bounds:

In a way ... the frames are clearer (tydeligere rammer) on the escort site ... you can put up the price and timeframe and that sort of thing ... and state what you can do and what you cannot do. (Baby-D)

She preferred, however, to use the sugar dating site at present, because she perceived of it as *safer*, but she said that this represented more work, since because of this she needed to negotiate much more with the sugar daddies before meeting them. This process of negotiation occurred on the application KIK; a chatting app in which one can be anonymous, and in which pictures and videos can also be sent between users. Thus, the sugar dating site merely functioned as a way of *initiating* contact. On KIK the part of sugar dating that can be defined as indirect sex work was performed, and this (preparatory work, as Baby-I called it) represented a big part of the labour of sugar dating. But they performed it differently. Baby-I

said that she always had a range of more or less nude photos ready on her phone so that she did not have to take new photos for each new sugar daddy, but merely send the ones she already had created. But Baby-E said that she only used the app for chatting, and that she refused to send nude photos, and that if the sugar daddy in question kept insisting on this she would delete or block him, since this was also, for her, an indicator of a lack of *respect*.

According to Baby-I this ‘preparatory work’ of texting (and sexting) was essential; one had to always pay attention as to what was happening on the phone, and because of this it was a “full-time job”, as she said. She told me about a recent occurrence in which she had been on a conventional date, while hearing the messages ticking in on her KIK application. This had been frustrating since it meant that she would be losing opportunities for *work*. These anxieties resemble those of an uber-driver, that never can relax in case work-opportunities should arise on the app. The negotiation-work engaged in by sugar babies on KIK brings to mind a description of the gig economy as our “new cyberized Downtown Abbey”, in which the ones with money “*will be able to use faceless, anonymous interactions via brokerage websites and mobile apps to hire those without money by forcing an online bidding war to see who will charge the least for their labour.*” (Hill in Murillo et al, 2017: 71)

5.3.3.2 ‘I am myself’: Deep and surface acting in sugar dating

Within the bounds of GFE, according to Bernstein, the authenticity of the encounter is very important, not only for the client but also for the sex workers themselves, as it relies on an ethos of sexual pleasure, individualism and self-discovery (2007a: 130). Baby-E did not engage in any relations with someone that she did not desire:

I only meet people that I would have been attracted to anyway ... I don’t think I could have done it otherwise ... because ... I don’t know how that would have made me feel like ... after ... and I don’t know if that would be very healthy, psychologically speaking. (Baby-E)

But for other sugar babies, physical desire was not important to the same degree, and it was also something that could emerge later on, and as a result of other things than physical attraction. As Baby-I said;

You cannot ask ... is he handsome? None of them are ... they are much older than you ... And there is a reason for why they use these sites ... and if you start to think that way you psych yourself out! You have to not think about looks! You have to try to have as good a time as

possible ... make the best out of the person ... focus on ... is he nice, is he kind? So, I think more about those things than ... does he have a big belly? (Baby-E)

At the same time, she pointed out that she had many positive (sexual) experiences, and that, in these encounters, *her* pleasure was most often central for the sugar daddy, (something which she had found surprising). This is also a form of authenticity. The *realness* of sexual pleasure. But it is also an example of the ‘deep acting’ of sex work in which feelings (and pleasures) needs to be invoked, not only for the client but also for provider.

Baby-D said that there were a few of the sugar daddies that she currently met regularly that she did not particularly like. She was thus using the sugar-dating site in order to recruit new ‘regulars’, so that she could dispose of the ones that she did not like. Thus, although they conceptualized it differently, authenticity was a goal for the sugar babies. But it was not always attainable.

I asked them if they ‘were themselves’ in the encounters with the sugar daddies. With this question I wanted to find out if they performed their femininity differently than they usually did, since this then, would be an example of a ‘manufactured identity’, and possibly a defence mechanism. (Sanders, 2005) They often had to think a bit about this question. First, they answered that yes, they were themselves, but that, at the same time, they were aware of who was the ‘customer’ in the relation, and who was paying. Because of this, all of them paid more attention to his needs, than they would have otherwise, and ‘smoothed out’ their personalities. As Baby-E said:

I am very much the same ... I dress like I do now ... well, depending on the situation ... the only difference is probably that ... I listen a bit more then I perhaps do when I am with my friends ... but it is something about it ... these men seem to have a need to talk ... and ...they say a lot of things to me that they probably do not tell others ... sometimes it’s like ... you don’t even want to be intimate, do you? ... You just want someone to talk to! And ... I do not argue much against them ... like ... Me, as a person ... I love to argue, discuss ... and I try to see different perspectives on everything ... but I don’t do that with them, because ... I don’t think they really want a new perspective ... I just think they want to be seen and understood (Baby-E).

The emotional labour of the sugar baby sometimes resembles that of the psychotherapist. From the accounts of these sugar babies, this can be conceptualized as a form of surface acting, since they reported that they worked on themselves in order to not be affected so much. But being unaffected was not so easy. As Baby-D described it;

D: I often feel like a social worker ... almost ... because it is very much that ... yeah, come out of them, and they very much have a need to talk ... but I don't have to answer so much, they just need to get it out.

Researcher: Can you feel sympathy with them?

D: Yes, definitely!

Researcher: And what about repulsion?

D: rarely, but yes. Sometimes they have hyperbolic opinions (drøye påstander), but I try to not get personal. I can think that what you say are more or less correct ... but I am not going to say anything against it. But it can be weird. It is someone that you don't know, who is ... telling you everything!

Researcher: Why do they do it, you think?

D: Well, I get the impression that most of them don't have anyone else to talk with. (Baby-D)

For Baby-D (she was the youngest of the sugar babies interviewed and under twenty years), these conversations were strange since she was, in some of the cases, the same age as the children of her sugar daddies, and which they sometimes talked about in the encounters. (I was a bit shocked, and my immediate thought was that these must be rather resourceless men. I asked her the profession of her sugar daddies, and she said that they are often “real estate agents, lawyers, you know...people that are well paid ...work in an office.. many pilots... But also a few psychiatrists, and some scientists.”) In the account of Baby-D it was (the emotional labour of) these conversations that was the real strain of sugar dating, not the expected intimacy.

Baby-D said that she did not use any make up, and that she “was herself” in the encounters, meaning that she did not change anything about her ‘look’ specifically for her sugar daddies. She received a lot of “positive feedback” from sugar daddies because of her natural femininity, and many of the other sugar babies told similar stories (also the ones that did not sugar date as ‘work’). They structured their femininity in accordance with the ideal of a *natural femininity*, and because of this, as they perceived it, they were appreciated by their sugar daddies. This femininity should not be perceived as forced, but it should ideally be something that comes natural from within. However, this is also a ‘femininity-performance’, and an enactment of a fantasy, although perhaps not as easy to notice as such, as in the case of drag (Butler, 1990), and the femininity performance of a manufactured identity.

However, the appreciation of ‘the natural’ expressed by their sugar daddies is an essential part of postmodern sex work, according to Bernstein, and she uses men’s visits to strip clubs as an example. Men’s desire for authenticity “finds expression in their frequently stated preference

for exotic dancers who inhibit the ‘natural look’, who personify ‘the girl next door’, and who can engage in conversation with frequency and ease.” (Frank in Bernstein, 2007b: 483) This ‘girl next door’-persona seems to resemble the femininity through which sugar babies define themselves. This femininity is an essentially unthreatening femininity. The sugar baby (as the ‘playboy bunny’), should essentially not be a ‘femme fatale.’ This latter is undermined by, and related to, findings from netnography in which the statement that one is ‘drama-free’ was a favoured self-description by sugar babies, while sugar daddies stated that they searched for a ‘drama-free’ relationship. The premise of this is, essentially, that women are normally a source of ‘drama’, but that in sugar dating this essentially feminine tendency needs to be suppressed. The sugar baby should provide as little as possible *emotion work* for the sugar daddy. In sugar dating femininity is structured as non-threatening and without friction, and this is re-enacted by sugar babies.

The sugar babies all expressed that they ‘were themselves’ in the encounters, meaning by that that they wore the same clothes and make-up as they usually did. Baby-I was perhaps the exception, as she explained how she changed her persona just a bit in her encounters; She wore the same clothes as she usually did, but she ‘tweaked’ how she matched them, and did her make-up a little bit differently, so that in a way she became a slightly different version of herself. This could be an example of the defence mechanism that a manufactured identity provides according to Sanders (2005). However, in sum, from the accounts of the sugar babies interviewed, it seems that *bounded authenticity* is the most precise theoretical framework to understand the emotional labour of sugar dating, and that, as Nayar has also shown: In sugar dating the boundaries are fewer, while the insistence upon authenticity is increased, in what is conceived of, in many ways, as a relationship (2016).

5.3.3.3 A neoliberal courtesan? The Whore-Madonna dichotomy

The sugar babies reported that most of their ‘regular’ sugar daddies were in settled, long time, relationships or married, and that with their sugar babies they looked for some ‘excitement’. Baby-E said that the sugar daddies always talked about their wife’s and girlfriends in positive terms, and that, with sugar babies, these men probably just wanted some confirmation (from sugar babies) that they still had a ‘mojo’ (‘hadde draget’):

Researcher: But ... that is a pretty bad way to check if one has mojo? To pay...

E: yes (laughs) it is. And I have even told them

Researcher: What do they say?

E: they say that ... anyhow you twist and turn it ... to cheat is bad ... but that this is the least non-respectful way to do it ... but also ... better than for example to start a relationship with a colleague at work ... or a friend of the wife ... or friends that they have in common ... because a thing like that is much more complicated ... a much bigger deceit ... than ... well ... in their logic, this is better, because they also know that I will never contact their partner. (Baby-E)

Thus, her sugar daddies seemed to perceive of adultery as inherently wrong, but that to commit it with a sugar baby would be less immoral. The sugar daddies of this sugar baby were very young. She was in her early twenties and they were most often in their end twenties/beginning of the thirties, and they often went through a ‘thirty-years crisis’, as sugar baby E perceived of it. This was part of the reason, as she said, that they ‘needed’ to sugar date. That most sugar daddies are in long time relationships or married, is undermined by observations from Netnography in which many profiles of sugar daddies stated that they were married, or in relationships.

According to Bernstein (2007) sex work has, for a particular class fraction, become more a case of emotional exchange than pure sexual release. This could be interpreted as the practice returning to its historical roots: “The tradition of the European courtesan (prized as much for conversation and culture as for her erotic capacities) and the “patronage prostitution” of Japanese geishas and Indian devadasis are well-known instances of emotionally expansive, yet explicitly transactional erotic arrangements. Historians have also noted that commodities other than sex were on offer in the luxury bordellos of eighteenth-century Paris” (2007: 171). If we are currently returning to the practice of courtesans, then the sugar baby (as theorized in previous analysis) should be a perfect example of a courtesan of our times, with the neoliberal ideology and ethos of authenticity that is imposed in sugar dating. All of the sugar babies interviewed engaged in long term relationship (or ‘arrangements’) with sugar daddies, and their sugar daddies were, at the same time, married or in ‘official’ relationships. Many reported that they received money from their sugar daddies also in weeks that their sugar daddies did not have time to meet them.

Daddy-C conceived of sugar dating as “a digitalization and an optimization of something that always have been there in different cultures.” He insisted that sugar dating was different from prostitution, and that a sugar baby was more similar to a girlfriend. Still, he said that it was *not* essentially a romantic relationship. This spectrum of feelings was reserved for his wife only, which he reported that he respected deeply (although it needs to be noted that he also

stated that he respected his sugar babies). Baby-H had a sugar daddy that she had met regularly for some years. This sugar daddy had a ‘trophy wife’ that seemed to ‘bore him’:

But she ... she is pretty boring, you know ... typical ... trophy wife ... so ... and I think he is bored with her ... and because of that, I think he wants someone that can ... I am very down to earth you know ... I am not a typical west side (vestkant) girl you know ... and I am very cheeky (frekk) and fun. And men really like that! (Baby-H)

The Whore-Madonna dichotomy was first identified by Freud as a form of ‘psychic impotence’: “It denotes polarized perceptions of women in general as either good, chaste, and pure Madonnas or as bad, promiscuous, and seductive whores” (Bareket et al., 2018: 519). Feminist theory suggest that the Whore-Madonna dichotomy stems from a desire to reinforce patriarchy, and links have been found between patriarchy-enhancing ideology, sexist attitudes and the Whore-Madonna dichotomy. Endorsement of the whore-Madonna dichotomy also negatively predicts the romantic relationship satisfaction of men (Bareket et al., 2018: 519).

Some of the perceptions of sugar babies, by sugar daddies, accounted for in the above, suggest that this dichotomy exist in the minds of some men in 2019 Norwegian society. And in a very strange way since, at the same time, sugar daddies seem to be very much invested in the idea of the sugar baby precisely *not* being a prostitute or ‘whore’.

5.3.4 Chivalry, romance, feminism

Sugar dating (re)establishes certain rules for courtship: It tells us how to go about in the encounter with the other. These rules are, for both sugar daddies and sugar babies, at the core of its appeal, since it relieves some of the anxiety inherent to modern romance. In sugar dating no ‘games’ are allowed, from either party, and communication is strongly encouraged, both in terms of ‘economic expectations’, but also in terms of intimate, emotional, and sexual expectations. Since Sugar Daddies and Sugar babies are given distinct gender-based roles (based on the idea of the existence of eternal essential gender differences) it becomes easy to relate to. Everyone knows what is expected of them. Finally, in sugar dating there should not be an excess of feeling (For example, there should be no drama, as shown in the above), but it should neither be completely *without* passion, since the relationship is put forth as one based upon chemistry and connection. The notion of respect is also central to sugar dating, and sugar babies invoked it persistently as essential to them. In the following I show how, for

sugar babies, sugar dating becomes a patriarchal microcosmos where ‘the pleasures of the patriarchy’ can be enjoyed. At the same time, due to the very same patriarchal norms, the idea of ‘real’ romance seems to be out of the question for sugar babies, but not for (all) sugar daddies.

5.3.3 The (Guilty) pleasures of the patriarchy

Sugar babies told me their stories about how they first made their profile on Sugar Daters, and the reason for why they decided to do so. A strong discontent, and a disenchantment with the dating application Tinder was central to these stories. This disenchantment was the reason that most had initially decided to try sugar dating. As Baby-I said; “I wanted to meet someone that would ... take a bit care of me ... go out and eat ... sleep in a hotel ... things like that”. Baby-H had met her first sugar daddy on Tinder, and because of this (positive) experience, she had decided to try sugar dating. Eventually she had quit Tinder. She also perceived of sugar dating as much safer than Tinder. She told a story about one time that she had been attacked by a tinder date. She also stated that she had met many ‘weirdos’ through Tinder, but not to the same degree on SugarDaters, although as she reported; there surely were some ‘weirdos’, also there. Many of the sugar babies expressed similar notions. The sugar daddy was conceptualized as much more polite and ‘grown-up’, as well as ‘respectful’, than the men that could be found on Tinder. Baby-F said that she wanted to sugar date because of the excitement, and she stated that on Tinder there were “not men, but boys”. Many sugar babies also expressed that the taboo of sugar dating was a big part of their reason for sugar dating. The taboo, and (feminist) norm-breaking of it, seemed to be the very thing that made it exciting. Many sugar babies knew about sugar dating precisely because of public debates and documentaries, confirming the hypothesis of ‘deviance-amplification’ (Cohen, 2011: 239) Daddy-B also said that he first had heard about sugar dating, precisely in public debates. Some of the sugar babies sugar dated because it provided them with more pleasurable (sexual) experiences. This seemed to be due to the communication that is encouraged in sugar dating. Their experience with ‘Tinder hook-ups’ had been very disappointing, in terms of the indifferent way that they perceived themselves treated by men. In the words of Baby-I, when speaking of the culture of ‘Netflix and chill’:

On Tinder ... Those guys ... They just want to get laid ... but they don’t give anything ... back. It’s like ... you see a half movie together and then ... you know, it is not very exiting. I don’t

know ... I was so disappointed by it ... And I thought ... if it's going to be like that ... then I want to get something back. (Baby-I)

By getting 'something back', she did not only refer to the money that she received from her sugar daddies, but she meant being treated with respect and chivalry. It had been very surprising to the sugar babies, due to the public discourses about sugar dating in which the sugar daddy (as with the 'whore customer') is consistently portrayed as a villain, that they were so 'nicely' treated by sugar daddies. Baby-E said that she had learned to expect more from men now because of sugar dating. This had not so much to do with the fact that the sugar daddies payed for everything, but with "making an effort":

E: well, I have, in a way always been very confident ... but now I have probably become even more ... secure in myself ... it (sugar dating) has in a way thought me that. It is many things that I now would probably not accept (finne meg i) ... in a way ... how well they (sugar daddies) treat me ... now my expectations to a Tinder date would be way higher. It is ... well, in my eyes, on a first date, you should feel special!

Researcher: But has that to do with the fact that they (sugar daddies) treat ... or .. ?

E: It has to do with making an effort.. you know.. if for example it is a student.. they don't have so much money always ... but if he invited you on a picnic in the park ... and had brought a grill ... or just something ... than that would show that they cared ... and it is just as much effort in that ... even if it doesn't cost ... as much. (Baby-I)

Most of the sugar babies had recently ended long-term relationships and were not looking to enter another at least not at the time when they had started sugar dating. However, they still wanted to be sexually active. As Baby-E said: "It (sugar dating) is a practical way of having a sex life when you want to stay single", echoing the entrepreneurial discourses of interfaces, and those of the neoliberal feminist, in which "a cost – benefit calculus are paramount" (Rottenberg, 2013: 429).

Since in sugar dating, in contrast to Tinder dating, there was always a lot of initial communication on various chatting apps, the intimate encounter was experienced as much improved. According to Baby-E, the difference between Tinder and sugar dating was that:

There are very clear guidelines in sugar dating ... firstly ... what do you expect? What do you like, what do you not like.? in terms of ... what turns you on ... And then, that you also get money for it ... then it becomes a win win-situation. (Baby-E)

Similar sentiments were expressed by many of the other sugar babies. On Tinder, according to sugar baby H, men: "do not know what they want". But in sugar dating they always described

exactly what they searched for in their messages to her, and this she found comforting. This could start a dialogue in which they both could state their preferences. On Tinder there were many, according to her, that “just wanted sex” but pretended to be looking for a relationship. Because of this, sugar dating was a better alternative; here men were at least “honest about their intentions”. According to Baby-G, Tinder exemplified a culture of “use and throw away (bruk og kast)”, but the culture of Sugar dating was different:

There it is more like ... I have done it (sugar dated) because I did not want a boyfriend ... and so ... I can't bear (orke ikke) a boyfriend in my life right now ... but it is nice still to meet someone ... and at least there are ... set rules ... so that you don't get any trouble afterword's. No drama, no bullshit ... nothing. Both know which rules apply ... so, you don't have to have anyone ... I don't have to have anyone hanging around ... trying to be my boyfriend. (Baby-G)

In the above account we can also notice how the ‘bounded authenticity’ of sugar dating becomes anxiety-calming also for sugar babies. Reversing gender expectations, it was the *sugar baby* that specifically expressed that she did not want ‘drama’, or even romance. Baby-G also used her sugar daddies in the way that is so strongly encouraged by the interfaces of sugar dating; *as mentors*, giving her career advice, since she worked in the same sector as many of her sugar daddies. Many of the other sugar babies invoked the same entrepreneurial discourses, when invoking the positives of sugar dating. In this sense the discourses about sugar dating as a way of progressing one's career was reproduced. Baby-E seemed to be very concerned with her education and future career, and she said that she always asked her sugar daddies about what advice they would give her, since they were older and “had more experience” than her.

The chivalry, and even *respect*, that the sugar daddies treated them with had come as a big surprise to all the sugar babies interviewed (since this is not how sugar daddies are portrayed in public debates). At the same time many conceptualized it in terms of something like a ‘parallel reality’, or like being in a Hollywood movie. According to Baby-H:

some are really traditional Gentlemen you know Opens doors ... take you to nice restaurants and so on ... and those do not exist nowadays! You cannot find anyone on Tinder that would do that ... these men ... they know that they have money ... they know what they want ... and I like that ... the old-fashioned thing ... it is like in a movie ... and that thing ... I think that all girls want to experience it in their lives. (Baby-H)

This luxury-indulgence, in combination with the chivalric behaviour of sugar daddies is at the core of the discursive construction of sugar dating as imposed by sugar dating interfaces and blogs, and as this account implies, it is reproduced in sugar dating.

Even if the sugar babies, as with Baby-E, had come to expect ‘more’ from men in their lives after sugar dating, in the terms of paying attention, making an effort and giving them compliments, they did not expect men on a ‘conventional date’ to pay for everything for them. As baby-I said, referring to someone she recently had been dating in a conventional way:

I have become a bit ‘work injured’ (laughs) I am not used to paying for anything anymore.

I feel now that it feels a little bit good ... now that I have met that guy. I can happily pay, or we can split the bill, and it feels good ... because ... then we are even. (Baby-I)

In my previous term paper about the sugar dating phenomenon I found that the sugar baby is subjectified as a neoliberal feminist; This is, at its core, a feminist that sees the feminist project as a personal project, not a societal one, and it sees feminism as a project that to a high degree is finished, and all that remains is for individual women to climb the power hierarchy. Because of this, I circled in on the subject of feminism in all the interviews; I wanted to know if they shared this ideology. The sugar babies all identified as feminists, but some had a more neoliberal approach than others. According to Baby-F it was now in fact women that had all the power, and feminism had no role whatsoever in our society anymore; she expressed the view that politically active feminists were really just insecure women that did not know how to “stand up for themselves”, and that the best way to be a feminist was to “express it with one’s personality”. But all the others expressed a much more conventional feminism concerned with *equal rights*, and they saw feminism as a *social project* that is not finished yet, thus essentially *not* a neoliberal view. For example, as Baby-H stated:

I am not the one that ... you know ... demonstrate in the streets and so on ... but I think it is sick that we don’t have the same rights yet ... that the pay is not yet the same ... and that ... you know ... its 2019 and the fact that there are still such differences ... This I think is simply a disgrace! (det er bare sykt!) (Baby-H)

A few sugar babies said that they had been raised by feminist mothers, and it seemed like feminism was important to their identity. At the same time, they perceived that they were breaking its norms by sugar dating. Baby-I perceived of sugar dating as somehow antagonistic to feminism, although at the same time she defined herself as feminist:

yes, I really am a feminist ... and because of that it is probably a bit sick to earn money on this, when I am so concerned with gender equality ... and I am raised as a feminist ... and also, to do what I want ... to be strong! I have been thought that girls can do everything that boys can do. (baby-I)

Baby-E also expressed this awareness, of her ‘feminist norm-breaking’, but she expressed a little bit more resistance to the narrative of radical feminism and the public discourses about sugar dating, insisting that she should have the right to do as she wished with her body (and here is also another example of reclaiming agency):

For me ... feminism means ... equal rights, and that women are just as much worth ... and that one should be treated the same ... and what it means for me ... even if ... many feminists would probably look down on me because of what I do ... it is still a right that I have ... and that I deserve to have ... to choose what I do ... with my own body. (Baby-E)

In the context of Norwegian society, the notion that sugar dating is breaking the norms of feminism is part of its taboo-breaking, and thus perhaps its pleasure. It seems to become, for some sugar babies, almost like a ‘guilty pleasure’. When sugar dating one enters a patriarchal microcosmos in which one can paradoxically expect *more* from men than in conventional dating.

Although the sugar babies were not explicitly neoliberal feminist, they all expressed that they thought that there existed essential (psychological, biological, or genetic) *differences* between men and women. For example, Baby-I stated that men simply were ‘hornier’ than women, and that they could not control this as well as women. A few others re-told the familiar story from evolutionary psychology of men as biologically determined to be more promiscuous than women. Thus, although gender equality was essential to them, the postfeminist notion that women and men are essentially and eternally *different* from each other was also reproduced.

5.3.4.2 But what about love?

Sugar dating is an affective practice that builds on the norms of the affective-discursive practices of sex work (the GFE) and *romance*, and it exist in a continuum between them. Some norms from romance are kept (chivalry, authenticity), while others are discarded with (irrationality). Because of this I was interested in how the participants conceptualized love,

romance and relationships, and whether these could possibly be attained through the instrumental practice of sugar dating.

As already accounted for, sugar babies did not display a particularly romantic disposition towards sugar dating. Most, if not all, sugar dated in order to specifically avoid a ‘serious’ relationship. Their reasons were diverse. Many had recently exited long-term relationships. Baby-E and Baby-D said that they simply preferred staying single, while Baby-G said that too much turmoil was occurring in her private life right now, and because of this she did not want to add a relationship to the equation. Baby-F was the only one that expressed that she could be “open for it”, when asked if romantic love could possibly occur in sugar dating, but she also stated that she sugar dated first and foremost for the excitement, and she said that she was not ready for anything “serious” at the current moment. When asked if they thought that it could be possible to develop a conventional relationship through sugar dating, the answer was persistently that yes, perhaps for others, but surely not for themselves; And this, as also mentioned, seemed also to be connected to the notion of the ‘whore customer’. Men that for one reason or the other pays for sex or even just a date, was not perceived as particularly fitting for serious relationships. Either because this meant that they were cheating on their current partner (something that meant that they could not be trusted), or (if he was single) simply because this meant that something had to be ‘wrong’ with him; It was not considered particularly ‘manly’ to have to go on the website Sugar Daters in order to be able to date.

Another reason that serious relationships could, or perhaps even *should*, not be attained through sugar dating, according to sugar babies, seemed to be their feminist disposition. The idea of being supported by a man in the long term, within a relationship, was not what they searched for in their life’s. Baby-E said that there were, on this website, many men that did not want to “pay for it” exactly because they were “after something more” – in the meaning a romantic relationship. She had recently been on one date with a sugar daddy that was working in the same profession as she was currently studying to enter, but this sugar daddy had seemed to search for a girlfriend, specifically one that would stay at home and take care of the future children. Baby-E found this absurd:

Some are looking for something very long term it seems ... and they think that ... They want, in a way ... to be a provider for you, and the day that we, you know, marry and have children ... then I should only think about raising the children? But then ... I sit here and I am in my early twenties ... and it is like ... children are far into my future ... and not, you know, not like that. (Baby-E)

Thus, sugar babies, as it seems, sugar dated for fun, for pleasure, for money, or as an escape from the disenchantment of Tinder hook-ups but wanted an *equal* relationship if it was going to be ‘serious’. In sugar dating, relationships are built (although they are not conceptualized as ‘serious’), connections of various forms are sought and do occur. Pleasurable sexual encounters (due to the emphasis upon communication), intellectual connections (‘mentorship’), and emotional, even therapeutic needs are met. But these connections, encounters and relationships were consistently *not* perceived as having anything to do with romantic love, both by sugar babies and sugar daddies interviewed.

The exception was, as mentioned, Daddy-A; he sugar dated specifically because he hoped to develop a romantic connection with a younger woman, and hopefully a serious relationship. He insisted that the reason that he wanted to meet someone younger was ‘not because of looks’, but because of ‘personality’ and the fact that a younger woman would have other types of ‘experience’ than him. (I have to state here, so that there are no misunderstandings; By younger women he meant women in their twenties and even thirties, not anyone that was legally under-age.) He said that, on conventional dating sites, it was difficult to receive answers, but that in sugar dating it had been; “beyond expectations”. He expressed that he did understand that the reason for this probably had to do with the monetary expectations of sugar babies, but as he perceived it, it would still be possible for him to meet someone through sugar dating, since there were “many interesting people on these websites”. He also expressed that in sugar dating there was the potential for sugar babies to exploit sugar daddies:

Researcher: But ... on this website ... is it not encouraged that one party should support the other in terms of the economical ..? You ... but, you are open for that?

A: yes. But that ... It depends on premises ... If it is a relationship that you feel are working well ... of course, I have nothing against helping the other party ... If it makes her life better! At the same time this can fit into the frame of ... you know... A relationship where there is a certain age difference ... But then, you will always have this problem that ... If one party has a good economic situation and the other does not, then there is always a chance of exploitation or something like that.

Researcher: Who is being exploited?

A: Yes! That is a good question. This is completely unclear ... It will probably vary from situation to situation ... A girl that is pretty and that knows this ... and that plays on this (spiller på det), she can probably get much money out of ... you know ... someone that is a little bit weak for such things ... and she does not care about what she has to do to ... get it. (Daddy-A)

When I tried to recruit participants for this study one sugar daddy declined with the following reason:

I am only in here to see what this is about. And as I presumed, it is filled with young girls that principally are whores. And I am not rich either. So, I guess you have to find someone else to speak with.

This, together with the accounts of sugar babies, indicates that some men want to sugar date because they think that this can be a way of attaining a romantic relationship, (and perhaps because other dating sites and applications have failed them in such a task). Some, as it seems in the above quote, are disappointed when monetary expectations are articulated by sugar babies and they give up. But others find ways to reassure themselves that romance can still be attainable, such as in the case with Daddy-A. Of course, perhaps it *can* be attained. This sample of sugar babies was persistent in their rejection of such an idea, but the sample is very small. Still it indicates that in the context of Norwegian society the old patriarchal bargain is no longer, essentially, sought after by women (except, sometimes, as a ‘guilty’ pleasure). Sugar dating is also an example of the ways that love and sex, has departed from each other in modernity, and of the plasticity of sexuality (Giddens, 1992). And women are becoming just as skilled as men (or perhaps even more), in the task of pulling them apart.

5.3.5 The use of porn tropes

In sugar dating we are subjectified through familiar pornography and popular cultural tropes and here there is a promise of pleasure. The pleasures for sugar babies in receiving the chivalry of their sugar daddies, while knowing that they were breaking societal norms are already accounted for, and I have touched upon the ways that sugar babies structure their femininity as an unthreatening ‘girl next door’- persona. In the following I account for the ways that some other porn tropes are reproduced in sugar dating, namely how discourses of ‘dominance’ and ‘submission’ are reproduced, and how they connect with notions of biological/genetic gender difference, as well as how the very few sugar mommies and male sugar babies (re)constructed themselves as the MILF and the boytoy in their profiles.

5.3.4.2 Being a man/ Domination discourses

Discourses of sexual difference was invoked by all men interviewed, but also by many sugar babies. (Postfeminist) discourses of essential psychological or biological gender difference so often told by our popular culture, and strongly emphasized in the interfaces of sugar dating, were invoked by most participants of the study. These discourses were then correlated to what it means to be a woman or a man. Daddy-B invoked his experience and observations as a father and a grandfather of both genders when he insisted that there are in fact essential differences between genders, even before they develop language. According to him the inclination of women towards using money on make-up and clothes must have a biological origin. The self-objectification of women was not understood in terms of the social, but in terms of something more eternal; 'the biological' (The premise being that there will inevitably always be sugar babies in one form or the other). At the same time, even if it was perceived that men and women are inherently and essentially *different* from each other, the ideal of gender equality was invoked, also by the sugar daddies, although they were reluctant to call themselves feminists. They expressed that they agreed in feminist norms of gender equality (as in having equal rights, equal worth), and that the changes that have occurred in society because of feminism was mostly positive, but at the same time they perceived of feminism as *finished*, and that thus, there are now other places in the world that feminists should be concerned with (aligning their view with that of a neoliberal feminism).

Daddy-C expressed a certain ambiguity when invited to consider the subject of feminism, and that of gender roles. Connecting manhood with the chivalric behaviour of the gentleman, as well as with his sexuality;

C: Gender roles? Oh, you mean ... oh, that is a good question! I have discussed it so much because ... obviously I am a feminist, and obviously I am not! So, you know ... because like ... firstly ... feminism as defined ... the tabloid part of it ... Of course, I am not there. I am ... the year 1830 ... When it comes to gender roles.

Researcher: 1830.. (laughs)

C: 1830, yes, yes! (laughs) I am ... I hold up the door ... I like to take care of things... I demand to be treated as a man you know... it is very important for me ... everything else, I back off from ... I feel pacified ... so, I am very much on traditional gender roles. But at the same time ... you know ... I love girls! And I love the strength of feminist girls. I don't want girls to be weak. I love strong ... intelligent ... subs (submissives) that want something in their life you know! And when they give up control ... it is a gift you know ... it is something that I really like ... and

because of this I believe in traditional gender roles... and I also believe that this is genetically rooted. (Daddy-C)

Daddy-C sugar dated specifically in order to accommodate relationships that involved practices of BDSM, in which he himself always played the part of the ‘dominant’. Although he pointed out that he was very concerned with everything that happened between him and his sugar babies being consensual, safe, and that it had to be pleasurable also for the sugar baby, he seemed to connect his personal sexual preferences to ‘being a man’, and understood it as grounded in something ‘genetic’.

These practices of ‘dominance’ and ‘submission’ seems to be a substantial part of the reason that some men decide to become sugar daddies. In the interfaces of sugar dating, as I have shown, users are subjectified through ‘kinky’ or pornographic categories. Findings from Netnography suggest that these are categories that sugar daddies invoke in order to explain *who they essentially are*. Especially the self-description ‘I am very dominant’, was repeated across personal profiles of sugar daddies (although there were also some ‘submissive’ sugar daddies, as it needs to be noted), and they seemed not only to refer to their ‘turn-ons’ when invoking such discourses but to their whole being, or character. (as a form of *scientia sexualis*, in Foucauldian terms). These discourses of ‘dominance’ and ‘submission’ were also visible in the profiles of sugar babies, but to a lesser extent.

5.3.4.3 The MILF and the Boytoy

As noted, in sugar dating there are possibilities of reversing gender expectations, as well as heteronormativity, by searching for a partner of the same gender. In this section I rely only on findings from Netnography since I did not interview any male sugar babies or sugar mommies. The fact that this was difficult to attain is, in itself, also a finding. As perhaps one would expect due to our gender norms, there were much fewer such profiles. As to the sugar-mommy profiles, although present, they had not been in use for some time. But the fact that there *were* several profiles of both sugar mommies and male sugar babies, albeit in the definite minority when compared with sugar daddies and female sugar babies, indicates that sugar dating can be used in order to disrupt gender norms, or at least it indicates that someone have ‘given it a try’.

Some of the male sugar babies did not express what exactly they were seeking in sugar dating, but most indicated some things. One profile simply read; “needs a mommy”, and several invoked the trope of the MILF in their description of what they were looking for. One described himself as “a boytoy”. One profile expressed that he where searching for sugar daddies. Another expressed that he was looking for both sugar daddies and sugar mommies. Many emphasized that they had a “good body” and one emphasized that he had good social skills. Another stated that he; “loved to make people smile”. I was contacted by a few male sugar babies in the course of the two months I was present on site. When I answered them that I was not there as a sugar mommy they expressed disappointment. They did not answer much after that, and none agreed to meet me for an interview. One wrote to me that; “It would be nice to meet a sugar mommy since I am heterosexual, but I have not met any, so I am uncertain if they exist in reality”. I was also contacted by a female sugar baby that expressed that she would have liked to meet a sugar mommy, since she stated that she was bisexual. I also received compliments from several female sugar babies on my picture, such as; “I just wanted you to know that you are beautiful”, indicating that they might as well search for a sugar mommy as a sugar daddy.

There were some sugar mommy profiles on the Sugar Daters site, but they did not seem to be in use (since profiles contain information on how long it has been since a user has been active; a few hours, a day, a week, or a month). The few profiles that contained some information expressed themselves in similar ways as sugar daddies. For example, in one profile it said: “looking for boys that know how to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle”, indicating that she would take care of the material part of the potential relationship. Another stated on her profile that she was “married, but lonely”, and that she was looking for a young lover.

In the same ways as with sugar daddies and female sugar babies, pornography tropes, themes and discourses were invoked in order to conceptualize what was searched for, and whom one essentially was. (A MILF, a mommy, a boytoy) But at the same time, many of the male sugar baby profiles stated that they were students and that they were looking for some help with the financial part of their life’s’. They used similar euphemisms as female sugar babies, such as “I love to be spoiled”, and; “looking for someone that can take care of me”. This indicates that for male sugar babies, as with female sugar babies, motivations are (also) financial.

6 Conclusion

In this final chapter I (6.1) summarize my findings, analysis and interpretations of the three discursive layers of sugar dating in terms of where its appeal and pleasure is located, and then (6.2) I discuss these findings specifically in terms of the idea from Kipnis (1999) that we might perceive of pornography as confronting us with that which cannot be articulated in our societies, and (6.3) I discuss how this study was limited, and make suggestions for further research.

6.1 Summary

I have looked critically at three separate discursive layers of sugar dating in order to understand how and why it has resonance in our culture, and thus wherein its *appeal* is located. In order to make sense of the way that participants in the study perceived of sugar dating and their own as well as their partners role in it, it was necessary to provide an understanding both of public discourses about sugar dating in the specific context of Norwegian society, and the specific norms of sugar dating, as they are imposed through its digital interfaces and blogs.

In part one I analysed national debates about sugar dating, and I found that the sugar baby and the sugar daddy were, in public imagination, imagined as prostitute and client. In previous debates, discourses of prostitution became conflated with discourses of trafficking and this was carried on in sugar dating discourses. The sugar baby was seen as a victim of circumstances, a victim of sugar dating, and a victim of the villainous and predatory sugar daddy, and thus understood essentially as non-agentic. Female sexuality, in these debates, continued to be seen as a fragile, romantic entity, while male sexuality was seen as a violent force. I concluded that these debates followed the recipe of media panics, in which the themes of sexuality, youth and gender collided, and produced a cause for worry. I do not say that participants in public debates were ‘wrong’ in their assumptions that sugar dating encourages prostitution, I rather show the ways that prostitution/ sex work, and thus sugar dating continues to be framed; persistently *not* as an expression of growing economic inequalities (as it could have been), but as an expression of *individual deviance*. The ‘whore stigma’ was continued in these debates, as both the ‘socially accredited experts’ and the entrepreneur of

the sugar dating website agreed that prostitution was unacceptable (the difference was only the disagreement on whether the *sugar baby* was a prostitute).

In part two I looked at interfaces and blogs of three sugar dating sites. These were the ‘original’, American site Seeking Arrangement, the Danish site Sugar Daters (from which I also recruited participants for the study), and the Norwegian site Rich Meet Beautiful. The primary thing that one needs to know about sugar dating is that here it is *not* allowed to explicitly advertise sexual services, and the sugar baby should not be a ‘gold-digger’, but is imposed to authentically desire her sugar daddy. The relationship that is advertised in sugar dating should be one of reciprocity, chemistry, and connection, while simultaneously one of ‘mutual satisfaction’. Gifts and allowances should be received by sugar babies, and intimacy and affection should be received by sugar daddies and sugar mommies. In sugar dating one is subjectified as the entrepreneurial self, and the neoliberal feminist. The entrepreneurial self is a self that is, in all relations, concerned with what it can ‘get’ from the other, or how the other can be a stepping stone towards future successes (Chul-Han, 2017), and the neoliberal feminist sees feminism as a project that is *finished*, and that the current task of feminism is solely for individuals to “climb the power hierarchy” (Rottenberg, 2013). Because of this the sugar daddy is subjectified as a *mentor* for his sugar babies. In sugar dating it is insisted upon certain eternal (biological) gender differences. This is how the discourse of sugar dating explains why the sugar baby and the sugar daddy are given distinct gender-based roles. In sugar dating, there are distinct rules for feeling, conduct and courtship, and these rules are central to its appeal, since it relieves some of the anxieties and uncertainties of modern romance. Its feeling rules and gender norms also relieve some anxieties connected to masculinity. We are reassured by the notion of the timelessness of manhood. Finally, in sugar dating we are also subjectified through familiar popular cultural and pornography tropes and in this way sugar dating becomes a ‘pornography of reality’, in which the subject can become her/him-self through the categories of its interfaces.

In the final part of the thesis I have accounted for and interpreted the ways that the norms of sugar dating, and the contradictions between sugar-dating interfaces and the public debates about sugar dating are made sense of by sugar babies and sugar daddies in Norway. I present the findings and interpretations of semi-structured/narrative interviews, and I use findings from netnography in order to undermine some of my claims. In this final part I diverge from discourse theory since I understand the participants as defended subjects and as thus, inhabiting a psyche that is sometimes beyond grasp of their conscious selves. By applying

such theories, it became possible to make sense of some of their contradictions and inconsistencies.

Findings are that sugar dating, as hypothesized, provide a way to overcome stigmatization, but only for sugar daddies. None of the sugar daddies interviewed saw themselves as the deviant and villainous ‘whore customer’ familiar from public debates. Ironically sugar daddies invoked certain *feminist* discourses in order to explain their participation in sugar dating and they presented themselves as ‘rescuers’, ‘mentors’ and even ‘parents’ for their sugar babies. Sugar daddies seem to participate in sugar dating at least partly due to a wish to nurture, or ‘take care of their baby’ – as one sugar daddy wrote to me. They also seemed to participate in sugar dating due to a wish for an authentic connection, since contemporary culture was perceived of as having become ‘too materialistic’.

For the sugar babies that said that they sugar dated in order to provide economically for themselves, an illusion needed to be created for the sake of their sugar daddies; the illusion that sugar dating was not essentially prostitution. In order to provide this illusion language needed to be played with during the initial stages of courtship, as is had to be ‘wrapped in’. This initial stage occurred on the app KIK. Most sugar babies conceptualized sugar dating *precisely* as prostitution. But they still reclaimed a sense of agency by imagining the victimized or pathologized sugar baby produced in public discourse as an imagined *other*; younger and more fragile than themselves. Contrary to this imagined sugar baby, many sugar babies saw themselves as inhabiting a particularly ‘strong psyche’. In relation to this they seemed to understand their own sexuality, at least partly, as deviant. They perceived of it as not essentially a ‘female’ sexuality. This seemed to be understood as a negative for some, but as a positive for others.

Further, sugar dating presents, as Nayar (2016) observed, an intensification of the ‘Girlfriend Experience’. The GFE denotes an authentic connection that contains boundaries. The creation of authenticity, as shown by Bernstein, becomes of importance to sex workers *themselves* (2007), and this seems to be of importance also in sugar dating. In sugar dating the boundaries are built significantly down, while the authenticity is reinforced. Because of this the sugar baby needed to perform a lot of deep acting, in the terms of Hochschild (2012). The findings also indicate that the Whore-Madonna dichotomy was operating in the minds of sugar daddies, even as they insisted that sugar dating was not essentially prostitution. I have also proposed, following Bernstein (2007), that the sugar baby can be understood as a (neoliberal)

re-emergence of the courtesan. At the same time the sugar daddy was, in the minds of sugar babies, romantically spoiled precisely because he was a sugar daddy.

In the specific context of Norwegian society, sugar dating breaks with the strong norms of feminism and our sense of gender equality, and because of this I have proposed that it becomes a 'guilty pleasure'. The sugar daddy is in sugar dating hailed as a Hefnerian 'playboy', and a gentleman, and this is exactly what is lived out by sugar daddies. The obligatory chivalric behaviour of the sugar daddies seemed to be highly pleasurable for the sugar babies, who were disenchanted in many ways by Tinder dating. This went beyond the economic aspect of sugar dating, and had to do with 'paying attention', giving compliments and 'making an effort'. Sugar babies also reported that they used their sugar daddies as mentors and advisers in questions of their career and self-development. Thus, exactly what is proposed by sugar dating interfaces. Because of the emotional communication that is encouraged in sugar dating, pleasures (of sex) was reported increased by many. Further, because of its feeling rules, rules of conduct and gender norms, sugar daddies and sugar babies know what place they have, they know how to 'feel' (not too much, not too little), and they know what is expected of them in terms of their gender and specific role. In this way it also relieves some anxieties of masculinity. The sugar daddy becomes useful to the sugar baby, and he is allowed, in sugar dating, to 'be a man' in a very traditional way, and thus regain some sense of mastery, in the terms of Faludi (in Barker & Jane, 2016).

Since sugar dating is an affective-discursive practice that builds on romance, I have asked the question of romantic love and if it would be possible to attain through sugar dating to all the participants. Sugar babies said that they sugar dated exactly because they wanted (for the time being) to *avoid* a serious relationship, but at the same time they did not perceive of the website SugarDaters as the ideal place to search for their future partners. This was due to a combination of what we could call 'the whore customer stigma' and their feminist norms. (As Baby-E pointed out; she did not want to be provided for but to have a career of her own) On the other hand, according to one of the sugar daddies interviewed, a romantic relationship was exactly what he was searching for in sugar dating, and based on what sugar babies told me about sugar daddies, it is plausible that this is a motivation for some sugar daddies (to the annoyance of some sugar babies, since these romantic sugar daddies did not want to 'pay for it').

Finally, sugar dating can also be understood as a 'pornography of reality', in which the individual can become her or himself through pornographic discourses. This I have only

briefly touched upon in the latter part, in which I show that certain pornographic discourses such as ‘domination’ and ‘submission’, and the trope of the ‘MILF’ and the ‘Boy Toy’ are re-enacted through sugar dating, as users seem to define themselves through these available discourses.

The appeal of sugar dating is located in its essence as a discourse coalition between the authenticity of romance and the rationality of sex work: A form of romance where the anxieties and uncertainties of romantic love are discarded with, and a form of sex work that is emotionally expansive for all parties involved. Its appeal is also located in its pornographic discourses, in which the individual is offered the opportunity of becoming her or himself through its tropes and themes. Perhaps we could call it ‘the pornographic self’, and understand it as a specific technology of the self, in the terminology of Foucault (in Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2011).

6.2 Discussion: Discontent and Taboo

Pornography then, is profoundly and paradoxically social, but even more than that, it’s acutely historical. It’s an archive of data about our history as a culture and our own individual histories – our formations as selves. Pornography’s favourite terrain is the tender spots where the individual psyche collides with the historical process of molding social subjects. (Kipnis, 1999: 167)

If sugar dating can be understood as a form of pornography that we are invited to *become our self through* then it can, following Kipnis (1999), be perceived of as articulating some sort of societal discontent. So, what are the exact taboos that are broken here, and what discontents are articulated, subverted or overcome? In this final discussion I allow for my own voice and opinions to shine a little bit more through.

Most obviously, sugar dating articulates discontent with our persistent stigmatization of sex workers and their clients, as it provides us with a whole new language in which they can regain their agency and re-humanize themselves. Even if its entrepreneurs claim otherwise sugar dating is most certainly an answer to this stigmatization. However, in the specific context of Norwegian society, it seems not to work so well since sugar babies see through this new language. But as Zelizer has shown; intimacy and monetary transfers are deeply related to each other in a capitalist society. One is not necessarily contaminated by the other (årdato), and the specific form that the monetary transfer take even provides *meaning* (and limits) to

the relationship, or encounter. Within this theoretical framework we do not necessarily need to understand sugar dating as prostitution, but simply as another articulation of the intrinsic relationship between that of material resources and intimacy. But it is a taboo for us to admit this, since in romantic love such earthly considerations are banned; this is at the core of its narrative (Illouz, 2007: 3).

It is not only in sugar dating that (female) ‘gold-diggers’ are looked down upon, but also in our wider culture. And here sugar dating points to another hypocrisy; the idea that, in romantic love, we simply ‘fall’ for a random stranger, and that class, economy and other factors are not relevant when we make up our romantic choices. One of the most essential cultural contradictions that sugar dating addresses – and subverts, is the obligatory irrationality of romantic love – by re-installing various rules for courtship, conduct and feeling. Since the affective practice of romantic love is irrational, devoid of material considerations, and is seen as one of the last sites in which we can experience the *sacred*, sugar dating with its cost-benefit calculus, rationality and instrumentality is essentially *blasphemy*. Related to this, in sugar dating the institution of monogamy with its inherent monotony is subverted. But the solution that sugar dating proposes – that of deceiving one’s partner – is very problematic, and we might add that it represents a regression to a version of class society that we thought us done with.

In her analysis of the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy, Illouz (2014) proposed that the pleasure of reading these novels are to be found in the way that they paradoxically combine a strong, assertive and independent femininity (precisely the neoliberal, postfeminist ideal of a woman) with the pleasures provided by the traditional patriarchy; “economically powerful and sexually dominant” (2014: 62). This is *exactly* the narrative of sugar dating. The discontent that such a narrative puts forth, and provides solutions to, is the fact that the feminist revolution is still unfinished. Even if, in Norway we are ‘second best’ in the world, only bypassed by Iceland, genders are not yet at the same level, with women still earning 83 % of that of men (Whiting, 2018). And we might add that in a global perspective it is most certainly not strange that such phenomenon emerges: “Progress on gender equality is slowing down. At the current rate of change, it’s going to take 108 years to close the Global Gender Gap, which now stands at 68%” (Whiting, 2018). When seen in this light the ‘pleasures of the patriarchy’ that seems to be essential to some of the experiences of sugar babies is perhaps easier to comprehend.

Sexuality in our culture shifts between the extremes of puritanism and hedonism, and the boundaries are not always clear when it comes to what types of sexual expressions are licit and illicit, acceptable and unacceptable. There are also limits as to who are allowed to experience or express themselves sexually, and in what ways. For example, as we age we are no longer allowed the same sexual expression as when we were younger. This is related to a sense of disgust with older bodies. This disgust has deep roots in our culture and there is a long tradition for laughing at the 'old pig' whether in the form of older men or women (Skagen, 2018; May, 2014). In our shared cultural imaginary the sexuality of older women is invisible, and the sexuality of older men is often imagined as rather revolting. Either way there are strong cultural taboos connected with the idea of older bodies as sexual, and particularly the idea that these bodies should have anything intimate to do with younger ones. In our culture young people are strongly imposed to experiment sexually but only within limits, and one of these limits, as it seems, is to stay within their own age-range. In sugar dating these norms are trampled upon as it proposes sexual relationships between age-groups.

Scholars disagree on the question of the existence of a masculinity crisis (Itulua-Abumere, 2013: 44), but if there exist one then surely sugar dating can be seen as an expression of it. As I showed in the analysis, the sugar baby is produced as a rather unthreatening creature, and this is also the gender performance that is re-enacted by individual sugar babies in Norwegian society. As with the 'playboy bunny' in the sixties and seventies the sugar baby does not pose a threat to a fragile masculinity. This is related to discourses of sexual difference which, as it seems, we are currently quite obsessed with (Gill, 2007, 2018). This obsession is visible in all three discursive layers investigated. Currently female sexuality is understood as a fragile entity, and male sexuality as its opposite. But we have not always constructed sexuality this way. According to Hawkes, for most of our history it was *female* sexuality that was seen as a threat to society, and thus in the need of taming (Hawkes, 2000) Currently, as sugar dating debates is but one example of, it is male sexuality that is understood as unruly and in the need of taming. It is not only in sugar dating that such discourses are pervasive, but as Gill has showed, they are visible everywhere in our popular culture. (2007, 2018)

Perhaps what is more interesting is not the exact answer to the question of what these differences might then, consist of or where they come from (the discursive, or the biological), but why we are so obsessed with this very question in the first place. Discourses such as these could be perceived of as misogynist, and as an excuse to reinforce patriarchal structures, but I

do not think that this can sufficiently account for why we (women as well as men) continue to insist and obsess on the question of the existence and importance of such differences. Perhaps these discourses rather could be seen as an expression of a shared cultural anxiety that, if there are no *differences*, then perhaps *eroticism* itself might disappear? As Simone de Beauvoir understood about the Lolita-complex: “It re-establishes the *distance that seems necessary to desire*” (1972:10).

There are many ways that sugar dating is *not* subversive. The ideology of neoliberalism does not only guide sugar dating but our whole society, and the materiality of our economy (Fleming, 2019; Murillo et al., 2017; Monbiot, 2016). According to Gill the sensibility of postfeminism has become hegemonic (2018). Perhaps the thing that sets sugar dating apart from other expressions of neoliberalism and postfeminism is the way that it is so vulgar and straight forth about it. In neoliberal ideology, *all* human relations are essentially seen as transactions in a market, and there is no such thing as altruism, or even love. As Brandon Wade has put it in interviews: “Love is for poor people” (in Edwards, 2012). Economic differences are currently increasing, and through the ever-expanding ‘gig-economy’ the ones *with* resources can force a bidding war among the ones *without* resources (Murillo et al., 2017). And since individual women are currently ‘climbing the power hierarchy’ the possibility of participating – on both ends of such transactions – are now possible, if one has the means. But the very construction of the sugar mommy shows us the limitation of a neoliberal feminism. If feminism is currently only concerned with individual women climbing the power hierarchy there will still be a lot of women left at the bottom. And crucially, if more women climb this hierarchy there will be more *men* left at the bottom, (thus creating more grounds for anxieties of masculinity). This feminism does not even touch on real social problems.

In neoliberal times, as has been argued, we are not only materially poorer, but also more atomized, and perhaps lonelier. So, the survival mechanism that sugar dating provides is not only the promise (for sugar babies, male as well as female) to overcome material circumstances and economic difficulties, but for sugar babies, sugar daddies, and sugar mommies to overcome the essential loneliness of neoliberal times. In sugar dating connecting with others is made easier, since it has such strict rules for how to go about it, and it also provides anxiety-calming *limits* to the relationship, or the encounter. The emotional risk of romantic love is overcome, and the possibilities for heartbreak minimized. The social contradictions attained to by sugar dating is those of neoliberalism, and postfeminism. And

sugar dating allows, for the individual, a very rational prescription for *overcoming* both the material and the relational problems created by this ideological and economic system. But simultaneously it *does not disavow it*, and this is essential. In sugar dating we are invited to subvert societal norms in various ways, but crucially not by rejecting or disrupting neoliberalism. Sugar dating essentially allows the individual the possibility of overcoming these contradictions and problems but at the same time status quo is preserved.

Rather than addressing the phenomenon of sugar dating as a ‘problem’ of the digital sphere – as if the digital sphere existed separate from our societies – we need to see it as *part* of our societies. Sugar dating presents itself as a *solution* to societal problems. These webpages, and their entrepreneurs did not invent our economic system, but they rather emerged as a result of it. The economic and ideological system of neoliberalism is what currently governs our societies, and within it everything and everyone is imposed to obey the rules of the market. Seen in this way sugar dating is in fact the very *ideal* of love in neoliberal times.

The welfare system was to a high degree built in order to protect women from a dependency upon men, and we implemented student loans and grants so that social mobility would be attainable. When we downsize these institutions ‘the patriarchy’ or whatever we wish to call it is reinstalled, with its inherent chivalry, its gentlemen, its libertarians, and its female as well as male, courtesans.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

In this study I have only used qualitative methods, and because of this it is not possible to make generalizations from it. It does not claim to be objective, but this was never its purpose. Various theories and methodologies that pertained to the relationship between the subject and the society has been operationalized in order to understand processes of becoming in sugar dating. Its objective was to understand where the appeal of sugar dating in the context of Norway with its strong gender-egalitarian norms is located, and for this it has proposed some explanations, and interpretations. It is a contribution to research on a phenomenon that is understudied.

It is difficult to know how widespread sugar dating is in the population, since there are so many different web pages that facilitate for it. I have looked at three such sites, but as a

google search indicates there are plenty more, as well as similar webpages (Brandon Wade has created several other sites, such as 'Miss Travel' a site in which one can find a 'benefactor' specifically to travel with). Because of this, a study that looks quantitatively at users and uses of sites like these might be called for. Sugar dating seems to be an emerging trend, but how common is it really? And what are the demographics of sugar dating? How is it connected with cultural capital and education? Another suggestion would be to look further at the relationship between economy and sugar dating. How important are material circumstances in making the choice to become a sugar baby? As this study has shown, at least in the context of Norwegian society, economic circumstances seem not to be the *only* reason for sugar babies to engage in sugar dating, although it is a major part of it. It would also be interesting to look further at the relationship between the whore-Madonna dichotomy and sugar dating, since this study indicates that this dichotomy is present in the minds of sugar daddies in Norway.

I have only briefly touched upon the idea of the 'manosphere', but it seems like the gender ideology of sugar dating is not very different from the gender ideologies that emerges in various anti-feminist digital spaces. A comparative study of sugar dating with the 'Manosphere' might thus be interesting. Another suggestion might be to compare sugar dating with one of the two affective-discursive practices that it builds on, namely romance and sex work. A comparative analysis between sugar dating and conventional internet dating, or tinder dating might be interesting, as would also a study that looked at the similarities and differences between more straight-forward practices of sex work, such as escorting, and sugar dating.

As I see it, internet dating is easily explainable. When dating we search for love and relationships, both long and short-term. And; that some would engage in sex work is also easy to understand. Basically, it can be a way to provide for one's self materially when other ways have failed, or when in the need of money fast for one reason or the other. And for the client, motivations are emotional and intimate needs that for some reason are difficult to gratify in other ways. But this in-between practice of sugar dating, seemed very strange, and in order to understand it I looked for its possible appeal, and thus its *positives*. Another reason why it was perhaps even called for to look for positives was to provide a counter-narrative to public discourses, in which sugar dating was persistently framed as a negative, and sugar daters was understood as victims and villains inhabiting deviant sexualities. But this does not mean that there are no negatives to sugar dating, and these should be pertained to. However, it is crucial

to avoid reproducing the moral-panic discourses of radical feminism, since these discourses contribute to further stigmatization and thus marginalization and dehumanization of individuals that for one reason or the other refuse to confirm to our strict norms of sexual expression.

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- <https://www.richmeetbeautiful.com/nb/>
- <https://www.seeking.com/>
- <https://sugardaters.no/>

8 Appendix

Appendix A: Consent Form in Norwegian

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet "Daddies, Mommies and Babies: Making sense of Sugar Culture"?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt i medievitenskap som handler om hvordan relasjoner blir etablert gjennom nettsider for «sugardating» i en norsk kontekst. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Formålet med prosjektet er å forstå hvordan vi møter andre gjennom nettsider for «sugardating», og hva det vil si å være en «sugar-baby» eller «sugar-daddy» i en norsk kontekst.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Instituttet for medievitenskap, ved humanistisk fakultet på Universitetet i Oslo er ansvarlig for dette prosjektet.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Du får spørsmål om å delta fordi du er en voksen kvinne eller mann som har laget en profil på nettsiden «RichMeetBeautiful» eller nettsiden «SugarDaters» der det fremkommer at du enten ønsker å møte en sugar-daddy/mommy eller en sugar-baby og at du også definerer deg selv som enten en sugar-baby eller en sugar-daddy/mommy

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta innebærer det at vi avtaler et møtested som for eksempel en rolig cafe der vi kan møtes for en samtale som vil vare rundt en time. Jeg vil stille deg noen spørsmål som du kan velge å svare så utfyllende som du ønsker på, og du kan også velge å hoppe over enkeltspørsmål. Jeg ønsker å bruke båndopptaker, og jeg kommer til å ta notater under intervjuet. Metoden jeg vil bruke er «semistrukturert intervjumetode». Dette innebærer at jeg vil stille deg spørsmål på en slik måte at det er opp til deg hvor mye du vil fortelle. Det innebærer også at du har en mulighet til å snakke om ting jeg ikke tenkt på når jeg utformet spørsmålene, og som kan vise seg å være relevant for å forstå sugar dating

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke ditt samtykke tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle opplysninger om deg vil bli anonymisert. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. De eneste som vil ha tilgang til din informasjon er undertegnede. Navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine vil jeg erstatte med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data og datamaterialet vil være sikkert lagret på serveren til UIO. Deltakere vil overhodet ikke være mulig å gjenkjenne/identifisere i det endelige produktet, som blir min masteroppgave.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 20 desember 2019 og da vil opptaket og alle personopplysninger slettes.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få slettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få utlevert en kopi av dine personopplysninger (dataportabilitet), og
- å sende klage til personvernombudet eller Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra UIO har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med: Institutt for medievitenskap ved universitetet i Oslo. Prosjektansvarlig er min veileder Steffen Krüger, førstelektor og hans mailadresse er er: steffen.kruger@media.uio.no. Han kan også nåes på telefon: 45806466. Min mailadresse er iselikr@student.media.uio.no, og mitt telefonnummer er 46632054

Vårt personvernombud: Maren Magnus Voll, som kan nåes på personvernombud@uio.no NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS, på epost personvernombudet@nsd.no eller telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Iselin Kristiansen(student) Og Steffen Krüger (veileder)

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet «Daddies, Mommies and Babies: Making sense of Sugar Culture» og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til å

delta i et intervju som vil vare ca en time og at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet, rundt 20 desember 2019. Jeg har forstått at jeg har anledning til å trekke tilbake mitt samtykke både under intervjuet og i etterkant.

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix B: Interview guide in Norwegian

Om nettsiden:

Fikk du med deg reklamekampanjen for den norske nettsiden «RichMeetBeautiful» høsten 2017 og hva synes du om den? Hva synes du om at kampanjen ble forbudt?

Hvordan fant du fram til sugar dating nettsiden? (gjennom en bekjent, media, eller noe annet?) Har du profil på flere sider?

Når du laget din profil, gjorde du dette sammen med en venn, eller alene?

Kjenner du flere som gjør dette?

Hva var dine forventninger når du laget en profil her?/ Hva leter du etter på denne nettsiden?

Hvilke type bilder/hvilken type tekst fungerer best for å tiltrekke seg andre?

Innfridde forventningene? Utdyp.

Hvordan vil du beskrive den perfekte Sugar Baby?

Hvordan er den perfekte Sugar Daddy?

Hvordan er den perfekte Sugar Mommy? (finnes hun?)

Relatert til de forrige spørsmålene: I hvor stor grad passer denne beskrivelsen på deg selv?

Hva er den perfekte (sugar) date?

Hva er den perfekte «ordning» (arrangement)?

Er en sugar baby det samme som en eskorte? Hva er eventuelt likhetene og forskjellene mellom disse?

Er det noen likheter og forskjeller mellom å date noen du har truffet gjennom andre nettsider eller gjennom bekjente og det å date noen du har truffet på et nettsted for sugar-dating? Utdyp.

Når du har opprettet kontakt med noen på nettsiden, tar man samtalen videre til et annet sted, som mail, sosiale media, snap? (Eventuelt hvilke apper anvendes?) Utveksles det telefonnummer?

Spåket:

Jeg ser på nettsiden at folk bruker ordene sugar baby/daddy osv og forkortelsene SD SB: Jeg lurer på om disse ordene blir brukt når dere møter hverandre også? Er det noen andre ord/begreper som brukes og som du vil fortelle meg om?

Hva er mest positivt med denne måten å date på?

Hva er mest negativt?

Emotional labour

Er det noen spesielle måter du føler at du må forstille deg (spille skuespill) når du møter en suger daddy/baby/mommy, eller føler du at du kan «være deg selv»? Utdyp.

Kan følelser være ekte i en slik relasjon? Hva er dine erfaringer?

Introduksjonsspørsmål:

Hvilket kjønn er du? (han/hun, cis/trans osv)

Definerer du deg selv som heterofil, bifil, homofil eller noe annet?

Hva er din (ca) alder?

Er du i student, i jobb, eller annet? Kan jeg spørre innenfor hvilken bransje du jobber? Hva er din sivilstatus?

Hva er din erfaring med internet-dating? Hva mener du om dette?

Romantikk/Dating:

Hva søker du i en romantisk relasjon?

Hva søker du i et forhold?

Hva betyr det at noe er romantisk? Hva vil det si å «date»?

Om kjønnsnormer:

Er det forskjeller mellom kvinner og menn når det kommer til hva de ser etter i en romantisk eller seksuell partner?

Burde kvinner og menn ha forskjellige roller i et forhold?

Hva er dine tanker om monogami? Er det forskjell på kjønnene når det gjelder dette?

Burde kvinner og menn ha forskjellige roller i samfunnet?

Hva betyr feminisme for deg? (er du feminist?)

Appendix C: Review from NSD

NSD Personvern

24.01.2019 17:34

Det innsendte meldeskjemaet med referansekode 941189 er nå vurdert av NSD.

Følgende vurdering er gitt:

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen, så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet 24.01.2019 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

MELD ENDRINGER

Dersom behandlingen av personopplysninger endrer seg, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. På våre nettsider informerer vi om hvilke endringer som må meldes. Vent på svar før endringen gjennomføres.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om filosofisk overbevisning, seksuell orientering og alminnelige personopplysninger frem til 20.12.2019.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og art. 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 a), jf. art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. § 9 (2).

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen:

- om lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20). NSD vurderer at informasjonen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13. Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og eventuelt rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

TREDJEPERSONER

I meldeskjemaet er det krysset av for at det skal samles inn opplysninger om tredjeperson, men det oppgis samtidig at opplysningene om tredjeperson skal være anonyme. Ettersom

opplysningene om tredjeperson er anonyme, er ikke dette noe NSD trenger å vurdere. Vi anbefaler at du minner informantene om å ikke nevne navn eller andre identifiserende opplysninger om andre under intervjuet.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Belinda Gloppen Helle

Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

Appendix D: Profile on Sugar Daters



The screenshot shows a user profile on the SugarDaters website. The header is dark red with the SugarDaters logo and navigation links: "Oversikt", "Spørsmål", "Research123", and "Logg ut". Below the header, the user's name "Hei Research123" is displayed. The profile is divided into three main sections: "SIDEN FORRIGE BESØK", "DIN STATUS", and "DITT PROFILBILDE".

SIDEN FORRIGE BESØK	DIN STATUS
Ingen nye meldinger	Medlemskap: Premium
6 nye besøk	Profiltekst: Ikke utfyllt
Ingen forespørsler etter private bilder	Bilder: Ett godkjent bilde
Ofte stilte spørsmål	Adgang til 1 privat album
★★★★★ ?	Din IP-adresse: 84.211.112.247

DITT PROFILBILDE



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111111 22 2017 07:41
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Appendix E: Photograph of Advertisement, NRK 07.09.2017



ULOVLIG REKLAME: Forbrukerombudet konkluderer med at reklamen for datingnettstedet Rich Meet Beautiful bryter klart med likeverdet mellom kjønnene og er ulovlig.

FOTO: ULRIKKE HALVORSEN

Appendix F: Front page of Seeking Arrangement



