Productive Women: Gender, Sex, and Labor in the Digital Cultural Economy

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Productive Women:
Gender, Sex, and Labor in the Digital Cultural Economy

A Dissertation Presented
by
KAVITA NAYAR-JABLONKA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2022

Department of Communication
Productive Women:
Gender, Sex, And Labor in the Digital Cultural Economy

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is the product of inspiration, guidance, and support I received over the years from countless people and institutions. First, I would like to thank the excellent professors at University of Massachusetts-Amherst with whom I had the pleasure of taking courses. Each and every one of them has helped me to develop substantially as a researcher, writer, and thinker. I am also grateful for my friends and peers in the Department of Communication who inspired me with their ideas and thoughtful comments in class, created a vibrant learning community, and made graduate school a fun and memorable time in my life.

Second, I would like to thank my dissertation committee. From my very first year as a Ph.D. student, Lisa Henderson, Emily West, and Amy Schalet showed interest in my (sometimes random) ideas for papers and projects, gently prodded me and directed my inquiries, and introduced me to theories and concepts I had not encountered before I met them. I am indebted to each of them for their generous and insightful mentorship, support, and feedback over the years.

It is safe to say, Lisa has challenged me to think more deeply and with more nuance than anyone else. From casual conversations in her office and class discussions to her own beautifully written pieces on sexuality, class and culture, I have always left these encounters seeing the world slightly differently and more compassionately. I am so grateful I had the privilege of working under her wing for several years, especially during the formative years of this project.

Emily has also been instrumental to my growth as a researcher and writer. Her course on qualitative research, and the readings and assignments she thoughtfully shepherded us through, provided the solid foundation I needed to formulate the methodological design for this project. Her sharpness of mind, editor’s eye, and unwavering support and encouragement brought this dissertation to its final stages, and for that I am deeply grateful.

Last but not least, no one has made me more excited to write about this topic than Amy, whose enthusiasm for the project and insights about the sociological themes it relates to kept me
going at times it felt like I bit off more than I could chew. Her course on the sociology of culture was a necessary complement to my training in communication and her particular expertise in conducting interviews proved to be most useful.

Dissertation writing can feel like a solitary endeavor, but I learned throughout this process that my best writing happened when I sought out conversations, camaraderie, and comfort from friends and family, whose love made me calmer and weather the ups and downs better. My best friend Nim was an attentive sounding board and always up to the task of providing a good laugh. My mom, who is my hero for so many reasons (including completing a dissertation while pregnant with me!), inspires me with her own research and writing. Her example inspired me to embark on this journey and I thank her for always seeing my potential. My dad, an eternal optimist, kept me uplifted and energized. My sister has always cheered me on and is the only other person I know who is happy to go on stream-of-consciousness tangents that may (or may not!) lead somewhere. Her curiosity and wise questions kept my mind active and wondering—a joyful place to be. Meeting my husband, Eric, during the dissertating process brought a level of happiness to my life I could not have fathomed and, without a doubt, made my thinking clearer. I would also be nowhere without the healthy support system I gained throughout this process. Donna, Ira, Hilary, Brigid, Deirdre, and my extended family—thank you for everything. The facilitators and fellow writers who showed up to write during the pandemic at what eventually came to be called the Academic Writer’s Space—thank you for your empathic fellowship and useful suggestions.

Additionally, thank you to the University of Massachusetts-Amherst Graduate School for providing funding for this project.

Finally, thank you to the women I interviewed, who so bravely contributed their stories and generously offered their time to talk with me. I do not take their participation lightly and am deeply grateful for their participation.
ABSTRACT

PRODUCTIVE WOMEN: GENDER, SEX, AND LABOR IN THE DIGITAL CULTURAL ECONOMY

SEPTEMBER 2022

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Explicit sex and sexuality have come to figure more prominently in mainstream media and popular culture in recent years, sparking public concern and scholarly debate on how the “sexualization” of culture particularly affects women. Against this backdrop and amidst digitally reconfigured circuits of media production and consumption, ordinary women participate in, and potentially profit from, the commodification of sexual interactions and relationships. This study compares women’s practices in cultures of cam modeling and sugar dating in order to better understand their meanings and contexts. Whether performed in tandem with romantic dating scripts and roles, as is common in sugar dating, or in the intimate yet solitary context of domestic spaces, as is common in cam modeling, both practices illustrate the ways in which digital media reconfigure the sites, contexts, and cultural practices of erotic labor. They also make salient the complex and constrained ways women claim sexual and economic sovereignty in the contemporary United States, and the resistances they continue to face. Therefore, ethnographic exploration of women’s lived experiences of cam modeling and sugar dating moves beyond critical assessments of commodified sex and intimacy as exploitative or oppressive. This study takes such an approach, exploring the ways in which women “make do” within commercial relationships, organizations, and networks of sexual cultural production, opening up possibilities for agency within structural constraints, pleasure under disciplinary regimes, creative sexual expression supported by online sexual labor, and new forms of intimacy in highly mediated social
environments. It will shed light on how women organize, make sense of, and derive value from these practices. It will also examine how their participation might expand, constrain, or complicate the realm of meanings and identities available to them in a changing cultural, political, and economic environment.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Overview

Women who work in sexual entertainment and leisure industries like stripping, escorting, and pornography have long conjured a myriad of contradictory meanings. Popular imagination often depicts the female sexual entertainment and leisure worker as doing what she can to survive, a struggling yet scrappy woman whose poor upbringing and choices have led her down the “wrong path.” Though not illegal, working in sexual entertainment and leisure tends to be associated with social ills, deviance, and stigma. Painted as victims, broken spirits, trauma survivors, addicts, moral failures, punchlines for comedians, and products of “bad parenting,” women and their work choices tend to inspire pity or judgment, but also awe and fascination. After all, in the hip-hop community, strippers have become legends hit songs are made of. Still, as the story goes, the choice to sell their bodies as instruments of sexual fantasy is one made possibly for financial reasons, but always already one that compromises personal dignity. This reductive trope continues to circulate, perpetuating the notion that working in sexual entertainment and leisure is degrading and exploitative work and a resigned choice at best.

But the rise of new industries for sexual entertainment and leisure in the digital cultural economy have created cultural uncertainty and disrupted this familiar story. Gigs like cam modeling and sugar dating have made it possible to make money selling sex and intimacy in new ways through uses of digital media technologies and online platforms. The growing popularity of cam modeling and sugar dating, especially with young American women who come across as smart, ambitious, and having options, have garnered media attention as anomalies that many seek to explain. Cam modeling is a digital gig done by a diverse group of workers, but none more visible than young American women, who stream live video and produce multimedia clips for online platforms that show them performing sexually suggestive or explicit acts and chatting with an internet audience for fees and tips. Media accounts portray women working from home, armed
with a computer and an HD webcam, and raking in money as sexual entrepreneurs at the frontier of internet pornography (Snow, 2018). Since the first commercial cam modeling platform launched in 1996, thousands of young American women have signed up to work as cam models in the now multi-billion-dollar digital sexual entertainment industry (Pressly, 2017). Many U.S. women also leap at this work-from-home gig that promises fun, friends, flexibility, and easy money, having come of age in an era marked by the sex-positivity of popular feminism, tech-driven entrepreneurship, and the glamorization of side hustles (Drolet, 2020).

Sugar dating is a gig that has also gained traction with young American women who use online platforms to connect with sugar daddies, men who agree to pay them to go on dates and form relationships known as “mutually beneficial arrangements.” Unlike media coverage of cam models, which focuses on how these sex workers have broken the mold of male-dominated sex industries to emerge as independent and even avant-garde female provocateurs, media coverage of women known as “sugar babies” focuses more on a startling figure, produced by statistics generated by Seeking Arrangement, a leading company in the industry, that many of these women are college students who use sugar dating to pay off or avoid the stifling and life-altering weight of student debt (Ross, 2015). As of 2015, nearly one million American students have created a sugar baby profile on Seeking Arrangement. College newspapers are especially interested in an annual figure Seeking Arrangement publicizes that accounts for the most and newest sugar baby registrants on their platform that are affiliated with universities and colleges. One article published in the University of North Carolina online newspaper introduces readers to sugar dating by informing them about a fellow student named “Anna,” a political science major who “makes $144,000 annually” just six months after graduation—Anna is a sugar baby (Karstens, 2019).

While many college students do seem to be attracted to the prospect of easy money in sugar dating, like cam modeling, Seeking Arrangement also notes that the average sugar baby on its platform is actually older, around twenty-five-years-old, and makes what amounts to a more modest figure of $33,600 annually.
Media portrayals of cam modeling and sugar dating as attractive and potentially lucrative income-generating activities for young American women are supplemented with memes and stories shared on social media that have introduced the notion that commodifying sex and intimacy is mainstream now. Many women hear about sugar dating and cam modeling through these channels and consider them legitimate options.

Even more perplexing to the general public, many women publicly defend the commodification of sexual interactions and relationships as entrepreneurial practices, stemming from a desire for economic independence and an experience of sexual empowerment. Women who participate in, and potentially profit from, digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure such as cam modeling and sugar dating, frame women’s erotic capital as means to not only negotiate current economic and social conditions, but also – and more controversially to critics – achieve personal fulfillment and pursue career goals. Cam models like Sophia Locke, who created an event series in Las Vegas she calls the Cam Girl Mansion where cam models gather and network (McGehee, 2015), and Little Red Bunny, who founded the Little Red Academy to coach, train, and mentor new cam models, make names for themselves in this growing industry (Snow, 2018). Rachel Uchitel, famously known as Tiger Woods’ ex-mistress, became the sugar baby spokesperson for Seeking Arrangement in 2021, promoting it as a way to approach dating differently, specifically “knowing what you want (and asking for it) as well as knowing your ‘worth’” (Charles, 2021). Dating sugar daddies, she says, is a way to “to date somebody who makes you feel good about yourself and… who you feel empowered by” because “you deserve to be treated well.” Kendra Sunderland, who gained notoriety in 2015 as a cam model known by the alias “Library Girl,” went on to create her own sugar dating website called Date Broke College Girls, which she promotes as “a place online where young women can feel empowered,” where they can meet a “mentor,” someone who will help them to “navigate challenges, especially ones they’ve overcome themselves – like managing student debts and starting a career” (Spargo, 2015).
The ways in which these women celebrate sexual commercial culture, and proudly participate in digital cultures of commodified sex and intimacy, speaks to a puzzling shift in cultural discourse from the (admittedly stark and overgeneralized) image of a downtrodden sex worker I presented in the beginning of this chapter. In the contemporary moment, a lot has changed regarding sex work and its social meanings. For one, social media has allowed for us to hear more from women working in sex industries including those I mentioned at the outset about how their experiences differ from stereotypes; And activism around sex workers’ rights has grown alongside increased governmental vigilance against sex trafficking that impacts their ability to make a living. Cam models and sugar babies exist in this matrix of sex industries, but they are somewhat unusual cases since they attract “ordinary” women who act relatively independently without the organizational frameworks of established sex industries. As more forms of sex work become available online, and younger generations get older, cultural acceptance of new ways of thinking about commodified sex and intimacy seems to be near or even here.

Still, digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure such as cam modeling and sugar dating emerge in a cultural, social, and economic context that is not entirely open to women commodifying sex and intimacy. Sex workers continue to be marginalized by legal, moral, and social codes that make digital gigs like sugar dating and, especially, cam modeling precarious work choices despite being legal in the United States. From the 2013 legal investigation into the banking system known as “Operation Chokepoint” that made banks skittish about dealing with anyone suspected of selling sexual goods and services, effectively shutting them off from essential economic resources, to the 2018 nearly unanimous passage of FOSTA-SESTA that was purportedly drafted to curb online sex trafficking but also led to platforms instituting or acting on “morality clauses” that barred anyone suspected from selling sex to use their services, women who commodify sex and intimacy are seen as potentially dangerous or at least doing something socially discouraged. Even more, one of the most successful popular feminist social media
campaigns, the #MeToo movement has brought questions of gender, sex, and power back to the fore of public conversation, making women’s reliance on sexually objectifying interactions with men to seek entrepreneurial and aspirational goals seem slightly out of step with the cultural moment.

This shift in cultural discourse also puzzles feminist media studies scholars who continue to ask: why do some women embrace the commercialization of female sexuality, and even find it empowering and liberating, rather than reject it for perpetuating gender stereotypes, inequalities, and both psychological and physical danger? As a feminist, I am interested in this question not because I believe it does in fact create these negative outcomes for women or that women should see them that way. But this new discourse of finding independence, empowerment, and pleasure in sugar dating and cam modeling seems counter-intuitive to what I have been trained to think as a feminist, as a woman, and as a person growing up in the United States.

Thanks to Second Wave feminists, women today enjoy more opportunities to engage freely and equally in the public sphere and women can, or at least they hold the American meritocratic belief that they can, essentially choose whatever path they want in life. But what is interesting to me is that with all the options available, women are choosing sex work. The notion that sex work is something women with no options choose has certainly been troubled by the cultural and social changes I have mentioned, but it is still a relatively strong belief and sex work still comes with considerable stigma and risks. As the feminist movement has evolved, sex workers make up a more visible political bloc, but sex work is still not widely accepted as a job like any other. Many feminists still see sex work as exploitative, demeaning, or oppressive to women. And given the expansion of opportunities to perform work women were previously shut out of, work that does not come with the stigma and risks of sex work, a common cultural assumption might be that if women did not need to perform sex work, they would not and these industries would not survive. But things have clearly not played out that way. Instead of turning away from sex work, it seems women are turning toward new forms of sex work like cam
modeling and sugar dating as potentially lucrative and meaningful forms of work and leisure. With all the opportunities women presumably have today, why are they choosing sex work and why do they like it? Do their choices reveal hidden constraints on the kinds of work opportunities that are available and appeal to them?

I extend this question as a puzzle because the rising popularity of cam modeling and sugar dating suggests to me that popular and academic conversations about sex work involve contradictions that deserve empirical investigation. The stigma, precariousness, and marginalization of sex work still lingers despite cultural normalization and mainstream awareness of practices like cam modeling and sugar dating. We know from popular and academic accounts that many women describe it as “empowering” and a “choice,” not a product of their lack of options, but these assertions continue to come as a surprise. What are we, the general public and academics, not understanding about their experiences and perspectives?

**Research Significance and Questions**

With this dissertation, I aim to contribute to scholarly understanding of late modern sexual commerce and its gendered implications. This dissertation engages questions central to critical cultural studies—questions about social reproduction and transformation, the role of culture, and what agency looks like—to build on debates and discussions in feminist media studies, digital labor studies, and interdisciplinary sexuality studies. A central contribution of this study is offering personal accounts from women about their experiences and perspectives as participants in emerging scenes for sexual entertainment and leisure. Research that specifically examines either practice is limited and ethnographic data on these scenes is even less available. This study brings women’s experiences and perspectives to the fore to better understand the gendered meanings, identities, products, and labor of digital sexual entertainment and leisure. Additionally, this dissertation represents the first study to bring cam modeling and sugar dating together in a comparative analysis that connects these scenes to broader cultural, social, and
economic transitions and empirically examines their meanings and stakes for women who participate in them.

This dissertation addresses four sets of research questions. First, what do women do and create as cam models and sugar babies? Second, how do digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure mediate desire, intimacy, and gender relations in late modern life? Third, how does the labor of cam modeling and sugar dating illuminate contemporary working conditions associated with the digital cultural economy? What do their experiences reveal about the constraints and possibilities of this work? Fourth, what meanings and values do women participants associate with cam modeling and sugar dating? How might their understandings expand, constrain, or complicate the meanings and identities available to them as sexual subjects in a changing cultural, political, and economic environment?

Conceptual Framework

In this section, I present the conceptual framework that informed my selection of research questions and guided how this study developed. First, I show how this study builds on interdisciplinary sexuality studies addressing the social transformation of intimate life and sexual commerce. Next, I situate the study within feminist media studies, specifically in conversation with relevant concepts and debates on the gendered implications of sexual commercial culture. Then, I discuss feminist interventions within digital labor studies and align this study with research on women’s work in the digital cultural economy. Finally, I present my approach to studying women’s participation in digital markets for sexual entertainment and leisure. Critical cultural studies covered in this section lead me to rethink concepts such as structure, culture, and agency and engage in cultural critique sensitive to how women use sexual commercial culture to thrive under social and economic constraint. Drawing on Bourdieu’s field theory, this dissertation will explore the composition and dynamics of cam modeling and sugar dating from the vantage point of women’s lived experiences.
Mediated Intimacies in Everyday Life

This dissertation draws from sociological studies of culture and sexuality in order to better understand the rise of digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure and how they reflect and shape late modern transformations in collective sexual and intimate life (e.g. Moon, 2008). Sociological theory and research relevant to this study consider the social organization of sexual desire, intimacy, and gender relations (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997; Green, 2014); the blending of intimacy and the market (Illouz, 2012; Zelizer, 2005); the social meanings of late modern sexual commerce (Frank, 2007; Bernstein, 2007b; Brents & Sanders, 2010); and how participation in commercial sex relates to social class configurations (Bernstein, 2007a).

Sociologists of culture and sexuality demonstrate how intimate life is imbricated in the culture of a society and trace its historical transformations (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2012; Green, 2013; Bernstein, 2007a). For instance, scholars who study modernity and intimate life focus on how the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution produced the notion of an autonomous self, ideologies of individualism and consumerism, and attendant values of choice, freedom, and equality—all of which contributed to an emerging narrative of romantic love, the transition of intimate life into the commercial sphere, and ideas of marriage as the merging of equal and uniquely connected partners (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997). As these scholars point out, romantic love is a distinctly modern construction, only coming into view as a widespread cultural ideal in the eighteenth century. Modern society is characterized by declining social structures such as religion and the family, which have historically limited sexual agency, especially that of women, to contexts of marriage and procreation. Seen as no longer mediated by traditional institutions (or at least not as powerfully), desire and intimacy take on new meanings as their contexts change. As Williams (1976) notes, mediation is not a “neutral,” but an “active process” that “alters the things mediated” (p. 205). Sex, for instance, takes on the character of the profane or sacred, depending on its contexts and mediation by the state, capital, family, and religion.
In contrast to “traditional” premodern society in which individual action is largely predetermined by social customs and institutions, modern society produces the “reflexive self” who has free will and the ability (or responsibility) to choose who to desire and the role of intimacy in one’s life (Giddens, 1992). The reliance on a reflexive self to navigate the social world and generate individualized life strategies affects sexual and intimate choices. Now relying on self-determined criteria, not religion or kin, to decide what to do with one’s personal life, it becomes imperative to develop individual preferences, needs, and feelings and self-awareness to know what those are. In this cultural environment, rituals of courtship and experiences of romantic love move out of the private sphere and into the commercial sphere of leisure and consumption. Sexuality is “autonomized,” a category in its own right, making “sexiness” and sexual prowess relevant as gendered symbolic capital in intimate markets (Illouz, 2012, p. 46). There is a “deliberative character” to sex and intimacy as a “functional tool” for managing “in a world increasingly devoid of social supports” (Santore, 2008, p. 1208). Additionally, sexual expression becomes key to narratives and projects of the self, infused with personal meaning and expectations of self fulfillment (Giddens, 1992).

In addition to historical transformations in intimate cultural life, sociologists of culture and sexuality also demonstrate cross-cultural differences in how modern concepts of individualism have developed and how these differences shape specific approaches to sexuality (Schalet, 2011). For instance, Schalet (2011) explores how American and Dutch cultures processed the Sexual Revolution differently and developed different models of individualism that produce different conceptions of, and orientations to dealing with, adolescent sexuality. Specifically, she shows how American culture constructs adolescent sexuality as a problem and restricts it in various ways, while Dutch culture portrays it as a normal part of adolescent development and encourages its exploration in safe settings and practices. Interestingly, unwanted teenage pregnancy is a real problem in the United States, but not the Netherlands, which shows how restrictive discourses and practices produce a problem they seemingly try to contain.
Underlying their different orientations to adolescent sexuality is what she identifies as different cultures of individualism and modern understandings of how a person develops as an autonomous being. Important to my project, she makes evident how culturally specific iterations of individualism produce culturally specific meanings of sexuality and implications for gender relations. In her study, she argues that American individualism is “adversarial,” while Dutch individualism is more “interdependent,” which leads to different conceptions of how “love and lust” can and should be merged (p. 207). She argues that American adversarial individualism creates tension between romantic love and sex that “exacerbates gender conflicts over sexuality” because “autonomy and attachments” are “viewed at odds” (ibid). In contrast, the Dutch interdependent individualism “softens” these gender conflicts because attachment is not seen as much of a threat to developing as an autonomous modern subject (ibid).

If the modern orientation to desire and intimacy has taken shape within a culture of consumption and individualism, scholars see these themes heightened in late modern (sometimes called postmodern or postindustrial) societies and under neoliberal capitalism. Bernstein (2007b) writes: “the global restructuring of capitalist production and investment that has taken place since the 1970s has had consequences that are more profound and more intimate than most economic sociologists ever choose to consider” (p. 4). Scholars notice a difference in how people approach intimate relationships. Illouz (2012) argues that the expansion of individual choice and contradicting criteria in mate selection have “legitimized sexuality as a goal in itself, detached from marital purposes” and sometimes even emotional life (p. 49). Highlighting the political economic foundations for intimacy and subjectivity, Brown (2005) and Rottenberg (2018) argue that neoliberal capitalism produces a “neoliberal rationality” that applies market logic and discourse to relationships (i.e., managing and tracking their progress, seeking return on investment, and making intimate decisions based on cost-benefit ratios). With a heightened sense of individualism, social actors come to value equitable and predictable intimate exchanges, guided by their own self-interest and little social obligation. These “egalitarian attitudes toward
intimacy,” lend relationships “an element of disposability... if they are not providing full satisfaction” (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 44). Intimacy under neoliberal capitalism is filtered through consumer culture, which frames it as a lifestyle choice, a right of each individual, and central to personal happiness and fulfilment (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 46).

Sociologists debate the nature and value of intimacy today. Many claim that the intimate lives of individuals in late modern societies are characterized by more choice, openness, and freedom, but the transformation of intimacy has also been intertwined with an individualistic ethos that diminishes the sacred nature of social bonds and interpersonal closeness. In late modern societies, the search for intimacy has taken on what Sennett (1977) characterizes as a tyrannical role, compelling us to seek connection and personal meaning from much of life and finding coldness, alienation, and rationalization in the public sphere when these “needs” are not met. Sennett (1977) calls the idea that “closeness between persons is a moral good” a “reigning belief” that underlies an aspiration “to develop individual personality through experiences of closeness and warmth with others” (p. 259). While the search for intimacy seems to have become all-encompassing, it has also become more impersonal and self-directed, informed by discourses of feminism, psychology, and technologies of choice (Musial, 2013; Illouz, 2012). Both Musial (2013) and Illouz (2012) point to pervasive individualism as a project of the self which is constructed as paramount by psychology and psychoanalysis as our primary orientation to society and reality.

Though I am not studying romantic love, per se, the purpose of reviewing how modern individualism has shaped sexual and intimate dispositions is to illuminate how it might shape women’s orientations to commodifying sexual desire and intimate heterosexual relations. It also sets the stage for a rivaling disposition that soon emerges: what sociologists call a “recreational sexual ethic,” that differs from the “traditional ‘procreative’ and ‘modern companionate’ models of sexuality” (Bernstein, 2007b, p. 6). Recreational sexuality is “a pleasure-based repertoire of practices and attitudes that reshapes sexual lives in late modernity” (Kaplan, cited in Illouz, 2012,
p. 256). Though individualism still reigns supreme, Kaplan notes a shift from “rigid sexual identities, communities or politics” to “fluid sexual preferences or ‘flows of desire’” in what Bauman (2003) terms “liquid modernity.” The emphasis on pleasure-seeking leads many scholars to think of recreational sexual ethic as hedonistic and an outgrowth of postmodern hyper-individualism and consumer society. This perspective imposes a modern mindset onto postmodern practices, reflecting a previously dominant (and still kicking) “hostile worlds” perspective, which sees intimacy and the market as opposing forces, corrupting each other when combined (Zelizer, 2005).

In more recent years, Zelizer (2005) and other scholars building on her work (Bandelj et al., 2015; Nayar, 2017a; Scull, 2020) challenge this position, seeing value in understanding late modern intimacies, especially those cultivated in the commercial sphere, through a “connected lives” lens, which highlights the ways in which intimacy and the market are always already overlapping spheres. Using Zelizer’s “connected lives” approach, Sanders (2008) argues “emotional and bodily intimacy can be achieved through commerce and that there is not a necessary corrupting factor when the two spheres merge” (p. 411). Despite academic and popular awareness of the transactional quality of romantic relationships formed by neoliberal subjects, there is still resistance to the idea that marriage and other normative partnerships might be driven by such individualistic motives and a taboo against openly discussing them using the terms of this framework. Other intimacies and sexual practices, many formed and played out in the commercial sphere, become instrumental to expressing and exploring a recreational sexual ethic in safer domains.

In reality, during a time of great cultural transformation, we see a mixing or at times a clash between a modern orientation to romantic love, which mostly holds onto a “hostile worlds” paradigm, and the emergence of postmodern orientations to recreational intimacy and instrumental connection, based in more of a “connected lives” paradigm. Illouz (1997), for instance, notes how postmodern romantic subjects include “the cool hedonism of leisure
consumption and the rationalized search for the most suitable partner” in their sexual repertoires, combining instrumentalism, pleasure-seeking, and romantic love narratives (p. 289). However, this clash of cultures sometimes produces unexpected meanings and outcomes. For instance, scholars consistently find that people who seek the services of sex workers are often assuaged by the contractual nature of the intimacy (Bernstein, 2007a; Brents & Sanders, 2010; Prasad, 1999; Sanders, 2008). In late modern contexts, there is a particular comfort provided by sexual services that more clearly follow the “morality of the market” (Prasad, 1999, p. 182). Intimate relations pursued in the marketplace are “marketed as uncomplicated” and “free” (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 46).

As the transactional nature of marriage becomes more salient, so too has a cynicism towards what is seen as a “hypocritical” illusion of “romantic love” (Prasad, 1999, p. 202). In her study of regular customers of sex workers, Prasad (1999) highlights patrons’ complaints about the hidden exchange of money and sex in marriage, akin to critiques made by feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Carol Pateman, and how they “valued prostitution for offering freedom from the social complications, obligations, and ambiguities” of idealized romantic love (p. 204). They valued the honesty of commercial sexual encounters, which make “clear and nondiscretionary the obligations of participants” (ibid). Her analysis suggests that, at least for some, the intimacy of “neutral, more cleanly exchangeable pleasures of eroticism” is preferred over the complications of romantic love in a neoliberal context (p. 206). In her ethnography of sex workers in San Francisco, Bernstein (2007b) describes the postmodern desire for “bounded authenticity,” a “desirable and sought-after sexual commodity” that includes contained demonstrations of emotional intimacy (p. 155). Specifically, sex workers told Bernstein that customers did not like if they bent the rules or showed favoritism as these acts and gestures violated the terms of the contract. The transaction provided a helpful barrier that held the emotional and sexual intimacy in place, keeping it from spilling over into the uncertainty of normative love and relationships.
At the same time, the trappings of romantic love have in some ways become a central component of late modern sex work, which has become more emotionally intimate in recent years (Bernstein, 2007ab; Constable, 2009; Sanders, 2008). In her study of male customers seeking what is known as ‘the girlfriend experience,’ Sanders draws out their desire for genuine connection with, and mutual pleasure enjoyed by, a sex worker. Scholars characterize desires for a sex worker to mirror feelings of romantic yearning and passion as part of the “normalization” of sex industries, a normative application of middle-class values to commercial sex contexts and legitimation of commercialized intimacy (Brents and Sanders, 2010). Bernstein (2007b) connects the “normalization” of sex work to its “privatization” and “gentrification” – its movement indoors and online as a result of public policy decisions into a diversified landscape of leisure, entertainment, and pleasure industries. The integration of sexual commerce with other service, tourist, and technology industries achieves a “mainstreaming” effect, “changes in marketing” or an “upscale in order to move away from traditional working-class sexual codes” (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43).

Upscaling sexual commerce has the potential to reproduce and exacerbate social stratification. Bernstein (2007a) highlights how upscaling and appealing to middle-class tastes has created dual markets: one for higher-class legal sexual services and another for lower-class sexual transactions that results in higher police intervention, arrests, and other legal and social repercussions. Studying the “new ‘respectability’ of sexual commerce,” Bernstein (2007a) shows how sexual exchange, especially forms pursued or experienced using digital media technologies, appeals to workers and consumers with higher educational capital and/or class privilege (p. 474). She specifically connects postmodern sexual commerce to the tastes of a social class Bourdieu calls “the new ‘petite bourgeoisie’” and how this class uses an “ethic of ‘fun’” to distinguish itself from the “old ‘petite bourgeoisie’” (p. 477). She writes:

In contrast to the old petit-bourgeois values of upwardly mobile asceticism and restraint (which served to distinguish this class from the working class, whose ethos rejects
‘pretense’ and striving), the new petite bourgeoisie regards fun, pleasure, and freedom as ethical ideals worthy of strenuous pursuit (p. 477).

Brents and Sanders (2010) call the “mainstreaming” of sex industries an uneven process. While there is considerable pull from an economic perspective to make the sale of sex more mainstream, “there is also considerable social ambivalence that results in strange policy implementation” when it comes to valuing and protecting its workers. Thus, the stigma so long attached to sex work remains, despite its changing profile in the mainstream economy. Even more problematic, upscaling sex industries involves moving away from working-class women and towards middle-class women whose services are made more desirable by the notion that they choose to do this work out of free will and personal enjoyment rather than economic need (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43; Berg, 2013).

This matrix of transformation in intimate life and sexual commerce has encouraged the emergence of digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure, including cam modeling and sugar dating. In the late modern world, what was once represented (perhaps inaccurately) as a block of sex industries have splintered into a diversified landscape of leisure, entertainment, and pleasure industries (Frank, 2007; Brents and Sanders, 2010). Not simply a matter of semantics, these transformations suggest stronger connections between sex and cultural industries specializing in relaxation, travel, self-discovery, fantasy, and play. For instance, Frank (2007) studies the intersection of sex and tourism developing a concept she calls “touristic sexuality,” an “exploratory attitude” or disposition toward sex that may “create new outlets for developing intimacy” and rework “normative ideas about gender and relationships” (p. 180). Theorizing sexuality as a space of possibility, Frank (2007) highlights how it has the potential to “infuse the everyday with hope and eroticism” (ibid). Her orientation to intimacy and the market, a recreational sexual ethic, and alternatives to romantic love provide a framework for seeing cam modeling and sugar dating not from a “hostile worlds” perspective of transactional sex, but as harbingers of sexual possibility and an expanded erotic life that thrives in tension with romantic
love, marriage, and monogamous partnership. This study builds on this literature to understand cam modeling and sugar dating in a context of cultural transformation and continued tensions between intimacy and the market. I make sense of the rise of digital entertainment and leisure through the lens provided by sociological research and contribute to this research, which has only just begun to ethnographically explore digitally mediated and commercialized recreational sexual scenes of cam modeling (Jones, 2020) and sugar dating (Scull, 2020).

**Feminism and Sexual Commercial Culture**

Feminist scholars also look at the change and growth of sexual cultural discourses, but with a set of questions and theoretical orientations geared toward understanding their gendered politics and implications. Within the field of communication, the area of feminist media studies provides a framework for considering the representation of women in cultural texts, institutions, and practices, with an eye for how media and culture relate to identity politics, social power, and gendered inequalities. One of the most notable and enduring interventions by feminist media scholars has been to critique the sexual objectification of women in media, advertising, and popular culture. Though objectification is not inherently about women or even sex for that matter (Paasonen et al., 2021), the concept has figured centrally in some of the most charged feminist critiques of how media and popular culture perpetuate male domination of women (Dworkin, 1989; Mackinnon, 1987) and flatten women’s worth to a factor of sexual desirability (Kilbourne, 1999; Wolf, 1991; Bartky, 1990). These inquiries tend to define objectification as “the reduction of women to their physical attributes and heterosexual attractiveness in ways that mitigate their individuality and agency” (Paasonen et al., 2021, p. 7). According to Paasonen et al. (2021), from its inception as an area of study, feminist media studies adopted the concept of objectification as a kind of “shorthand for gender-based inequalities” (p. 9). Much of this research borrowed from theories of spectatorship, specifically the now-classic works of Berger (1972), whose analysis of art aesthetics gendered the act of looking and being looked at, and Mulvey (1975), whose analysis of the cinematic apparatus delivered a concept of the “male gaze.”
Illuminating the gendered politics of seeing and being seen, Berger’s (1972) analysis of the nude and flirtatious feminine body in art and suggestion of links to contemporary media helped feminist scholars articulate the internalization of an active male “surveyor” who does the looking and “the surveyed female” object who watches herself “being looked at” (p. 47). Similarly, Mulvey (1975) addresses the ways in which film structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking that reinforce patriarchal society through unconscious and cultural constructions of a “male gaze.” The “male gaze” refers to a three-part process of looking done by film characters, moviegoers, and the camera’s field of vision that, collectively, result in the consumption of women as erotic spectacle. Like Berger did with art, Mulvey shows the presence of women in film assumes, or creates, an ideal male spectator. Now taken-for-granted, their combined insights about the representation of women as passive, powerless objects meant to bolster the fantasy of an active, powerful male spectator were groundbreaking at the time for gendering and, in Mulvey’s case, overtly politicizing the act of looking.

By the 1980s, feminist critiques of women’s objectification in and by commercial media went beyond those explicitly studying film and television and reached a fever pitch in the anti-pornography stances of some radical feminists who voiced their concerns, most notably, at a 1982 conference held at Barnard College, which included an ongoing debate over the implications of pornography and launched what are now known as the “feminist sex wars.” Coming from a position that frames heterosexual male desire as dangerous, some radical feminist scholars took sexually explicit media to task for perpetuating cultures of sexual exploitation and violence against women (Barry, 1979; MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997). In their review of this history, Paasonen et al. (2021) highlight radical feminist beliefs that pornography serves as a ‘blueprint” for male behavior, which is the real problem. They offer Robin Morgan’s slogan—“Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice”—as an example of the anti-pornography sentiment and rhetoric of the time (p. 42).
Unpacking the sexual objectification of women in culture and media continues to interest some feminist media scholars, but these longstanding critiques have done little to quell the growth of industries for sexual entertainment and leisure in subsequent decades and women’s pleasure in them (Henderson, 2008, p. 221). By the 1990s, feminist media scholars noticed a shift in the cultural environment that suggested a need to update theories of objectification to reflect what they were seeing. First, sexual representations and practices became much more prominent in popular culture—a transformation known as the “sexualization” (or the more polarizing “pornification”) of culture—and scholars became interested in understanding objectification through the lens of these broader cultural transformations. Like sexuality scholars, they noticed how “pleasure, sexuality, and the erotic” had become potent dimensions of everyday life, a trend that created friction with some Second-Wave feminist agendas (Brents and Hausbeck, 2010, p. 11; Plummer, 2003). By the twenty-first century, references to the “sexualization of culture” abounded, serving as a container in academic writing for a range of phenomena such as:

- a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices, and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex (Attwood, 2006, p. 78).

As this list indicates, the “sexualization of culture” refers to a wide array of practices, texts, discourses, and sentiments that coalesce at the intersection of sex, identity, and commercial culture.

What the term lacks in specificity, it makes up for in sensibility. The “sexualization of culture” articulates a shift in popular culture and taste that hails middle-class women as sophisticated sexual agents who incorporate new sexual or sexualized practices into their routines (e.g. taking pole dancing classes), develop sexual competencies (e.g. learning how to please their sexual partners and achieve orgasm during sex), and cultivate distinct sexual sensibilities (e.g. preferences for rough sex). Though many scholars voice dissatisfaction with the term’s broad application, the “sexualization of culture” resonates because we can see and feel this shift all
around us and sense how it is all connected (Attwood, 2006; Evans and Riley, 2014). Feminist scholars still contend with the concept of sexualization because, as Evans and Riley (2014) explain, it is “still useful as a way of defining or describing a certain set of ideas attached to the bodies of young girls and women in the twenty-first century” (p. 18).

The terms sexualization and pornification are also important for feminist media scholars to contend with because of their circulation in other academic fields such as psychology and invocation by policymakers and the public. In an article written for an interdisciplinary audience, Gill (2012) points out the limitations of writings by psychologically oriented scholarship on sexualization and the value of a perspective informed by feminism and media studies. In particular, she critiques an article by Lamb and Peterson (2012), which she says relies on older media effects models and generally omit a discussion of how sexualization intersects with power (p. 741). This orientation, she argues, leads to recommendations such as building media literacy programs that will teach girls how to locate and defend against sexualization’s negative effects, which she finds inadequate (ibid). In 2007 the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls published a report on what the organization saw as a negative trend in which the sexualization of culture has resulted in children adopting sexual discourses and practices at increasingly younger ages. Overall, the report found “ample evidence” that “sexualization has negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs” (APA, 2007, p. 2). Frequent consumption of media images and “exposure to narrow ideals of attractiveness” were seen as dangerous to the health and wellness of young girls, and should be combatted by more research, public policy advocacy, raising public awareness, and media literacy initiatives, according to the report (APA, 2007, p. 3). These examples show how sexualization research has far-reaching implications and cultural cachet. Therefore, feminist media scholars should continue to contribute to these conversations despite its limitations as a concept.
Against a backdrop of new “techno-social mediascapes” that bring commercial sex culture into the mainstream and women’s everyday lives, feminist media scholars explore how women’s relationships to sexual representation have changed compared to just a few decades before (Dobson, 2015, p. 2). Gill (2003) notes a shift from sexual objectification to sexual “subjectification”—from passive and desirable objects to more “active” and “desiring” constructions of female sexuality—articulated to new modes of “empowered” femininity. While early feminist research on sexual objectification emphasized women’s lack of power over the sexual frame and “male gaze,” contemporary feminist discussions of sexualization or pornification center on how empowerment seems to be the goal and an experience women claim by engaging with sexual commercial culture (Gill, 2008). Furthermore, women’s roles as producers and consumers of commercial sex cultures formerly meant for men potentially destabilizes critiques based on binary relations between a masculine subject and feminine object (Dobson, 2015; Comella, 2017) as well as theories of “the male gaze” that preclude female sexual subjectivity and agency (White, 2006). As Dobson (2015) argues, “young women are now media producers themselves” which means “we need to seriously reconsider research approaches and agendas that position [them] as cultural dupes, or victims of negative media influence and effects like ‘sexualization’ in straightforward ways” (p. 4).

The new landscape in which women explore sexual self-representation is anything but straightforward. From studies on women’s sexual self-representation using social media and digital communication technologies to their consumption of sexual paraphernalia and educational materials, we see an uneven shift and ambivalence built into women’s relationship to sexual desirability and desire (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Several scholars underscore that contradicting discourses related to the sexualization of culture leave real women in a tough position, often framed “as both vulnerable and dangerous” or asked to balance on a tightrope between the power of being sexy and free and the risk of falling victim to sexualization (Evans & Riley, 2014, p. 19; Dobson, 2015). Dobson (2015) points out that although women are hailed as neoliberal sexual
subjects, they must also navigate sexual regulation by academics and policymakers that police them “for signals of sexualized self-representation” and “‘low self-esteem’ that are thought to result from immersion in a sexualized media culture” (p. 24).

Women’s celebration of sexualized culture also strikes a nerve with some feminist media scholars who interpret these trends as a ramping up of hostility, ambivalence, or indifference toward feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2012; McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2007b) and reconfiguration of sexism under new conditions (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Douglas, 2010). Paul (2005), for instance, calls out the “pornification” of media and popular culture for exacerbating the pressure placed on young women to conform to male-driven fantasies of female sexuality and laments the power of commercial sex industries for limiting the kinds of sexual representations imaginable. Feminist discomfort with sexual commercial culture and women’s pleasure in it sometimes reflects an abiding anti-pornography sentiment, carried over from the “feminist sex wars,” that the proliferation of sexual commercial culture is dangerous for women since it causes or exacerbates social problems such as “rape culture,” domestic violence, and reduces women to sexual objects (Long, 2012; Dines, 2010). According to Paasonen et al. (2021), in the post-#MeToo era, there is “renewed interest” in anti-pornography feminism that could be considered a “revival” (p. 48). Though separated by decades of social change, the second-wave world in which outspoken radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin lived feels oddly familiar and her passionate renunciations of heterosexual male desire—and its intended or unintended violence—seem “clear-eyed” to some feminists such as Aronowitz (2019). The thematic overlaps between these eras—harassment, rape, the protections afforded to men in power—have resurrected radical feminist insights for a younger generation of feminists navigating a changed social world in which the proliferation of sexual discourses includes increased discussion of violations of gendered sexual power.

More often though, critiques of women’s participation in sexual commercial culture appear in analyses of postfeminism. As Gill and Scharff (2011) explain, the term “postfeminism”
is sometimes used to describe an intellectual orientation or historical period that signals a break with dominant feminist tradition and the legacy of Second Wave feminism, but many feminist media scholars treat it as an object of analysis, not their own theoretical perspective, and engage with “the normative or ideological content of postfeminist discourses” (p. 30). Amongst these scholars, some see postfeminist media and culture as a “backlash against feminism,” meaning a rejection of feminist ideals or a kind of “retrosexism” (Whelehan, 2000). Others like Gill and Scharff (2011) frame postfeminism more as a “sensibility” encompassing women in contemporary culture. This sensibility is not so much a backlash against feminism, but more what McRobbie (2004), calls a “double entanglement” of feminist and anti-feminist belief, which tethers women to compromising patriarchal structures by promising them individual freedom, empowerment, and choice at the expense of collective feminist goals. Though diverging in subtle ways, both the “backlash” and “sensibility” frameworks tend to use women’s pleasure in sexual commercial culture as evidence in broader arguments about how patriarchal capitalism continues to delineate the bounds of feminine sexual agency (Douglas, 2010; Gill, 2007).

Of course, some feminist media scholars counter what appears to be a dominant ‘sex as discipline’ narrative in this area of study (e.g., Henderson, 2008). Feminist porn studies present especially worthy contrasts to seeing sexual subjectification as a postfeminist problem (Smith & Attwood, 2014; Berg, 2016). For instance, Attwood (2011) critiques how accounts of postfeminist sexuality often foreground, but ultimately deny, women's sexual agency. She questions how newness of culture and technology leads many to reject what she sees as an expanded “space for the presentation of new feminine sexualities” (p. 212). In a study of female-authored sex blogs, Attwood (2009) points out that by publicly expressing their sexual desire, these authors do not “abandon reflexivity” and attempt to please men (p. 16).

In her historical and ethnographic account of Black female porn actresses, Miller-Young (2014) argues for an understanding of pornography as a site in which Black women publicly claim recognition of their desires and desirability and achieve “erotic sovereignty” (p. 16). She
frames Black women’s porn performance as means to reappropriate the cultural meanings of the
Black female body, often exploited by others, and transform it into “a potential site of self-
governing desire, subjectivity, dependence and relation with others, and erotic pleasure” (ibid).
Importantly, Miller-Young draws attention to the ideas, needs, and desires of Black female porn
actresses and the realities they face in the industry, holding both in tension as part of the social
meaning of their cultural production. For instance, Miller-Young describes prolific porn actress
Lola Lane’s contestation of industry expectations for Black women to perform “ghetto” identities
despite her assertions to directors that she is “not ghetto!” She tells Miller-Young that she
performed the role of a “porn star” by wearing a “fancy glittery showgirl type of dress” that she
had made to counter stereotypes of a downtrodden Black femininity, even if the producers opted
to keep the “ghetto” theme in production titles. In her attention to these tensions, she does not
discount Black women participants’ perspectives as laden with unconscious agendas, nor does
she assume their perspectives hold all the answers about what porn ultimately or actually means
for a racialized gender politics. Instead, she suggests that the social relations involved in Black
women’s sexual media production, which bring to light questions of agency, are “part of a long
struggle by Black women to occupy their bodies” (p. 20). Participating in the making of sexual
commercial culture may not revolutionize sex industries or media representations of Black
women, but women’s cultural production produces values that are both thorny and transformative
and which demand account.

As this review has shown, while some scholars indeed further the argument that the
proliferation of sexual discourses and representations provide opportunities for women to
“embody transgressive female sexualities” (Attwood, 2006, p. 83), many more see these trends as
devoid of political value for women. We might look to what Evans and Riley (2014) identify as
the affective “noise” surrounding feminist debates over sexual commercial culture for answers.
Highlighting the “emotional field” of academia, they suggest the mixing of gender, sexuality, and
the market incites a feminist “narrative of concern” (p. 19). Adding sex to feminist arguments
tends to heighten a sense of alarm, turning sex into what Henderson (2008) calls a “negative accelerator,” something that makes bad things worse (p. 221). Critiques of neoliberalism sprinkle in critiques of women’s sexual lives and choices to make a point about gender oppression. This familiar move is emotional because on some level it attempts to signal a proper, or legible, feminist identity (Paasonen et al., 2021). But it is also dangerous because, as Henderson (2008) warns:

if you only come to the discussion of sex when you don’t like what you see, that is all you can find. Historically, many sexual populations in many contexts – privileged, abused, exploited, protected – have more to lose than to gain from that imposition (p. 222).

Sex workers, for instance, have much to lose—starting with their livelihoods—from feminists calling out their exploitation and voicing concern over their wellbeing and the gendered politics of their choices. Some scholars like Beloso (2012) critique feminist dismissal of sex work as inherently exploitative to its workers, and women in general, for their “erasure of class” from the conversation (p. 47). She dubs the preoccupation with the exploitation of sex workers a kind of “whoromyopia” that preserves “the fantasy of an imaginary outside to capitalism” (p. 66). She challenges anti-sex work feminism on the grounds that it avoids taking the exploitation of all workers under capitalism to task. Feminist concern for sex workers is not new and beyond the scope of this review, but the legacy of this disposition has implications for how sexualized culture that merges work and leisure, like cam modeling and sugar dating, will continue to be analyzed going forward. As Paasonen et al. (2021) already point out, “most sex workers disagree with this perspective” (p. 57). Framing sexual entertainment and leisure as inherently objectifying risks shutting out alternative ideas, voices, and already existing realities, a potential outcome that seems antithetical to feminism (even when it is done for the sake of feminism).

Similar to Gibson-Graham’s (2006) identification of Left melancholia as an intellectualized attachment to the past that may preclude seeing possibility in the present, I argue that lamentations on the objectification of women and the sexualization of culture represent a
feminist melancholia that perhaps signals something as large and obscure as a paradigm shift or as small and necessary as a passing of the baton. Just as Leftist critiques provide important insights, the feminist legacy of critiquing how commercial culture appropriates women’s sexuality and bodies is valuable for identifying the incongruities and injustices of a now globalized commercial media system that continues to impose limitations upon feminist goals of gender equality and freedom. However, this perspective can also be blind or willfully resistant to seeing women’s engagements with commercial sex anew or to see change as resistance. Adkins (2004) points out how some feminist scholars have a tendency to frame change as “a shift in the conditions of social reproduction itself” rather than resistance (p. 9). Changes like the prospect of middle-class women accepting sex work as a legitimate profession are enfolded in a story of how structure has made its own reproduction seem revolutionary. It is true, as Skeggs (2004) states, “the terms of symbolic violence are constantly shifting” (p. 24). But constantly shifting terms also generate constantly shifting (i.e. creative) strategies for circumventing or living better within them. This study contends that feminist analyses of middle-class commercial sex culture must move beyond the terms of these debates in order to not underestimate the creativity lurking beneath change and look for meanings articulated to commercial sex cultures beyond gender oppression (e.g. Schalet, 2011).

“Women’s Work” in the Digital Cultural Economy

Cam modeling and sugar dating are gigs based in the digital cultural economy that involve doing “women’s work,” the feminized labor of social reproduction, therefore I draw on and situate this study within feminist digital labor studies. Digital labor studies examine the changing categories and conditions for work created by intersecting processes of development in digital media technologies and globalized post-industrial capitalism (Scholz, 2013). Influenced by autonomist Marxist thinking, many theorists characterize digital labor as indicative of a broader shift toward “immaterial labor,” which Lazzarato (1996) defines as the work of producing the “cultural content of the commodity,” which involves “activities that are not
normally recognized as ‘work’—in other words the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion” (p. 133). For these scholars, digital cultural industries epitomize what Tronti (1966) calls the “social factory,” where “work extends far beyond the temporal and spatial limits of traditional workplaces, eluding effective forms of capture and measurement, and capital’s productivity penetrates ever more deeply into all, including the most intimate, aspects of our lives” (Hearn, 2011, p. 316). Without the familiar bounds and oversight of traditional offices or factories, work takes on the look and feel of play for people in certain media, culture, and technology industries.

This work is potentially lucrative, but more often it is performed by a growing class of “unstable, unqualified, underpaid, and unprotected workers,” acclimated to working conditions characterized by flexibility, segmentation, casualization, competition, and precarity (Hearn, 2008, p. 496). Considering the growing research on how digital labor might exacerbate social inequalities, there is a puzzling discrepancy between the academic literature and industry and popular discourses about the gig economy. Scholars explain this discrepancy by pointing to how working conditions produce particular work cultures, subjectivities, and dispositions. For instance, Neff (2012) argues that creative workers of the dot-com era in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a time of uncertainty and ultimate doom, romanticized the autonomy and risk to which they had grown accustomed, signaling their changing relationship to work and their expectations of working conditions. Others note how work in digital cultural industries has popularized cultural entrepreneurship (McRobbie, 2011), aspirational labor and subjectivities (Duffy, 2017), and self-branding and promotion (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2013).

Today, many Americans still see desires for flexibility, independence, and control as guiding their choices to enter the gig economy, but they often need this work to fill income gaps created by low or loss of wages, representing what Bernhardt (2018) calls “the privatization of the safety net.” Just as dot-com era creative workers romanticized risk and uncertainty, Web 2.0 gig
workers are emboldened by the rhetoric of entrepreneurialism to see self-reliance as a *choice*, not capitulation to unsustainable conditions (Duffy, 2017, p. 10). Workers see themselves as motivated by an enterprising spirit to create multiple income streams, when it may also be an economic necessity, demonstrating how habituation to uncertainty has become even more entrenched in workers’ subjectivities (Shade, 2018, p. 45). Needing to hold multiple jobs is not new, but its veneration as part of the aspirational identity of a digital entrepreneur with admirable “hustle” is potentially problematic.

Feminist media scholars contribute to this literature, but also critique existing frameworks in digital labor studies for producing a “class-dominated and gender-essentialist account of the changing world of work” and address the dearth of research on the participation of women in digital cultural industries and contexts (McRobbie, 2011, p. 65). They point out that industry discourses do not hail all workers unanimously. Gig work is highly gendered, and women’s inroads into the gig economy differ depending on their race, class, and appearance. Women with racial and/or class privilege are encouraged to identify as “girlbosses,” self-employed entrepreneurs and creative workers trading in self-brands and attention as influencers, bloggers, and digital boutique owners. Their activities are romanticized and filtered through discourses of passion, pleasure, self-fulfillment, self-expression, friendship, fun, and community (Duffy, 2017, p. 9). These discourses cohere in what scholars identify as a neoliberal feminist ethos of empowerment and self-improvement, increasing women’s affective investment in gigs tapping into these desires.

Research by Gill (2002), Neff, Wissinger and Zukin (2005), and Duffy (2015ab) suggests that digital media work performed by women often perpetuates gender inequalities, sexism, and disciplinary regimes of patriarchal capitalism despite drawing women into these economies based on an ethos of progressivism, creativity, hip and cool culture, autonomy, and entrepreneurial opportunity. For instance, Duffy’s (2015b) study of female fashion bloggers draws attention to discourses and representations that glamorize cultures of digital media work for women and
overestimate its disruption of traditional hierarchies in media industries. Such work, Duffy argues, obscures more insidious truths about its material practices and outcomes. The flexible labor practices of digital media work are also routinely marketed to women as attractive developments to help them manage the demands of modern working womanhood, which perpetuates the “double shift” effect of adding waged work to domestic duties (Gregg, 2008). For this reason, these scholars argue for deeper analyses of women’s experiences and understandings of contemporary working conditions in what are often gender-segregated jobs in the digital cultural economy.

Though valuable, feminist critiques of women’s motivations sometimes downplay women’s agency and how intersectionality shapes experiences. Many women, especially women of color or those without college degrees who are more likely to work in low-wage service industries, choose gigs to escape the confines of a rigged system that undervalues them and ignores or derides their needs. For women already marginalized by their racial and class positions, the trade-off is not between a well-paying, reliable corporate job with benefits and a flexible gig without stable earnings and worker protections, but one between two insecure scenarios (Gregg & Andrijasevic, 2019, p. 3). Sexuality scholars who situate cam modeling and porn work in this nexus have importantly problematized prior feminist framing of women’s desires for flexibility, control, and independence as inherently misguided or unfulfilled (Berg, 2016, p. 168).

Feminist scholars also critique framings of digital labor as “immaterial” and novel in late capitalist economies. Gill and Pratt (2008) remind us of the factory labor by the tens of thousands of migrant laborers, e.g., in China, that allows the underbelly of information and technology industries to function, arguing that discussions of “immateriality” belie the material processes and social relations involved in sustaining those industries. Scholars such as Arcy (2016), McRobbie (2011), Jarrett (2014), and Shade (2014) also challenge how discussions of “immaterial” and “free” labor in the digital cultural economy erase useful connections to unrecognized work
historically performed by women and feminist theories that account for it. For instance, Jarrett (2014) draws on Fortunati (2007) and the International Wages for Housework campaign to argue for using theories of women’s reproductive labor, the “production of social relationships that reproduce the social order,” in analyses of what is otherwise referred to as the “free labor” of web users (p. 21). With this lens, she refrains from seeing value extraction by social media companies as “an inherently exploitative or wholly commodified process,” and calls for frameworks that better account for how affects expressed and relationships developed through social media retain their use-value for participants (ibid). Her perspective highlights the “nonmaterial goods of socialization and sensibilities that circulate” despite their commodification (ibid). Doing so potentially reveals hidden pleasures, but also forms of social control feminist theories of reproductive labor have made salient.

Drawing on feminist approaches to digital labor, this study uses the concept of emotional labor, and not immaterial or affective labor, to address the heteronormativity undergirding cam models’ and sugar babies’ labor. Feminist scholars critique the use of autonomist Marxist concepts “affective” or “immaterial labor” because it suggests a kind of newness to this work and a lack of gendered (and other identity) distinctions (Jarrett, 2018). Emotional labor more aptly represents gendered histories of emotion work and the trajectory of reproductive work from the private to the public sphere with women’s entrance into the paid workforce (Federici, 2020). As Federici (2020) argues, “Hochschild’s analysis leaves no doubt that women are the central subjects of emotional labor, and, though this is mostly waged work performed in public, she maintains that, in essence, it is work that women have always done” (p. 66). The rise of service-oriented work, and the commercialization of feeling, relationships, and self, is distinctly female and intimately connected to women’s changing relationship to the unpaid domestic and reproductive work they are typically responsible for providing in the private sphere. As Arcy (2016) argues, “This dismissal of emotional labor erases critical feminist work that redefined domestic and reproductive work as a form of labor power. Despite this long history of feminist
Of particular interest to feminist scholars is the connection between the commercialization of feminized work in platform-based labor and women’s reproductive labor in the domestic sphere, which is historically devalued, invisible, and unpaid. The blend of work and pleasure in cam modeling and sugar dating creates ambiguity that parallels what feminist scholars write about the “women’s work” in the home and personal relationships, the work of performing socially reproductive labor. Marxist feminist scholarship on digital labor make connections between the sociality of digital labor and women’s social reproduction that have helped to illuminate questions of exploitation, value extraction, and capital accumulation, particularly because so much of this work is done for free, fun, personal fulfillment, and aspirations for the future (Weeks, 2011). These studies consider the “use values” of emotion work and social life as sustaining, but take seriously the surplus value created by women’s socially reproductive labor to platforms and to digital consumers.

This study adopts a position articulated by Duffy (2017) in her study of fashion bloggers, which provides an important framework for assessing the intermingling of pleasure and gendered labor in digital cultures for sexual entertainment and leisure. While she sees value in Marxist readings of users’ exploited activities, she also draws attention to the awareness of personal benefits and value-generation women she interviewed demonstrated. She argued, “Many social media creators derive pleasure from their digitally mediated ‘passion projects’, but they also believe that they will benefit professionally from such value-generating activities” (p. 46). She found that instead of solely providing exchange values for brands and corporations or seeing their activities as simply “fun,” social media creators emphasized the “work” of their activities and found it “highly pleasurable.” I consider these tensions in this study, providing a slightly different account of how and why cam models and sugar babies negotiate work with pleasure.
I build on feminist interventions into digital labor studies, adding sexual entertainment and leisure as a largely overlooked category of work in the contemporary U.S. digital cultural economy, a gap Rand (2019) notes as well and has studied in the British context (Rand, 2018). Cam modeling and sugar dating are forms of digital labor that epitomize both the blurring of labor with leisure and the changing boundaries of work as it “creeps” into domestic and leisure spaces where productivity is less recognized (Gregg, 2008). While women who participate in these industries expect to and sometimes do get paid, they also supply valuable content to web owners who would not have anything to sell without them. Additionally, they provide services to men, the value of which may be undermined by perceptions of the spaces, activities, and relations of their work as leisure (Nayar, 2021). Cam models and sugar babies trade in desire, sex and intimacy, which sometimes leads to the assumption that women do this work primarily for personal pleasure. Even more, women who do this work sometimes favor the rhetoric of leisure and pleasure because seeming to be uninterested in financial benefits in fact earns them more money (Nayar, 2017b).

At the same time, both cam modeling and sugar dating invite women to frame their sexual activities as entrepreneurial and part of a larger affective investment in autonomy, portraying online sex work as a mechanism of “making do” and investing in oneself. This narrative is truthful yet problematic, especially considering feminist digital labor research that exposes the disciplinary underpinnings of such discourses. Each practice makes appeals relating to broader discourses of female empowerment, cultural entrepreneurship, and the benefits of flexible labor. In this study, I ask how these spaces complicate the common critique about the general re-entrenchment of sexism, gender inequalities, and disciplinary regimes benefiting patriarchal capitalism. The sexual labor of cam modeling and sugar dating makes gender divisions of labor explicit through practice and philosophy. Both are highly feminized occupations in which women participants are expected to highlight rather than counteract their feminine traits, as they might in male-dominated professions and workplaces. Does adding sex
and emphasizing gender exacerbate the dynamics of patriarchal capitalism or create unexpected openings for women to maneuver? The ways in which women participants might be cognizant of these constructions and use them to their advantage is a possibility I explore in this study.

Adding the views and lives of sex workers into the conversation about social media and creative work also allows for interesting alliances to emerge. For instance, in a past study, I have used Baym’s research on the relational labor required of musicians to conceptualize the added demands of digitally mediated forms of sexual commerce (Nayar, 2017). Like Baym’s musicians, Duffy’s fashion bloggers, and Marwick’s social media influencers, cam models and sugar babies enjoy their work whilst negotiating the demands of new working conditions, but they are often siloed by the stigma of sex work and what Banet-Weiser (2012) calls the “idealization of white femininity,” which constructs a dichotomy between gendered work that is “empowering” and that which is “pathologized and considered immoral” and usually performed by marginalized women (pp. 85-86). The isolation of research on these stigmatized income-generating activities from other feminized gigs suggests more intersectional research is needed to unpack women’s varied motivations for entering the gig economy and the stakes of gig labor for women beyond those whose visibility is most celebrated.

**Critical Approaches for a Micropolitics of Thriving**

This study draws from a broad range of critical cultural works to rethink the nature and relationships between structure, culture, and agency in digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure. Drawing from Henderson (2013b), I examine the micropolitics of thriving, how people use culture to meet needs and imagine different futures and build on approaches working in this vein (Attwood, 2011; Berlant, 2011; de Certeau, 1984; Cabezas, 2006; Schaeffer, 2013). Not quite “resistance,” thriving is a scale of creative adjustment to institutional demands that improves the quality of everyday life and nourishes future social action (Henderson, 2013b). This approach represents a particular orientation within the area of critical cultural studies, which examines the ways in which cultural texts, practices, and discourses function as expressions and
means of political and economic control, on the one hand, and popular resistance or struggle over meaning, on the other. Sometimes characterized as a fault line between structuralist and culturalist approaches to cultural studies, scholars debate the extent to which culture reproduces or transforms existing power relations and structures; how to recognize forms of cultural contestation, resistance, or subversion; and to what extent such forms have political value (e.g. Fiske, 2010). This broader lack of consensus creates disagreement on whether to interpret everyday “micropolitics” as negligible—because they are not revolutionary in their creation of a different future—or noteworthy—because they offer sustenance in the present (Henderson, 2013b).

This study explores the ways in which women “make do” within commercial sex cultures, opening up possibilities for agency within structural constraints. I do so by attempting what Henderson (2013a) calls “defamiliarization,” a method of seeing women’s interpretations and production of commercial sex cultures from a less comfortable angle, to make it “strange again” (p. 2468). Doing so comes with the risk of being perceived by some as part of a problematic “turn to agency” in media and cultural studies and, ironically, an exemplar of how a “neoliberal and postfeminist sensibility” now encompasses some feminist theorizing on the sexualization of culture (Gill and Donaghue, 2013). But I, along with others who take similar approaches, see this move as a means to critically interrogate frameworks that produce dichotomies, rather than continuities, between cultural reproduction and transformation and that promote reactive arguments about commercial sex and intimacies as dangerous, disciplining, or just disappointing.

First, I draw on theories and approaches that rethink what we mean by ‘structure’ to reveal disruptions or instability in a seemingly closed system, and to understand the pressure and movement of forces that seem universal and static. Seeing structure as overdetermined, the result of multiple, sometimes contradictory influences, critical cultural studies scholars challenge its characterization as monolithic and impermeable (Grossberg, 2010). I draw on feminist
geographers writing under the name Gibson-Graham (2006), who adopt Althusser’s theory of overdetermination to imagine how structural conditions are not given. Overdetermination means that “each site and process is constituted at the intersection of all others, and is thus fundamentally an emptiness, complexly constituted by what it is not, without an enduring core or essence” (p. xxx). Given this emptiness, Gibson-Graham (2006) argue a radical contextualist approach is needed to apply a “rigorous anti-essentialism to the understanding of causation” when considering what a particular site, practice, or text is ultimately or actually about (p. xxx).

Gibson-Graham’s articulation of structure is useful to this study, which envisions cam modeling and sugar dating as sites where neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, and racial hierarchies are constituted and continually re-shaped by social actors. By examining structures as effects or outcomes, not simply causes or determinants, we are better able to see how they assume form and force through concrete decisions and daily practices, a process hidden from view when structures are considered logical, natural, self-reproducing, and singular. Like the common saying “history is written by the victors,” cultural critics and researchers hold a certain amount of power in writing a narrative about the contestation over meaning that occurs in the making of culture. When we start the story by explaining sexual entertainment and leisure as an outgrowth of capitalism and patriarchy in the first and last instance, we have predetermined the victors and assumed they have already claimed what is at stake in the struggle.

Second, I question the impulse to produce a “pure critique,” one that assesses culture’s offerings or shortcomings solely by its allegiance to a preordained politics (Illouz, 2007). Like Illouz (2007), I opt for an “impure critique” that does not impose criteria onto culture to determine its value but allows “the moral criteria at work within a community” to guide my analysis. Producing an “impure critique” involves pausing and heeding Henderson’s (2008) advice to be “slow to discover meanings or to package sexual experiences and sexual cultures” if we are committed to a “politics of sexual possibility” (p. 223). Inspired by Henderson’s “slow love” approach, Dobson (2015) argues that research on “provocative media practices and
representations” tends to incite a sense of urgency, and recommends taking an “open, ambivalent, disposition” in these exact moments when it seems hardest to come by (p. 8). Instead of approaching these objects of analysis “with the intent to evaluate their media practices against preexisting theoretical criteria or ideals,” she advises we approach them “with a view to learning something about their lives within particular social, cultural, geographical, and political contexts” (ibid).

With such an approach, I hope to achieve what Sedgwick (2003) notably refers to as a “reparative reading” of culture, which challenges theory and criticism to move beyond pessimistic – though ironically satisfying – analyses of sexual culture’s limits and symbolic violence. Sedgwick asks us to recuperate the ways in which culture often enriches lives even when it does not meet a critic’s ideals. Drawing on Muñoz (2010) who frames “hope” as “both a critical affect and methodology,” Banet-Weiser (2013) challenges framing critique as “pessimistic,” stating that instead, she sees it as a form of “hope”: “It is about having the kind of faith and investment in culture that it demands our critical attention; It is a recuperative project, it is, above all else, about an ethics of care” (p. 232). This ethic may be shared by many critical scholars, who see themselves hopeful for a better future, but attention to how critique is a form of power that also does symbolic violence to communities of real people with complicated lives is important to remember. Bringing nuance to this conversation, Henderson (2013) clarifies that a reparative frame does not “claim that social damage or threat isn’t occurring all around us” (p. 13). It is possible to offer critique with care and hope for a better future, and still recognize alternatives that are “already here” as Henderson and Gibson-Graham remind us. Most importantly, a reparative approach “claims that stepping into the critical cycle of threat and defense disables other forms of reading, other insights, and, ultimately, other forms of living” (ibid). Approaches that analyze culture attentive to the question, “What else might this be about?” have a chance at producing fresh dirt on an otherwise beaten path.
Sensitized to these considerations, I hope I have resisted the temptation to see women’s participation in the commercial cultures of digital sexual entertainment and leisure as simply animating an underlying structure that works to further immobilize or disempower them. Cam modeling and sugar dating, for instance, could easily (and I would argue misleadingly) be read as symptoms of postfeminism, neoliberalism, and consumerism. Though not entirely off the mark, such a perspective glosses over moments of incongruity, unpredictability, tension, and negotiation that expose women’s engagement with commercial sexual culture as a real struggle over meaning, not just a half-baked effort. Cam modeling and sugar dating are zones of cultural contestation and these moments have yet to be fully explored.

**Field Theory and Scenes for Sexual Entertainment and Leisure**

I draw on Bourdieu’s field theory to better understand the social organization of women’s practices in scenes for sexual entertainment and leisure. This theory emphasizes the importance of observing social practice and dynamic struggles between social agents in a field—the sociality of a field—to better understand how its structure implicitly – and even explicitly – encourages the adoption of philosophies and strategies for succeeding in the field and produces subjectivities in the process. Fields ultimately produce stratification and class factions according to the particular forms and distribution of capital among social agents. Bourdieu identifies economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms of capital, noting how their circulation and valuation vary depending on the field, and subfields, in question. Additionally, scholars such as Miller-Young (2014), Illouz (2012), and Green (2013) recognize the importance of erotic or sexual capital for social agents in sexual fields.

A central component of field theory is “habitus,” which represents the systematic and collective internalization of structure and the constitution of relatively unconscious and seemingly idiosyncratic tastes, sensibilities, and other orientations toward the social environment. As “history turned into nature,” the habitus represents an adaptive disposition that is sensitive to what is required to succeed in a particular field (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). This sensitivity, or
inclination to follow and strategize according to the “rules of the game,” illustrates how Bourdieu (1990) seeks to illuminate “the objectivity of the subjective,” meaning the ways in which structure is internalized, embodied, and expressed in and through people’s lived experiences and everyday practices (p. 135). Those in similar positions in the hierarchical order of a field share similarities in habitus, a patterning of subjectivities and dispositions that tends to reproduce social order by maintaining present distributions of capital. Though emphasizing the social organization of intrapsychic life, field theory also points to the importance of practice, the enactment of strategies by social agents, to struggle for better positions in relation to other agents, which restructures the social environment. In this way, field theory specifies the possibility of social agents to act back on structure and rearrange power relations in the field.

Field analysis involves mapping the positions of the social agents and the relationships among them. Doing so for this project means investigating what forms of capital are active and valued among cam models and sugar babies and how these understandings shape their trajectories and socio-sexual life in these scenes. First, this process involves examining relations among cam models and among sugar babies, defining what kinds of capital are recognized and rewarded, and how these might relate to social stratifications along familiar demographic dimensions of race, ethnicity, and class, but also create stratification according to field-specific logics. Second, this project examines the worker/patron relationship, between cam models and their audiences and sugar babies and sugar daddies, as important sites for understanding how issues of gender and power play out in these scenes of sexual entertainment and leisure. Specifically, both scenes suggest a re-inscription of traditional gendered divisions of capital and labor, requiring further exploration of these dynamics. Third, I explore cam models’ and sugar babies’ relations with social agents representing related institutions such as networked social media platforms and trade associations and organizational support such as site administrators, customer service, marketing and public relations staff, and site owners. Though I explore the technological and commercial infrastructure of the field in a limited and indirect way due to the scope of this project and its
primary focus on women’s experiences and perspectives, moments in which women’s positions and trajectories depend on working within these structures are especially relevant to my study. At a broader level, cam modeling and sugar dating represent new social agents in an already established field of sexual entertainment and leisure, a sort of heresy or “de-routinization” of the field that reorganizes relations with the introduction of “heretical” players and their non-routine practices and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1993). While cam modeling is particularly connected to industries of pornography and stripping, sugar dating is more closely tied to industries with shaky legal status such as escorting services and prostitution, both of which are heavily monitored and penalized by law enforcement. As such, both cam modeling and sugar dating should be analyzed in relation to the fields of pornography, stripping, escorting, and prostitution, as well as each other, looking at how their introduction reorganizes the distribution of capital among them.

Because classic field theory has been critiqued for overemphasizing social reproduction and potentially downplaying the micropolitics of everyday life, I also draw on de Certeau’s (1984) notion of tactics in this project. According to de Certeau (1984), Bourdieu describes the complexity of structures and their dynamic interplay with social agents, only to reach a conclusion about them that is “aggressive” and “repetitive in [its] affirmations” of social reproduction (p. 59). In other words, Bourdieu’s tightly theorized fields framework may underestimate the existence of practices it fails to capture. In contrast to Bourdieu’s “strategies,” which involve practices and discourses that follow a logic set by goals elaborated in the field, de Certeau discusses “tactics” as practices and discourses that further particular goals defined by the agent. Tactics do not overtly challenge the structure of a field, but rather allow people to stealthily manage their own objectives and tend to their own needs. Calling them “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong,” de Certeau theorizes tactics as attempts to negotiate or circumvent a field’s impositions (p. xvii).

Inspired by de Certeau’s attention to “the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline,’” this project too considers tactics
to be integral to a framework that accounts for agency’s varying incarnations in fields of sexual cultural production and the ways in which workers find ways to thrive (p. xiv). Studying the eroticization of resort workers, Cabezas (2006) underscores the ways in which tactics defy theorizations of sexualized labor, which limit definitions of workers’ resistance to non-compliance. Outside of this scheme, she finds female workers resist alienation or exploitation by finding opportunities to “establish relationships with hotel guests that provide more direct benefits and opportunities for travel and migration” (p. 507). Whether the changing conditions of sexual entertainment and leisure work represented in cam modeling and sugar dating create similar possibilities to engage in tactical resistance is a question I explore, as is the question of what terms cam models and sugar babies might want to, or indeed do, resist.

**Chapter Overview**

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters and an appendix. Chapter 2 details my methodology and research design. In this chapter, I discuss how I collected and analyzed data, focusing on decisions such as selection of participants, sites, and texts as well as any obstacles I encountered. I conclude this chapter with a consideration of the ethics of studying sex workers and the importance of taking a self-reflexive approach to such research.

I then present my analysis in Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 3, “‘It’s Not All About Sex’: What Cam Models and Sugar Babies Do and Create,” explores the cultural production of cam models and sugar babies and how their commercialized activities as cam models and sugar babies re-present, mediate, and effectively transform cultural rituals of heterosexual desire, intimacy, and gender relations associated with late modern life. Drawing on a concept of the imagined audience, I explore how women create a desirable performance of femininity that produces a particular sensibility for how men experience masculinity in these sites for sexual entertainment and leisure.

In Chapter 4, “‘It’s Real Work’: The Emotional Labor of Being Cam Models and Sugar Babies,” I examine the emotional labor involved in cam models’ and sugar babies’ cultural
production and its constraints and possibilities. Highlighting various strategies they use to manage competing demands, I make connections to other forms of service and/or feminized work but also draw out the uniqueness of emotion management in these forms of erotic labor.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I switch gears from what women provide to male consumer-audiences and the labor involved in this production to address what women get from cam modeling and sugar dating, answering research questions that generally relate to questions many people have about women in these scenes: why and how do they get into these lines of work and income-generating activities? Chapter 5, “Taking Sexy Back: Why and How Women Become Cam Models and Sugar Babies” examines the meanings and values women associate with cam modeling and sugar dating, highlighting how their overlooked investments, strategies, tactics, and stances create a different story around their engagement with sexual commercial culture that challenges academic feminist critiques.

Chapter 6, the final analysis chapter, “Pursuing Better Sexual Selves: The Collective Experience of Being Cam Models and Sugar Babies,” explores the pleasures women derive from their membership in affective communities that coalesce around these sexual commercial practices, particularly the sense of belonging and identity that comes with identifying as part of the sex worker community, a historically stigmatized social category. This chapter concludes the analysis by presenting the ‘cam model’ and ‘sugar baby’ as ideal subject positions that may discipline them to an extent, but also provide them with tools to imagine better futures and better, more productive, sexual selves that make the meantime more bearable.

Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the arguments presented in each chapter, addresses limitations of the research, and offers avenues for future projects to explore.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Overview

Having described my approach to studying cam modeling and sugar dating, this chapter explains how I conducted the study. In order to answer research questions, I turned to ethnographic and other qualitative methods, which offered ways of studying practices, personal narratives, and cultural discourses as crucial zones of contestation where we actively produce culture, structures, and subjectivities. This study draws on multiple qualitative methods: (1) participant observation on cam modeling platforms and at offline events for cam modeling and sugar dating; (2) interviews with women who identify as cam models and sugar babies; and (3) textual analysis of online forums and blogs that provided accounts of women’s personal experiences as cam models or sugar babies.

Data collection for this study lasted from June 2017 to May 2020. I collected data in two phases. From June 2017 to June 2019, I conducted interviews and gathered texts from online forums and blogs dedicated to sugar dating and cam modeling. After coding and analyzing this initial corpus of data, I returned to the field to conduct a second phase of interviewing in April and May of 2020. This process was both imposed and opportune. Issues of access limited the number of interviews I conducted in the first stage of fieldwork, which prompted me to reevaluate my relationship as a researcher to the online texts I gathered and their role in this study. Due to this serendipitous obstacle in the field, I spent nearly two years absorbing thousands of posts and comments on online forums and blogs. This process helped me to develop a better sense of the institutional cultures encompassing these practices and the interactive identities formed within them. Getting to know the online material culture of sugar dating and cam modeling over time allowed me to become a better informed and more empathic researcher, who could listen and lead richer conversations with participants when I began a second phase of fieldwork, during which I obtained the bulk of my interviews. The following sections provide further details on the
methodological framework, decisions, obstacles, and processes that shaped the production of this study and its suggested findings.

**Scope of Participants**

As its research questions indicate, this dissertation is fundamentally a study of a social formation—young American women. Understanding the constraints of each practice indeed involves reconstructing (and deconstructing) the broader field and understanding its relations, but I am particularly interested in how these technologically-mediated practices intersect with the cultural, social, and economic dynamics young American women navigate today and how they process them. Like other media and cultural scholars who study the contours and evolution of American womanhood amidst political economic, social, and technological changes such as McRobbie (2007, 2016), Radway (1984), Banet-Weiser (1999, 2012, 2015), Gill (2007a), Rottenberg (2018), and Peiss (1998, 2011) among others, I am most curious about how young women experience and view the world and themselves as social agents, and the connection between the practices and discourses they embrace to their sense of identity, subjectivity, and agency. Participating in cam modeling or sugar dating is a socially constructed “choice” that persuasively responds to a social “problem” young women collectively face—how can they achieve desires for gender equality, sexual freedom, and personal autonomy under the continued constraints of patriarchal capitalism—using the cultural “tools” at their disposal and perhaps picking up new ones along the way (Swidler, 1986; Ortner, 2006).

The decision to focus on this demographic was also practical and driven by the numbers. Young women form the most visible and prolific group seeking to earn money in both practices. While some scholars, especially those working in the critical tradition, might critique the scope of this project as unduly limited, neglecting or even further marginalizing accounts from less visible participants, I chose to circumscribe participation to an otherwise subordinated group at the “center” of both cultures precisely because of this shared positioning, complicated status, and the comparisons I sought to make between practices. Jones (2020), for instance, provides a different
perspective on camming as she uses a method adopted from activists called “progressive stacking,” which “prioritized the voices of people of color, people from Latin America, trans people, queer people, and people with disabilities” (p. 10). This method flips the normative hierarchy to make visible those who are marginalized in this community to avoid being doubly marginalized by the production of knowledge about it. From who she selected to be included in her study and the questions she asked to how and when she included their voices in resulting publications, she made a deliberate attempt to shed light on people at the margins in her account of camming. I commend this effort. Cam modeling is indeed more diverse and also more inclusive of male performers and older female performers than this study might suggest. Sugar dating is also a popular practice in the gay male community and sometimes reverses normative heterosexuality with women serving as “sugar mamas” to male sugar babies, but these scenes and scenarios are not included in this study.

Setting a parameter around gender and age allowed me to focus on differences within this relatively homogenous group in education levels, which I used to assess social position and cultural capital, and racial backgrounds. Following young women into and through fields of cam modeling and sugar dating makes a stronger case about the role of sexual cultural production in the formation of young womanhood in the contemporary U.S. context and distinctions between sugar dating and cam modeling as separate entry points into the diverse social world of sex work available to this collective. By controlling the frame of this study, I attempted to bring sugar dating and cam modeling into direct conversation with each other in a systematic way that allowed me to make specific claims. Thus, my scope of participants is hardly representative of the total population in scenes of cam modeling and sugar dating, but it meets what Luker (2008) defines as the goal of non-canonical social scientists of being “reasonably representative of the larger phenomenon” I am investigating, which is sexual cultural production and the formation of young American womanhood (p. 103). By sampling cases in this way, I offer insights about cam modeling and sugar dating as gendered and gendering fields.
In concrete terms, I operationalized “young American women” as cisgender females between the ages of eighteen and thirty-nine living in North America, primarily in the United States. My actual sample, the characteristics of which are presented in Appendix B, includes a couple of outliers for comparison, but the majority of my interviewees comprised this core analytical group. Since the age ranges of cam models and sugar babies were less consistent than I expected and had hoped, I debated if and where I should draw an upper limit in age for the purposes of forming this study’s arguments. I settled on a range of eighteen to thirty-nine because it includes the two youngest generations—Millennials and Generation Z—who share many of the same outlooks and prospects and also met the criteria for studying a developmental stage psychologists define as “early adulthood,” which spans the ages of eighteen to forty. This division also made sense to me as I saw it reflected in the data. Most interviewees I found during recruitment fell into this range. The two interviewees who fell outside this range exhibited a different sense of each practice and what it meant to them than the rest of my interviewees, even the next oldest one who, at thirty-eight, is an older millennial. Despite the age gap between the thirty-eight-year-old informant and her younger counterparts, she shared more with those junior to her in her overall approach and view of the practice than women in their forties and fifties.

Cohorts, or generations, share many of the same experiences and perspectives, having been born at a similar time in history, because their worldviews are forming and being shaped by the same political, economic, and social factors, technological changes, world events, and the dominant cultural discourses of a moment in time. Individuals may of course vary in their opinions, but generational studies offer ways to track overall changes from one generation to the next or as a generation gets older. Millennials and Generation Z include those born in 1982 or later, therefore they grew up and have come of age during a period in the United States characterized by hegemonic neoliberalism, economic uncertainty following the 2008 financial crisis, increased political polarization, a post-9/11 “war on terrorism” that has promoted a
surveillance state and militarization of police, and techno-optimism as the internet and social media have become mainstays of everyday life.

This age range is also significant because of the psychological and emotional demands and changes occurring. According to Havighurst (1948), early adulthood is a time devoted to completing nine developmental tasks: (1) achieving autonomy, or establishing oneself an independent entity with a distinct and self-chosen life path; (2) establishing identity through the development of personal tastes, interests, and worldviews; (3) developing emotional stability, a sign of maturity; (4) choosing and pursuing career and educational objectives; (5) experiencing intimacy through the formation of close and long-term romantic liaisons; (6) joining and becoming involved in a group or community; (7) gaining domestic skills as heads of households; (8) becoming a parent and raising children; and (9) undertaking responsibilities associated with marriage and parenting. Psychologists who study emotional and psychological development at an individual level take these tasks to be starting points from which they can conduct research. I do not do that here. Instead, I see this analytical device as culturally produced and socially situated. That is, it is meaningful to me as a way of understanding what late modern social subjects living in a Western democracy, shaped by historically specific and culturally dominant discourses of individualism, choice, and freedom, are expected to accomplish psychologically, emotionally, and materially by a certain age. I situate the women I interviewed within this life stage because it is socially constructed as a time when a person is tasked with making life decisions like establishing an identity and lifestyle independent from one’s upbringing, becoming economically independent, and pursuing personal aspirations in terms of a career, romantic relationships, and family—all of which are culturally supported exercises of agency, which is what truly interests me.

Because of its social relevance, this is a fruitful group to analyze even if limiting my sample to cisgender females and focusing specifically on the experiences and perspectives of those under forty offers an incomplete picture of the broader diversity of who cam models and
who sugar dates. This approach has its limitations, but it also allowed me to make claims about the shared motivations, trajectories, and experiences of a social formation of young American women, who are navigating life tasks and decisions associated with early adulthood and are shaped in similar ways as a generational cohort. Rather than examine the range of meanings and values at play in the broader fields of sugar dating and cam modeling, I seek to better understand why and how these women choose sugar dating and cam modeling, as solutions to their problems and sources of the economic and sexual sovereignty, community, and identity they seek, given the range of choices more or less available to them in the contemporary economic, social, and cultural contexts.

**Selection of Field Sites and Texts**

Once I determined who I wanted to study, I faced a daunting task of figuring out where to find them and conduct a study that included ethnographic observation, interviews, and textual analysis of material culture. Central to traditional ethnography is “attention to the everyday, an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups” (Marcus, 1998, p. 83). Historically, conventional anthropological ethnography involved traveling, often to distant locales, and living among cultural ‘natives’ for months or years at a time in order to gain a sense of “being there” and enough knowledge to confidently represent a culture, its constituents, and their meaning-making practices (Marcus, 1998, p. 99). But cam modeling and sugar dating do not typically occur in centralized, physical locations and venues, and many participants work hard to keep their participation hidden or separate from their everyday lives. The subjects of analysis in digital cultures of cam modeling and sugar dating coalesce online, but are often physically located in dispersed settings, and assume personas or online identities that do not necessary reflect their true identities. Trying to conduct a conventional ethnography, which assumes physical co-presence, a ‘bounded culture’ and stable cultural identities would have been next to impossible at least in the initial stages of research. While some cam models do work out of physical studios and sugar daters might be found in specific cities and congregate in bars, lounges, and hotels unofficially
designated as welcoming, I was not aware of such organization behind the practices when I began this project. My access to these sites was also limited. I would not be able to live among research subjects for an extended period of time (they did not live with each other either). Opportunities to observe women in action were also minimal due to the intimate nature of the topic.

Attempting to overcome these obstacles might have also been counter-productive. The haphazard and unconventional nature of collective physical togetherness in practices of cam modeling and sugar dating suggested to me that traditional approaches of finding a field to study would fail to capture the mediated and dispersed qualities of digital sexual entertainment and leisure cultures and how young women typically experience them. I was neither alone nor the first researcher to experience this problem. Against a backdrop increasingly characterized by processes of globalization, technological connection, and mobility, critical scholars challenge the applicability of traditional ethnographic approaches that privilege physical co-presence, single-sited designs, and unmediated social life. Critiques of classical anthropological notions of a bounded culture take on greater relevance when studying mediated culture, which “crosses contexts and borders in pervasive and regular ways” (Couldry, 2003, p. 10). While it could make sense to study the mediation of culture in one place and time, it is just as important to understand such phenomena from a standpoint that questions the relevance of these given boundaries. As boyd (2009) argues, “Geography can no longer be the defining framework of culture; people are part of many cultures including those defined by tastes, worldview, language, religion, social networks, practices, etc.” (p. 27).

Such an idea is not universally accepted. Because ethnographers have historically built truth-claims and produced knowledge on the grounds that only through “immersion” and “rapport” can a researcher begin to understand the language, practices, cultural logics, and sensibilities of subjects, there is resistance to the idea that such methods will work in digital contexts or if these sites even constitute ‘culture.’ Couldry (2003) argues that such presumptions should be challenged, especially given what Williams (1973) has noted as the both “central and
marginal” role of mediated culture in our everyday lives (p. 295-296, as cited in Couldry, 2003, p. 15). In other words, the amount of time spent in and with a physically bounded culture may not be the most appropriate golden standard for a study of culture in a mediated world. Some researchers highlight how rethinking what constitutes ‘context’ may reveal more than holding the study of mediated culture to a debilitating ideal. Hine (2011), for example, argues that the internet requires a more “fluid, mobile, and connective form of fieldwork” (p. 570).

As a result, I drew on the work of critical ethnographers and scholars who apply ethnographic methods to studies of digital culture to construct ‘fields’ for cam modeling and sugar dating instead of performing long-term fieldwork in a single setting. I specifically adopted an approach often assumed by researchers in my position, who are also studying mediated culture, known as “multi-sited ethnography,” which “moves out from single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus, 1998, p. 79). Multi-sited ethnography is designed around “chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites” (Marcus, 1998, p. 90). Though sometimes deemed less rigorous when compared to the canonical ethnographic method, constructing environments to study that include physical and virtual spaces, local and global cultures, and organizations alongside individuals is a necessary part of most ethnography today (Bird, 2003; Couldry, 2003). It is also valued in part for its ability to bridge “locations of cultural production that had not been obviously connected and, consequently, for creating empirically argued new envisionings of social landscapes” (Marcus, 1998, p. 93).

Similar to this study, Lingel (2017) sought to bring together disparate subaltern communities—in her case, body modification and drag communities—and technologies, and analyzed online and offline practices. Her research adopts a method similar to the one I applied, which compares across multiple but connected communities and sites. She calls this approach
“networked field studies,” writing that it “involves working across multiple sociotechnical assemblages within a particular community and also looking across these communities to see shared practices” (p. 14). It importantly allows a researcher to compare across multiple field sites, online and offline. She states, “Within the context of countercultural groups, researchers have tended to look within rather than between communities” (p. 15). Oriented toward a comparative analysis, networked field studies “seeks to identify practices and characteristics that emerge across distinct communities and sites” and “provides a framework” for making these “conceptual links” (p. 15). She identifies “transferability” rather than “generalizability” as the goal of networked field study. Transferability, she argues, is “better suited to interpretive work. Where generalizability is about scaling up, transferability is about moving between—tracing connections between field sites rather than generalizing or making universal claims” (p. 15).

I too consider sugar dating and cam modeling fruitful entry points into a broader field of subaltern sexual culture because I see them as different but related sites where structures of patriarchal capitalism, gender, and sexuality are openly negotiated and redefined. Though I did not end up gaining certain forms of access to observe cam models and sugar babies in-person while they engaged in these practices or follow them for extended periods of time, which would have illuminated more about their private lives and how these practices fit into them, I moved between online and offline sites for cam modeling and sugar dating throughout the course of my fieldwork and analysis of texts. Adopting a “follow the thing” multi-sited ethnographic technique that Hine (2011) defines as “mobile ethnography,” I constantly compared what I saw and heard in spaces where sugar dating and cam modeling were relevant. What I could not observe first-hand, I pieced together and analyzed what I could from online forums and blogs for cam modeling and sugar dating, which serve as discursive communities for shared practices, meanings, and values.

Based on the guidance of a multi-sited ethnographic approach and others inspired by it that address how to conduct ethnography in digital spaces, I found and studied cam models and sugar babies where they were—online (Lingel, 2017; Hine, 2011; Constable, 2003; Schaeffer,
2013). I traced their presence on and across specific digital platforms, some of which I used to observe their interactions and others I used for recruitment of interviewees and textual analysis. Often adopting multi-sited ethnographic approaches, researchers interested in mediated culture address some practical issues, including constructing boundaries (what to include in the field) (Hine, 2009; boyd, 2009; Marwick, 2013), justifying entry-points (Hine, 2011); and building context and validity when a researcher’s access to the field is limited in space and time (Couldry, 2003; Ortner, 2013; Baym, 2009).

I certainly faced difficulties in figuring out how and where to define the boundaries and choosing entry points in a seemingly unbounded field. While digital platforms for sugar dating and cam modeling with which I was already familiar offered reasonable starting points, especially for textual analysis, they presented barriers to entry as fieldwork sites because many are semi-restricted online spaces that would require me to sign up for an account and even partake in deceptive practices that would go against the ethical guidelines for online research I intended to follow. For example, the sugar dating platform Seeking Arrangement requires the creation of a dating profile to view and contact other participants and limits who one sees based on identity and sexual orientation, therefore I would have had to pose as a sugar daddy in order to view female sugar babies’ profiles and contact them for interviews. Access to cam models was less problematic—they are, after all, public performers—but I was restricted by rules imposed upon the study by my institutional review board, which made clear I was not to contact individuals or solicit interviews with women I observed on cam modeling platforms in order to avoid disrupting the dynamics of this community. Issues with gaining approval from institutional review boards to conduct sensitive and sometimes controversial studies of sexual culture are reportedly common in the academic field (Sanders, 2006).

The resulting analysis includes online and offline sites. The offline sites of Miami and New York City were determined by two special events that took place in those areas that brought together large groups of cam models and sugar babies, respectively. Though sporadic and limited,
these offline observations were special opportunities to engage in “interface ethnography,” where observations take place “in the border area where the closed community or organization or institution interfaces with the public” (Ortner, 2013, p. 175-176). Because Ortner (2013) faced obstacles getting access to Hollywood film producers for a study she conducted, she emphasizes the ways in which events and locations that seem peripheral to the community of interest are embedded with meanings, especially when their publicly performed personas are part of the study itself. I attended these events with this mindset and also the online forums and blogs I analyzed, as they too were constructed for an audience as much as they served as places where practices of cam modeling and sugar dating are conceptualized and negotiated by women. The online sites included are MyFreeCams, Streamate, Amber Cutie’s Forum, Tumblr, Seeking Arrangement, and Let’s Talk Sugar. I also used Twitter and Craigslist specifically for recruiting interviewees, but did not analyze content, if any, that I found on them. To gain observational data on cam modeling, I used MyFreeCams and Streamate, two popular cam modeling communities on which women perform group and private shows for tips and fees. These sites present different cultures and business models, therefore offered opportunities to observe a range of practices and styles adopted by cam models.

Online texts helped build more context around my observations and interviews. For my textual analysis, I identified four key sources: one for cam modeling and three for sugar dating. Having previously conducted pilot studies on both practices, I continued collecting data from two sources with which I was already familiar and had proved useful. The first is an online forum called Amber Cutie’s Forum, which is created, managed, and used by cam models to discuss issues and strategies in the field, generate camaraderie, stay up-to-date on industry and technology developments, and so on. After gaining approval to observe the forum from Amber Cutie, I collected data from all topic threads that appeared between January 2017 and December 2018 as well as five topic threads with the highest total number of posts at the time of collection. Due to the copious amount of data available, I used a data-scraping software, ParseHub, to gather
these topic threads and comments into an Excel file I later imported into NVivo, the qualitative analysis software I used for this project. The second is Seeking Arrangement, a popular sugar dating website that publishes and moderates a publicly-accessible blog, on which sugar daters respond to blog posts written by site administrators and converse amongst themselves on a range of topics. For this project, I collected all blog articles posted by Seeking Arrangement from January 2017 to April 2018 and their comments.

During the course of my fieldwork, Seeking Arrangement created an offshoot website for sugar babies called Let’s Talk Sugar, which ended up being an important source to add to the study since it included a “Sugar Support Forum,” which gave sugar babies an opportunity to post their own topics and connect with each other. While I only read the website’s sections and articles for background knowledge, I systematically sampled the Sugar Support Forum by collecting topic threads that were created between January 2017 to April 2018 and had at least twenty posts.

Additionally, I analyzed posts written by sugar babies on the blogging platform Tumblr, a venue I knew to be popular among participants and would have searchability and accessibility features for research purposes. I searched for relevant tags and profiles, identifying forty users active from 2017 to 2019, and sampled twenty posts per user. Hosted by a company unaffiliated with the sugar dating industry, commentary from this blogging community served as an important contrast to that which emerged on the sites owned and operated by Seeking Arrangement.

Selection of Participants

Due to the scope of participants and my use of a grounded theory approach, this study theoretically sampled participants for one-on-one in-depth interviews based on what I deemed adequate participation in the practice, age, and gender. In the beginning stages of fieldwork, I created websites for each practice, on which potential interviewees could fill out an intake questionnaire that supplied relevant demographic information for me to use in my selection process. Later on, I determined this step to be too cumbersome and might have led to attrition between making contact with a potential informant and interviewing them. As a work around, I
asked potential interviewees to answer a few questions via email during the recruitment process that indicated their age, gender, and participation in a practice. I made clear during these email exchanges with potential interviewees that the study was limited to cisgender women, ideally thirty-five and younger, who had some experience with a practice. I obtained the rest of their demographic information verbally at the beginning of interviews. Because I take a grounded theory approach, I remained open to obtaining the amount of interviews I needed to achieve theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014).

Recruiting for interviews took place primarily online with some offline recruitment at relevant events. I issued calls for participants on Twitter, Tumblr, Craigslist, Backpage and found contacts on industry forums and related websites. I went to special events attended by cam models and sugar babies, whom I invited to participate in the study when appropriate, and distributed post cards I had made advertising the study at these events. I also deployed a snowball sampling procedure by asking those I had already interviewed to refer other participants to me or share my information with those in their social network who also participate in these practices. Most interviewees responded positively to this request, but only a few additional interviews resulted from using this method. To make participation more enticing and worth people’s time and energy, I advertised in all recruitment materials that I could offer twenty-five dollars as compensation upon completion of an interview thanks to a dissertation research grant I was awarded by the Graduate School at University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

As aforementioned, recruiting participants was the most challenging aspect of conducting this study. In the first stage of research, I was not particularly successful in using these methods, and only managed to recruit ten interviewees over the course of two years. Several problems surfaced during this time. First, recruiting people online is impersonal, therefore it was harder for me to gain trust and connection with potential interviewees. I tried different techniques to personalize my online presence and communication, but it is easier to ignore or outright reject a researcher’s propositions when distance and relative anonymity is a factor. For this same reason, I
also found many potential interviewees who were once enthusiastic would fall out of touch when asked to sign an informed consent form and schedule an interview. Again, the relatively impersonal nature of emailing and direct messaging on social media made it difficult to sustain potential interviewees’ interest and secure their commitment to participating in the study. Third, recruitment required ongoing follow-up with those who expressed interest to reach the interviewing stage and “cold-calling” those I found on Twitter and Tumblr, both of which took time and effort. I devoted as much as I could to the process, which became a part-time job in and of itself, but earned little return on investment. Finally, as I found out in my second stage of fieldwork, I was simply looking in the wrong places and lacked a crucial element of negotiating access: a sponsor, or someone who could vouch for me and the study, in order to gain credibility and trust in the impersonal online world. The problems I encountered at different stages of the selection and recruitment process are, of course, not unique to this study and are likely to be expected of human subjects research. But I share these problems in the spirit of transparency and to help other researchers who may want to study a sensitive topic like sexual cultural production, which can introduce its own kind of hurdles.

In the second stage of fieldwork, I fortuitously corrected course by making changes to where I posted recruitment announcements for the project and with whom I spoke about the project. For instance, I switched from posting in the “volunteer opportunities” section of Craigslist to the “gigs” section and paid the modest fees to post in various cities across the United States including New York City, San Francisco, Seattle, Philadelphia, and Atlanta (all cities heralded as epicenters for sugar dating), which resulted in a slew of inquiries about the study. I should note that this second stage of research began in April 2020, a time that will go down in history as the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though unplanned, I ended up finding most of the participants in this study at a time when many were recently unemployed or concerned about their financial stability as the economic effects of a national shutdown were still quite uncertain. The fact that I offered modest compensation was something that appealed to them.
Finally, I also made an acquaintance in the cam modeling field on Twitter, who had many cam model contacts as well as contacts in public relations and media related to adult entertainment. This individual was kind enough to put the word out about my project, which resulted in advertisements posted to Twitter and on the websites of adult entertainment industry news outlets XBiz and AVN. Several cam models told me that without this introduction and the backing of industry insiders, they would not have participated in my study.

**Data Collection**

This study draws on multiple sources and methods of data collection for at least two reasons. First, this variety strengthens the study’s validity by allowing me to cross-check conclusions made based on one source with another (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Methods of interviewing, textual analysis of cultural discourses, and ethnographic observation of online and offline activities provide three access points into understanding how being a sugar baby or cam model is socially constructed by different stakeholders. Triangulating among multiple methods builds reflexivity into the research design by drawing attention to the affordances and limitations of each method. In Caldwell’s (2008) terms, it creates a necessary confrontation between different data by “placing discourses and results of any one register in critical tension or dialogue with the others” (p. 4). I analyzed what women told me, a researcher, about their experiences and understandings in conjunction with what they actually did in these settings or what they shared with each other on a forum or blog. I compared observations of women in these scenes (when possible) to how they narrated and reflected on these practices in interviews and written records, reminded by Charmaz (2014) that comparing “fieldnotes and written documents can spark insights about the relative congruence – or lack of it – between words and deeds” (p. 50). Such discrepancies helped generate insights about differences between women’s self-constructions and the performance of femininity in commercial contexts. By carrying out the textual analysis portion of the study prior to most interviews I conducted, I used what I gathered to query interviewees during moments in which disparities emerged, asking for clarification on statements
that countered attitudes, beliefs, and experiences articulated in the online forums and blogs I analyzed.

Second, using multiple data collection strategies enables a textured account of both sugar dating and cam modeling, examining several rungs of meaning around both practices (Baym, 2009). Drawing on different data sources and methods is common to the research designs of both cultural production studies (Caldwell, 2008; D’Acci, 1994; Havens et al., 2009) and qualitative internet studies (boyd, 2014; Baym, 2009) for this reason. Studying the culture of media production, Caldwell (2008) used what he called a “cultural-industrial method,” which involved four “registers” or “modes of analysis”: (1) textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts; (2) interviews with film and television workers; (3) ethnographic field observation of production spaces and professional gatherings; and (4) economic/industrial analysis. Similarly, D’Acci (1994) relied on a mix of on-set observations, interviews with staff and crew, textual analysis of scripts, production notes, etc., and audience responses. Mixed methods allow researchers to examine connections and sometimes discontinuities between producers’ accounts of processes and what remnants of the process (memos, notes, script rewrites, etc.) might suggest transpired.

Use of multiple methods may also be necessary for mapping different dimensions of a field. For instance, interested in understanding how changing institutionalized discourses shape the character and experience of modern love, Illouz (2012) draws from a range of sources, including in-depth interviews, internet sites, newspaper columns, Victorian era novels, and self-help literature on sex, dating, and romantic relationships. In qualitative internet research, taking a mixed methods approach can be useful for contextualizing online data with offline encounters, which is necessary to understand what online social life and subjectivities mean in situ (boyd, 2014). boyd (2014) demonstrates the value of extending the boundaries of digital cultures to include offline environments in her research on how youth culture develops through MySpace. In addition to examining random online profiles, boyd considered information gathered from
parents, site creators, and adults who used MySpace; conversations she witnessed in public spaces about MySpace; and commentary on blogs and in the news.

In the following sections, I elaborate on how I applied each method to further my analysis of sugar dating and cam modeling.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation has long served as a way for researchers to gain access to local meanings that shape and contextualize the range of available subject positions and everyday social practices within a given culture and inside particular systems of power. At the heart of an ethnographic approach is a core belief that spending time with people, “hanging out” (Kendall, 2002; Hine, 2011) and talking with them, is essential for grasping the underlying meanings, patterns, and relevance of social practices. By immersing oneself in a community, an ethnographer attempts to approximate what it feels like to be a part of that culture and how members of that culture see the world. At the level of daily process, an ethnographic approach involves being on ‘site’ (on or offline), participating and observing, producing field notes, journals, memos, and transcribed conversations to eventually construct what Geertz calls a “thick description” of a culture, which uses layers of data to ascertain the “contextual significance of social practices for their performers” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 135). As Luker (2008) asserts, “the point of doing observational methods is to document ‘practices,’ those moments when belief and action come together” (p. 158). Oftentimes, it is in the minutiae of everyday life that connections between the private and public, individual and social, materialize. Observing these moments first-hand, and over time being able to determine how common and shared they are by members of a cultural collective, is one of the most valuable opportunities for insight presented by this method.

Since cam modeling takes place in public online spaces, I observed two free cam modeling sites popular in the United States: MyFreeCams (MFC) and Streamate. Drawing on two different sites provides a sense of how business models, sexual performances, relationships with
audiences, and the stakes and terms may vary from site to site, an observation drawn from preliminary research. For instance, two cam models I interviewed for a previous research project discussed how they negotiated whether to work on MFC on a given day as opposed to Streamate. MFC often requires women to be peppy and entertaining, play games and organize competitions among users, and to work harder for tips than Streamate, which reduces time spent in “group chat” waiting for tips and increases time spent engaging in sexual acts for a per-minute fee. Different sites demand different capacities, which vary for particular models from day to day. Additionally, the two sites differ in the types of sexual bodies, practices, and tastes featured. MFC is restricted to women alone and in a private location (among other rules), while Streamate allows both women and men to host, individually and sometimes together. While this study foregrounds the experiences and understandings of women on these sites, the variable presence of men as workers in each scene still matters in terms of the spectrum of sexual tastes brought to these spaces.

My observation of these two cam modeling platforms involved visiting each site at least two times per week for hour-long sessions (four hours per week total) over the course of six months, which began in June 2017 and ended in December 2017. Visiting each site, I purposively sampled different kinds of cam models to achieve a range of representation. I used search, categories, and other functions of each platform to sift and sample across each virtual territory. For instance, I used lists compiled in real-time on MFC to view cam models’ rooms who were trending (highest increases in number of viewers in the last few minutes) or most popular (most viewers). I also used tags, topics, Miss MyFreeCams, and cam scores to identify different kinds of performers—especially differences between those who had mainstream versus niche appeal and those who were doing well or not on this platform at a given time. I compared and contrasted cam models with varying popularity to see what was valued and rewarded in this setting. I observed what they did on camera, how they talked to users, their emotional and bodily styles, and more. I looked for patterns and themes in the kinds of rapport they developed, sexual
performances they engaged in, and their manners of communicating and relating. I systematically rotated visitation on each site, making sure to include ranges in days and times spent in each setting to get a sense of the work and the sites’ temporal dimensions (weekday nights versus mornings versus weekend crowds), and thus of the type of labor environment characteristic of each.

In observing the cam modeling sites MFC and Streamate, I assumed a relatively anonymous position in the field and, like many other users, did not interact with other users or cam models in these settings without drawing attention to myself. Because these settings are public, I did not inform users or cam models of my observations. However, I did not use the public nature of the site as justification for not considering my role in the field (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Even though I took a “complete observer” role, I still took ethical precautions to preserve users’ and cam models’ expectation of privacy, at least in the sense that their shows take place in real-time and are not made for repeated and future viewing. Thus, even when technology afforded it, I did not video record my sessions on MFC and Streamate in the event that these files were somehow lifted from my computer. Instead, I took extensive field notes and wrote memos after observation periods.

Additionally, I attended two offline events, one for each practice. In June 2017, I went to Miami to attend CamCon, an annual convention for cam models and business affiliates. In April 2018, I went to New York City to attend a Sugar Baby Summit held by Seeking Arrangement, where company representatives and chosen speakers led seminars on the culture of sugar dating, tricks of the trade, and financial advice for sugar babies, among other topics. This was the second time I attended a Sugar Baby Summit, the first of which I attended in June 2015 when I went to assess feasibility as a potential fieldwork site. At these events, I attended seminars and socialized with cam models and sugar babies between sessions. I kept a notebook with me to record the cultural pedagogy and wrote field notes at the end of each day about my experience and thoughts.
Conducting semi-structured interviews with human subjects provided several advantages in comparison to participant observation and textual analysis. First, interviewing women allowed me to explore their demographic backgrounds and social histories. Second, I was able to prompt them to describe situations, feelings, and thoughts that speak to my research questions. Third, I gained more connections in the field.

I interviewed twenty-four cam models and twenty-four sugar babies for this study. In my first stage of fieldwork, I conducted ten interviews (four with cam models and six with sugar babies). I recruited three sugar babies from Twitter, one from Craigslist, and one from the Let’s Talk Sugar support forum. One sugar baby was an unsolicited referral by someone in my social network. Of the four cam models I recruited during this stage, I recruited three during my attendance at CamCon in June 2017 and the fourth from Twitter. In my second stage of fieldwork, I conducted thirty-eight interviews (twenty with cam models and eighteen with sugar babies). I recruited fifteen sugar babies from Craigslist: one in Atlanta, five in New York, five in Philadelphia, two in San Francisco, and two in Seattle. The remaining three were from the Let’s Talk Sugar support forum. All cam models I interviewed in the second stage came from Twitter or referrals. Upon conveying interest, potential interviewees received an informed consent form via email, so they could read it over before deciding to sit for an interview. Informed consent forms contained standard language about the study, risks and benefits, confidentiality procedures, and more. It also contained a list of psychological resources should a participant endure any distress during or after the interview. At the beginning of every interview, I went over the main points from the form. Written consent was obtained whenever possible. Otherwise, I accepted verbal consent, which I recorded along with the entirety of each interview.

Seeking to address my research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews that covered a range of topics including, but not limited to, (1) entrance into and interest in sugar dating/cam modeling; (2) what women do in these roles; (3) experiences in the field; (4) pros and
cons of the field; (5) how sugar dating/cam modeling fits into other sexual practices, identities, and relationships; (6) other work experiences and career trajectories; (7) thoughts on insider/outsider perspectives on what it means to be a sugar baby/cam model. I prepared a set of questions approved by my institutional review board based on “sensitizing concepts” that guided my interests in these practices and served as points of departure for conversations that often unfolded in different ways depending on the dispositions and interests of interviewees, which I welcomed with a perspective informed by an “active interviewing” approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). As Charmaz (2014) points out, sensitizing concepts are merely “starting points to form interview questions, to look at data, to listen to interviewees, and to think analytically about the data” (p. 31). Actual interviews often took shape in ways I could not have anticipated and would have been stifled by rigidly sticking to my script. The average interview lasted about 1.25 hours. The shortest interview was 34 minutes and the longest was just over two hours.

I conducted all interviews over the phone or via videoconferencing services (Skype or Facetime) except for one face-to-face interview I conducted at a cam modeling event. Like debates over the necessity of face-to-face contact to meet ethnographic standards for participant observation, the quality of phone or video-conferenced interviews is sometimes called into question. However, due to the sensitive nature of talking about sex and intimacy, specifically working in sex industries and the stigma attached to it, I found these options to be preferrable to face-to-face interviews. They offered opportunities for virtual co-presence and a buffer for interviewees, who often spoke with me from the comfort of their homes or during familiar routines in and around it. The variation in interviewing methods introduces its own questions, but I found providing different options for people to talk to me was the best route to not only getting enough interviewees, but also a richness of data since openness of communication may be best achieved different ways for different people. In terms of guaranteeing confidentiality, use of videoconferencing services did pose certain risks to breaches of data security. However, Skype-to-Skype voice, video and instant messaging is encrypted communication, protected from
potential hacking. Facetime is also protected by end-to-end encryption and Apple states that it
does not store Facetime calls on its servers. I rejected services like Google Talk because it did not
offer end-to-end encryption, making it possible (though I am not suggesting probable) for Google
to archive (and release) conversations taking place on Google Talk or Hangouts.

Textual Analysis

In order to flesh out the cultural contexts of my field sites that may not have emerged
from interviews and participant observation, I collected data from several online forums and
blogs related to sugar dating and cam modeling, the characteristics of which I previously
described. Drawing on documents that reveal the remnants of cultural production can
complement interviews and participant observation. In his study of production culture, Caldwell
(2008) likens his analysis of workers’ artifacts and material culture to “looking over the shoulder”
of crew members, borrowing this phrasing of what fieldwork accomplishes from Geertz. As
previously mentioned, combining documents with ethnographic fieldwork is a common strategy
for analyzing process in cultural production. Documents may contain signposts of how struggle,
change, confusion, and consensus entered into and exited the picture over a period of time. As
Hine (2011) notes, the internet makes “interactions of diverse kinds persistent, traceable and
amenable to [a] sociological gaze,” therefore online documents are useful material to include in a
study of mediated cultural practices and identities that are otherwise ephemeral (p. 570). Beyond
maintaining records of cultural discourse and tracking how it changes over time, online forums
convene users who share interests in the same practices and cultural production but do not
necessarily inhabit a cohesive field site. With my research questions in mind, I used personal
accounts found online as points of connection with, and contextualizing data for, interviews and
participant observation within each scene. I also used these sources to build a comparison
between sugar dating and cam modeling as two distinct modes of sexual cultural production and
digital erotic labor, analyzing linkages and divergences that these data sources made salient.
While I used categorization and coding strategies common to grounded theory approaches, I was wary of losing context within narratives (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell (2013) warns that categorization strategies are not always appropriate to answering research questions. While categorization is a useful strategy for data analysis in a comparative study such as mine, I also wanted to preserve the value of social media networking practices such as sharing, linking, and regularly commenting on each other’s content, which create webs of meanings and experiences ripe for social scientific exploration. Thus, I set out to examine online discourse not only for its content, but also movement and traction in the field. I pursued this line of inquiry, when appropriate, using a “follow the thing” mobile ethnographic approach much like what Hine (2011) illustrates in her exploration of fandom online. In practice, I found this approach most useful in the context of studying the Tumblr sugar baby community. By using this approach, I informally tracked certain texts through a range of Tumblr profiles, for instance, or followed an idea that related to this project’s sensitizing concepts if it appeared in a blog post. I say informally because I did not count or document these movements precisely. Instead, while reading through and coding these data, I made notes on posts I came across that had been widely circulated in the community, receiving plentiful like and shares (all of which are documented and live on as part of the post’s biography, so to speak). I could see themes emerging from posts deemed popular or essential to the practice, according to the community whose texts I had collected.

Because users post to this platform knowing it is publicly accessible but may have an expectation of privacy that limits the context and audience of their posts, I referred to recommendations for ethical internet research offered by the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee to ensure I took the necessary precautions to minimize harm done to users by collecting their data. This report emphasizes the continued importance of ethical considerations pertaining to all human-subjects research in online settings, such as weighing participants’ vulnerability, respecting their privacy, and having a clear sense of the benefit from conducting a study and collecting users’ data (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Online data should
not be collected without thought to the impact of a loss of anonymity even if it originally appeared on a publicly accessible website. I used these guidelines to carefully define my intentions for using Tumblr data collected in the protocol I submitted to the University’s Institutional Review Board to conduct human subjects research. Per this protocol, I received approval to observe and collect posts from Tumblr without disclosing my presence or gaining informed consent from users based on the stipulation that I remain focused on extracting broader themes for analysis, not analyzing any one account in great depth. Tumblr users also post content under handles that signal their status as a sugar baby, but provide them a certain amount of anonymity in terms of their real names and identities. Even if their comments are public and traceable, the average person would not be able to link comments that appear in this study to a physical person. For greater protection, I also refrain from identifying the specific author of quotes I include in my analysis and simply refer to them as a Tumblr post or user. While these quotes are easily searchable, this vagueness adds an extra step to discovery that most people are not motivated to undertake.

Analyzing personal accounts provided a glimpse into the cultural production of the roles and identities of sugar babies and cam models. The online sources I analyzed were replete with stories about personal experiences, complaints about problems likely shared by peers, celebratory announcements, orations on the state of the field, advice, warnings, and more. Though a mode of cultural production worthy of a standalone study, personal narratives constructed using multimedia and/or textual content on social media and blogging platforms like Tumblr are also valuable as reflections of the self-reflexivity research subjects may possess about working as cam models or sugar babies (Couldry, 2003). While partly performative as one might expect of online personas, these forms of self-expression also provided glimpses into the culture and subjectivities of participants beyond what I heard in my initial interviews. In these partially “backstage” spaces, participants expect their listeners to understand and often participate in these fields. Behind the shield of relative anonymity and with the deliberation afforded by the written form, they brazenly
document the situations they encounter and their thoughts and feelings and covered more than I could in the range of questions I designed to fit into a one-hour interview. They also provided a glimpse into groups with whom I may not have spoken or were underrepresented in my interviews. Black women are a vocal group in the Tumblr sugar baby community, and specific discourses relating to their experiences were revealed in these forums.

At the same time, there are practical issues to consider in analyzing online documents as part of the production process. As with all internet research, the limited social cues, anonymity, and public reach of self-expressions put their authenticity into question, making it difficult to generate strong claims based on online forum and blog data alone. Furthermore, without reliable knowledge of users’ social positioning, contextualizing discourse by considering its social organization is impossible. I also considered the issue of self-selection, with women who welcome attention and other perceived benefits of maintaining a social media presence being the ones to share their cam modeling and sugar dating stories, perhaps embellishing them for their audience.

Personal accounts of sugar dating and cam modeling experiences are part of a “confessional” personal blogging subgenre, in which participants tell their side of the story, which can be based on a combination of fact and fiction. While forum conversations are less likely to be deemed inauthentic as forms of posturing by site users who share the stage in these online contexts, personal accounts on social media are written with an imagined audience in mind and structured by site forms, genres, and tastes. There are inherent risks in using methods that rely on self-exposition, even interviews, that the information gathered is “limited, misleading, or fabricated” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 89). However, whether the accounts provided accurately reflect reality is less important to me than the theoretical plausibility of what I learned from the narratives participants created and shared in these spaces because, as Charmaz (2014) argues, even “inaccurate, embellished, minimalist, or deceptive accounts” still reveals “important data about these participants, their situations, and the theoretical range of empirical possibilities” (p.
Laying this groundwork in the middle of my fieldwork oriented me to the field and its range of possibilities. Subsequent interviewing also provided robustness to the data collected and themes generated, which counterbalanced the chance of being led astray. Plus, I applied a test provided by Luker (2008) that involves asking, “Does the selection bias affect the explanandum (the thing being explained) and explanans (the explaining thing)?” (p. 107). I did not find selection bias to have an obvious bearing on either my explanandum (the social construction of young womanhood) or my explanan (participation in sexual cultural production). In other words, being more vocal or likely to embellish a personal narrative about participating in these practices did not alter “the theoretical case” I am attempting to make (ibid).

Regardless of the extent to which the content reveals what actually happened, I took these materials to add “backstage” dimensions to the roles women perform in the “front stage” of cam modeling and sugar dating sites proper (Goffman, 1959). While I began the study with the assumption that online texts were less trustworthy than interviews because of their public nature and issues related to self-selection (only certain kinds of social agents would engage in these activities), I came to realize that both methods share these limitations. Both suffer from some kind of self-selection bias, and both have been acknowledged to be kinds of performances—either for an imagined audience or for a researcher, an “audience of one”—and the information gleaned from both needs to be analyzed with these interpersonal contexts in mind. As Goffman (1959) suggests, even behavior and talk that appear unfiltered or at least more “authentic” than what takes place in “front stage” contexts are forms of cultivated self-presentation and communicate coded information. Just as qualitative researchers acknowledge (and debate) the validity of other techniques that rely on self-reporting (interviews, questionnaires), online material culture should be considered a complex social space. Thus, I remained sensitive to what a second level analysis of the form or contexts of subcultural confession in the “backstage” of cam modeling and sugar dating might reveal about women’s experiences in these scenes.
Online texts serve different communicative functions, a factor I considered in my analysis. Some are more conversational, such as online forums, on which participants aim to connect and negotiate issues together. These platforms allowed me special access into working conditions, industry standards and changes, worker subjectivities, and recounting of what is done in the field. Others, such as the Tumblr blogging community, were more personal, offering deeper insight into particular women’s narratives and how they approached and fit cam modeling or sugar dating into their lives. They are written for an anonymous and imagined audience or community of like-minded people, and I came to reconsider the value of online texts because of this difference in audience. Speaking to women as a researcher who is an outsider imposed its own challenges to generating trust and openness. I worked around this barrier through the use of specific interviewing techniques that helped to generate a sense of good faith such as practicing “self-disclosure” to begin the interview and whenever an interviewee had specific questions; “active listening” that showed interviewees I respected them and valued what they chose to share with me; and humility as a researcher by asking interviewees to tell me if my questions had failed to cover anything they thought was important to know or mistaken anything they said in the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 196-199). Still, online textual data offered an advantage over interviewing by being unintrusive and observational rather than directing conversations and topics. Self-expression, and the conversations it tended to ignite on online forums and blogs, may be directed at an imagined audience, but this “listener” is not typically conceived to be a researcher. Most importantly to this study, one-on-one interviews did not capture the group dynamics that online communities did. They did not capture what women get from each other through the practice, or through their association with it. From the activity on online forums and blogs, I could see clearly the genesis of what Berlant (2008) refers to as a juxtapolitical “intimate public” of women whose identifications and attachments revealed a shared experience of underlying constraints and imagined possibilities.
**Data Analysis**

This study draws on a grounded theory approach, therefore I followed recommendations by these methodologists to see data collection and analysis as simultaneous processes. I started analyzing data as soon as my fieldwork began in June 2017 and after it ended in May 2020. In the beginning phase, data analysis transpired in more casual forms such as field notes, memos on individual or a set of interviews, annotations of transcribed interviews, and so on. I made a list of sensitizing concepts for each of my major themes (cultural production, gender, labor, and sexuality) and continually referred to this list as I conducted and transcribed interviews, gathered and coded online texts, observed online interactions, and attended offline events. Because I completed the textual analysis portion of the study in between stages of interviewing, I coded this data first, along with my initial set of interviews, using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. Even though I recorded all interviews, I took notes during the interview process, which I kept in a notebook and used to alert myself to key moments, quotes, or questions that I wanted to follow up on, and usually did when it made sense and or as the interview was winding down. While notetaking during an interview may be seen as distracting by some, I found it helped me stay engaged in the conversation, follow up on important tangents that were not in my script, and improved my memory of each interview in the future. As I accumulated more interviews, I kept an Excel file with a matrix of informant information (using pseudonyms only and without contact or traceable information) that included their answers to demographic questions and relevant details about who they were in an “additional notes” column. This document helped me compare and contrast demographics of interviewees, leading to the development of a modest amount of descriptive statistics that I present in Appendix B. It also illuminated other patterns of positioning I had not initially considered such as marital status, life-changing events, and chronic health conditions.

At this stage, I also found transcribing interviews to be a fruitful time to sit and reflect on what I heard in an interview, which may not have been fresh in my mind at that point. Revisiting
interviews in this way helped jog my memory, but more importantly offered enough distance to see aspects of the interview I had missed. To expedite the transcription process, I used a software called Temi that relies on artificial intelligence technology to produce a relatively accurate transcript of an audio recording that I then manually corrected. Hearing back the recording and revising the transcript produced was still a lengthy process, but listening to women’s responses to questions I posed made the narrativizing of their experience even more pronounced for me.

Transcription was a time when I became more acutely aware of the patterns in discourse and how it shaped how women saw the world, themselves, their work, and relationships. Relatedly, Luker (2008) describes interviews themselves as narratives, “stories about what the person being interviewed thinks happened, or thinks should have happened, or even wanted to have happened” (p. 167). As I mentioned before, finding out what is really “true” is less important to qualitative researchers like myself than understanding these “mental maps that people carry around inside their heads” (ibid). As I saw patterns emerging from my interviews, and then my textual analysis, and then more interviews, I started to see certain things were “going on inside lots of people’s heads” (ibid). It is at this moment in data collection/analysis, when I started to “hear the same thing from people all over the country who don’t know one another” that I started to feel like I was “tapping into something that is reliably social and not just individual” (ibid).

After I collected most of my data and transcribed interviews, I continued coding the various texts I had compiled in NVivo. I followed coding procedures suggested for grounded theorists by Charmaz (2014), meaning I began with initial codes that were concrete and preserved action as much as possible, and then moved to more focused codes, which were more conceptual. Like Charmaz (2014) mentions about her own research, “focused coding” for me most often meant directing my attention to “initial codes that had more theoretical reach, direction, and centrality and treating them as the core of my nascent analysis” (p. 141). It also meant coding my initial codes if collectively they seemed to tell a “larger analytical story” or process I sought to describe (p. 127). I would take groups of codes that were categorically similar and file them under

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a more abstract codes I created that alerted me to themes that were emerging. As recommended by a workshop I attended on using NVivo, I often “pruned” my codes—merging, reorganizing, and renaming them—and combined coding with memo writing and running queries on hunches I had about a grouping of, or relationship between, codes. Grounded theory uses what are called “constant comparative methods,” which involve comparing data with data to find similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding queries were especially important to comparing cases I created for sugar dating and cam modeling, so I could see the distribution of different codes. At this time, I also began to produce conceptual maps of codes and how they related to sensitizing concepts as well as more analytical memos. I used “clustering” as a pre-writing technique that helped me to understand and organize my codes, categories, and the comparisons I sought to make between cam modeling and sugar dating. I used memos to raise focused codes to conceptual categories. Like Birks et al. (2008), I categorized memos as “operational, coding and analytical” (quoted in Charmaz, 2014, p. 169). I kept operational memos, in which I expounded on the research process and my decisions and actions, in a paper notebook. I used NVivo to create and store coding memos, where I forced myself to define tricky or seemingly important codes and thought about their relationship to other codes, and sometimes analytical memos, which explored concepts and overall themes. Analytical memo-writing also occurred on a manuscript software Scrivener, which I found allows for non-linear thinking and writing in chunks, both of which served me well at this stage.

**Ethical Considerations**

In considering what it means to produce ethical human subjects and internet research, I primarily drew on a history of critical scholarship that has challenged the ontological assumptions and power dynamics underlying traditional ethnographic standards, precipitating a “crisis of representation” that has had reverberating effects across social scientific fields (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Contemporary ethnographers in various fields increasingly practice under reformulated measures of methodological rigor and with particular attention to the ethics and
politics of ethnographic enquiry (though traditional standards still apply for some schools of thought and some areas of study). Two issues made salient at this time are important to consider in a study of women involved in the production of commercial sexual cultures: (1) the problem of anthropological ‘authorship’ (Moores, 1993) and (2) power dynamics between researchers and participants.

First, critical ethnography moves away from a vision of research and writing as simply a matter of an objective outsider scientifically analyzing and documenting the intricacies of a culture. Instead, ethnography is often understood as a kind of narrative, or story that includes only “partial truths,” told from the perspective of a situated, subjective researcher whose continued time in a field makes him, her, or them more intertwined in its social life. In this way, critical ethnographic approaches disrupt the “truth-seeking” mystique of method and favor postmodern conceptions of socially constructed realities. Ang (1996) describes an ethics of authorship to be “admitting that the ethnographer cannot be ‘everywhere’ but must always speak and write from ‘somewhere’” (p. 62). Researchers should think through decisions made in the research process and why, such as which “stories to tell, in which form, to whom, where and when, and with what intention” (p. 64). Likewise, Baym (2009) argues for an understanding of “truth” not as a universal, real, or discoverable entity that is somewhere out there, but as a contingent and situated reality of generating “interpretations of affairs that meet our audience’s standards for what they will accept as a basis for action” (p. 152). In other words, if ethnographers relinquish any remaining illusions about objective truth-telling, then at least the narratives we produce should be grounded in some recognizable reality and, through this kernel of recognition, be generative for others, including those who welcomed us or at least accommodated our presence.

Second, researchers have discussed the implicit power they exercise in observing and documenting others, in producing representations of their lives for academic and sometimes popular consumption. As Ang (1996) describes it, ethnography is “a political intervention in that it helps to construct the culture it seeks to describe and understand, rather than merely reflect it”
(p. 86). Thus, postmodern ethnographers do not merely see their accounts of other cultures as “partial truths,” but more accurately as “positioned truths” (Strahern in Ang, 1996). Considering issues of power and inequality in relation to ethnography has meant reexamining the position of the researcher in the field in relation to participants as well as the history of ethnography as a tool wielded by (primarily White, male) academics who used writings on “indigenous cultures” to achieve disciplinary recognition, career success, and sometimes, even, sponsored surveillance. Conducting an ethical ethnography then implies thinking of social research as “a form of respectful engagement” that “should illuminate the experiences of others in their own terms,” treating research participants and what they value fairly and empathically (Bird, 2003, p. 188).

The power of representation and the appropriation of cultures that are not our own, or even those we may call our own but use for our own purposes, continue to be ethical issues that researchers grapple with. In my study, I feel the weight of representing women whose work often puts them in the line of fire, especially in academia and the feminist conversations I aim to address. Though not always identified as part of the sex worker community by themselves or others, cam models and sugar babies are forms of erotic labor whose representations bear on how women who accept money for relating intimately are perceived and valued. I also recognize the temptation to perceive my study of cam modeling and sugar dating as a kind of third-party fetishization of sexual subculture. Many participants came into the interview with questions about my positioning. Indeed, Charmaz (2014) warns, “identity and etiquette” are important when it comes to interviewing: “How your research participants identify you influences what they will tell you. Their identifications of you draw on their readings of subtle observations as well as explicit categorizations” (p. 28). Though I do not hold insider status in either community, I do abide by a personal philosophy of “live and let live” unless causing harm, a disposition which translates academically as curiosity and open-mindedness. I attempted to convey this ethos to participants, especially those skeptical about my interests. I also attempted to convey my desire to respect what these practices and settings mean for community members.
My approach in the field included a degree of transparency with research participants interested in knowing my position on what they do, and what I might do in my free time, to the extent that I was able to remain innocuous yet relatable and human in their eyes. For instance, several interviewees asked me why I had undertaken the study, what my position was on sex work, and if I had ever cam modeled or sugar dated or considered working in the sex industry. I responded as honestly as possible that I had never worked as a sex worker and did not feel I had the right disposition to be successful at it, but could understand what drew them to either cam modeling or sugar dating and believed women had every right to engage in sex work safely and with dignity. I told them I admired what they did and empathized with their struggles as a woman who had similar experiences despite differences in background and context. While sometimes awkward, I delivered these personal disclosures with humor and light-heartedness that often prompted a shared laugh and feeling of camaraderie with interviewees. In this way, I tried to communicate a recognition that life, money, and sex are all complicated, personal negotiations with political anchors, which is precisely why I am interested in their stories. I tried to relay a “complicity” in handling life’s challenges and finding meaning within its constraints (Couldry, 2003; Marcus, 1999).

I integrated self-reflexivity where appropriate in my approach to documenting the field (i.e. in notes, journals, memos, and the actual dissertation manuscript), in moments when I experienced resonance, tension, or opposition with participants’ accounts. In other words, I do not aim to impose my own story onto accounts of the field with any frequency, but I remained sensitive to my position as an Indian-American, upper-middle-class woman and feminist researcher with affective investments in and some aversions to sexualized representations of women in media. Drawing on Gibson-Graham’s (2006) recommendations, I considered my affective stances toward what I saw and heard in the field – sexual imagery, sounds, interactions, stories, fantasies, etc. – to be important aspects of fieldwork that should not be discounted but reflected on and processed as part of this work. I believe doing so allowed me a better chance to
interrogate the social organization of my own reactions and, over time, gain an emic perspective on cam modeling and sugar dating.

Studies of gender and sexuality are particularly tricky but important areas in which to demonstrate researcher reflexivity in fieldwork and writing, as an essay by Kendall (2009) and responded to by Sunden (2009) and Campbell (2009) suggest. Reflecting on her study Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub, Kendall (2009) explains that despite not writing, or even thinking much, about her own sexuality and femininity as important to a study of masculinity in cyberspace, it was “very much a part of” her fieldwork experience – generating moments of attraction, repulsion, discomfort, insecurity, and identification – which, if included in the study, “could only have strengthened the analysis” (p. 102). She acknowledges that her affective experience, at some times more than others, inflected her analysis, but “that is nowhere represented in the text” (ibid). Kendall does not answer her own question of whether “researchers who look at sexual behavior online” should, in the spirit of leveling the researcher-subject relation, “expose their own,” but it is a question that I take seriously in this study. Campbell (2009) offers some guidance on the issue, recommending that fieldworkers consider themselves the “research instrument par excellence” and demonstrate reflexivity in how choices of, and in, a field reflect personal sexual tastes (p. 112). I tried to adhere to this recommendation by explaining my approach and its limitations, decision-making process, obstacles faced, and concessions made throughout this chapter.
CHAPTER 3

“IT’S NOT ALL ABOUT SEX”:
WHAT CAM MODELS AND SUGAR BABIES DO AND CREATE

Overview

Beginning my analysis, this chapter explores what cam models and sugar babies do and create within the mediating contexts of digital sexual entertainment and leisure industries. Though cam modeling and sugar dating bear similarities to established sex industries, particularly pornography and escorting, and are often straightforwardly discussed as newer forms of “sex work,” the cam models and sugar babies I spoke with and observed claimed, in various ways, that these practices are “not all about sex.” The insistence that they represent more than sex could have many meanings. At the very least, it suggested to me that what cam models and sugar babies do requires greater attention and understanding, and how these emerging digital industries fit into a diversified landscape of late modern sex industries requires more empirical investigation.

Drawing on cultural production approaches, this chapter addresses two central research questions: What do women do and create as cam models and sugar babies? How do digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure mediate desire, intimacy, and gender relations in late modern life?

To answer the first research question, this chapter specifically explores how women’s understandings of cam platform users and sugar daddies shape what they do and create as cam models and sugar babies. In my interviews and online observations, the male consumer emerged as a prominent figure, consistently cropping up in conversations from explicit theories women had about what he desires and needs from a cam model or sugar baby to tacit assumptions about how women should feel and behave to please his discerning tastes. Following Hall (1993), I considered women’s assumptions about male consumers critical since these conceptions seemed to shape how they perform the work of being a cam model or sugar baby and the meanings encoded into what they create (p. 92). Of course, women gleaned information directly from
individual male consumers and generated insights from these social interactions\(^1\); but as cultural producers, women also actively construct social formations known as “cam platform users” and “sugar daddies” in their appeals to tastes they imagine men have and bring to these scenes (Ang, 1996; Radway, 2000).

Sensitized to this dynamic, I argue that as cam models and sugar babies, women ritualistically perform gender to produce a distinct sensibility of being with a woman, which I call feminine presence. Women in these scenes describe themselves as satisfying men’s desires to enjoy a woman’s company, revealing culturally engrained assumptions about the natural feminine energy a woman supplies with her aesthetic and affective presence and the pleasing aura it creates for those around her. Throughout the chapter, I show how women’s production of feminine presence creates the very scenes in which sexual entertainment and leisure unfolds and supports the identities, experiences, and feelings men access within it. Focusing on the production of feminine presence draws attention to how women still essentialize gender differences despite being cognizant of its performative qualities. It also speaks to their intentionality to produce something specific within the context and for the purposes of sexual entertainment and leisure: the experience of being a man with a woman. According to women in these scenes, feminine presence is pleasurable because it allows men to enact, negotiate, and at times escape cultural constructions of masculinity that dominate their everyday lives. This chapter details how women produce a feminine presence to create both a desirable experience of masculinity and the feeling of being in a symbolic space designed for sexual entertainment and leisure, where such experiences emerge.

\(^1\) Though I did not interview cam platform users and sugar daddies to discuss their experiences and perspectives, some male voices did appear in conversations with women that I observed in online forums and blogs. This feedback from men intrigued me and also informed the analysis presented in this chapter since men provided a kind of market research for women to apply to their roles and relations.
Examining the routines, thought processes, common knowledge, and interpretations of cam models and sugar babies, I noticed a pattern in cultural qualities and impulses—a “structure of feeling”—permeating women’s production of feminine presence and the meanings it generates for sexual entertainment and leisure and male consumers (Williams, 1977). Answering the second research question, I argue that cam models and sugar babies invoke and construct a romantic sensibility that mediates gender relations, male desire, and intimacy in these scenes. Contrary to popular belief that cam modeling and sugar dating are all about sex, they are actually quite romantic cultures, as far as these women are concerned. Though not romantic in the traditional sense of love, attachment, and commitment, sugar dating and cam modeling are romantic in a philosophical sense, celebrating imaginative explorations of the self and promising transcendent experiences that stand in contrast to the rationalism of everyday life.

In this sense, cam modeling and sugar dating are much like what Illouz (1997) has termed the “romantic utopias” created by, and circulating within, advertising, film, and commercialized leisure. According to Illouz (1997), these cultural industries expanded over the course of the twentieth century and provided a new language of love and rituals of consumption to enact it that promised “temporary access to a powerful collective utopia of abundance, individualism, and creative self-fulfillment” (p. 8). This chapter builds on Illouz’s formulation of romantic utopias to include cam modeling and sugar dating as sites designed for male consumers to experience romance outside of love—in spaces for commercial sex no less—and to shed light on the utopian desires that circulate in these scenes.

As this analysis will show, cam models and sugar babies produce a feminine presence that incorporates rituals, aesthetics, and symbols of romantic utopia. Cam models and sugar babies see themselves as culturally recognized signifiers of fantasy and escape. Far from passive, their feminine presence produces an aesthetic that transports consumers to symbolic sites for sexual recreation, where hedonistic desires for sexual distraction, visual pleasure, and masculine power are unencumbered by social reality. As much as cam models and sugar babies frame
themselves as producers of an *aesthetic* feminine presence that allows men to escape what is mundane, disappointing, or frustrating about everyday life and revel in pleasurable fantasies, they also frame themselves as producers of personalized commercial sexual encounters and an *affective* feminine presence that allow men to feel connected, be authentic, and experience emotional intimacy with another person. Balancing men’s dueling desires for escape and connection, women position themselves as containers for fantasy and feeling, an aesthetic and affective holding space for men to work out their relationships to late modern masculinity, desire, and intimacy.

The ways in which women imagine their feminine presence to offer respite from life’s mundane realities and constraints illustrate how sites for sexual entertainment and leisure represent new romantic utopias, which are typically considered love’s domain. I draw parallels between Illouz’s love-oriented romantic utopias that appealed to, and shaped, middle class tastes by the end of the twentieth century and the sexual romantic utopias that cam models and sugar babies produce today to highlight a shift in sexual and cultural tastes and a changing social order. Cam models and sugar babies produce feminine presence for an imagined romantic, and arguably middle-class, male consumer, who seeks more *meaning* from sexual entertainment and leisure than simply sexual pleasure, or what a utilitarian, rational, and arguably lower-class consumer of commercial sex might want.

**Conceptual Framework**

Cam modeling and sugar dating exemplify what Bernstein (2007a) says are the defining features of “postmodern sexual commerce”: diversified and specialized sexual media and cultural experiences; blurred boundaries between intimacies associated with public and private spheres; and expectations of emotional authenticity in commercial exchanges. Given the changing meanings and contexts of commercial sexualities, scholars have noticed how spaces for sexual entertainment and leisure have become conduits to “romantic utopias” of transgressive escape made for the dominant heterosexual male market (Illouz, 1997). For instance, Frank (2002) found
that the male regulars of strip clubs in rural Southern United States enjoyed these spaces and interactions with dancers partly because of the uncomplicated experience of masculinity they promised. In the strip club atmosphere, they felt “young,” “virile,” and “attractive” (p. 271). Seen as an escape from the demands of normative sexuality, strip clubs are “a means of dealing with one of the psychic side effects of love and intimacy in traditional relationships: aggression” (Frank, 2002, p. 246). The contrast between these spaces and everyday life, Frank argues, is “very much a part of the pleasure of the sexual scene” (p. 70). As Frank argues, strip clubs represent a liminal yet bounded space – neither home nor work – where the scripts and standards imposed upon normative gender relations and sexuality are inverted at times by the sexual dominance and public nudity of female workers, but also preserved by male fantasies of embodying a hegemonic masculinity. In her ethnography of the Lion’s Den, a strip club in the northeastern United States, Price-Glynn (2010) also found the construction of masculinity to be an important theme for this site of sexual entertainment and leisure. Countering a prevailing assumption that pathologizes or criticizes men who visit strip clubs regularly, she engages with the homosocial relationships they build in these spaces as providing cultural meanings that shape their experience of masculinity.

Though distinct from other sexual scenes – for instance, those associated with romantic dating or married life – sexual entertainment/leisure spaces and workers are imbued with meanings that shape and reflect the social construction of what is allowable (or not) in other spaces and with other people. Whereas modern sexual desire is articulated to discourses of true love, passion, romance, and mutual intimacy, spaces for sexual leisure and entertainment sanction the expression of postmodern consumer-oriented sexual desire that favors personal and private explorations, pleasure and excitement, and sexual spectatorship. As a personal and sometimes secret experience, strip clubs are “transgressive and exciting,” a kind of retreat from the routines of ordinary life, utopias that organize sexual desire and intimacy in particularly enjoyable and transcendent ways. Because of the desire for escape, the venues for sexual entertainment and
leisure most often studied are those located outside the United States and/or associated with the phenomenon of sexual tourism (Cabezas, 2006; Törnqvist & Hardy, 2011; van Wijk, 2006).

I argue that a study of cam modeling and sugar dating potentially reveals new avenues through which such social spaces, situations, and relationships are created in local settings and through uses of digital media technologies. Though they resist being defined by spatial separateness, cam modeling and sugar dating represent transitional spaces between the private sphere of home and the public sphere of work much like other venues for sexual leisure such as strip clubs, peep shows, and the erotic nightlife of bars, lounges, and dance clubs where sex, consumption, and social camaraderie have typically intersected (Frank, 2002). Analogous to the physical or symbolic transitional environments created by entertainment, hospitality, and tourism industries, cam modeling and sugar dating cultures prioritize fantasy, play, and sensory pleasure in ways that feed romantic desires for excitement, escape from material realities, and self-expression. However, cam modeling and sugar dating are more mobile, privatized, and seemingly more authentic than the transitional spaces of traditional sexual entertainment and leisure because of their connection to personal leisure and domestic life. They are also potentially more difficult to separate from other intimate and social realms than sex work that takes place outside the home or everyday routine. Thus, the cultures of cam modeling and sugar dating mediate desire, intimacy, and gender relations in ways that differ from traditional cultures of commercial sex. These are differences I explore.

Aesthetics of Sexual Escape

Sugar dating and cam modeling are scenes in which women recognize they are meant to fulfill men’s desires to escape from everyday life. In both scenes, women honor motivations to escape reality, respecting the bounded spaces for fantasy they co-create with consumers. For example, Veronica told me that in sugar dating, “we have this understanding that, you know, you’re here as my release from the real world.” Sugar babies active on Tumblr reiterate Veronica’s sentiment, reminding each other that being a sugar baby means providing an “escape”
from “stressors” such as career, marriage, and parenthood that bog men down. As one sugar baby put it, “Being with a sugar baby means being with someone who can make you forget about your real everyday life.” Cam models frame their responsibilities to facilitate consumers’ desires for fantasy and escape similarly. For instance, Jessica acknowledged that despite developing relationships with some regular customers, many prefer to view her one-dimensionally as pornographic content. They consume her image without thinking about a real person behind the screen: “It's porn, right? So, people go to escape, ultimately. They don't really want to know your problems or your views on politics and things like that.” Sugar babies and cam models see themselves as serving a similar function: they take consumers to a time and place far away from their everyday lives just by appearing across from them at a dinner table or on a computer screen.

Whether men’s fantasies include sharing a decadent dinner and stimulating conversation with a sugar baby or a secret fetish with a cam model is less important to me than the underlying desire for a pleasurable experience outside the bounds of normativity and distanced from practical considerations. Serving as a means for escape and fantasy actively transports men to romantic utopias where “real life,” with its attendant social rules, is temporarily suspended. One of the most obvious ways these scenes differ from “real life” is the way in which women permit men to indulge in their desires to shamelessly consume them as aesthetic pleasures. As feminist discourses have begun to occupy more space in the popular imagination, the objectification of women is now a problem with a name. It is socially unacceptable in most social spheres to blatantly objectify women (Paasonen et al., 2021, p. 11). This emerging sociosexual regulation is especially prevalent since the popular feminist campaign known as #MeToo has put male abuse of sexual power in the workplace and dating culture under the microscope, exposing ongoing problems of sexual violence and instilling a sense of uncertainty and even backlash amongst men (Flood, 2019). While necessary and beneficial, social progress has changed the cultural milieu, which has repercussions for men and how they perform masculinity in different social spaces, especially where masculinity intersects with sexual desire, gender relations, and power.
Cam modeling and sugar dating are alternative realities that provide men with a different set of possibilities from “real life.” Cam models and sugar babies share an understanding that men who seek interaction with sugar babies and cam models do so, in no small part, to gaze at women valued for their physical appearances—to admire their beauty, bodies, and overall look. They knowingly accommodate this expectation in routine practices by which they fashion themselves as aesthetic objects that generate erotic pleasure. For example, they produce sexualized imagery meant to transport men into fantasies that they wish to indulge in. Cam models showcase their bodies and sexuality while live streaming and producing pornographic content for photo and video clip sharing platforms. Sugar babies, especially those who specialize in “online only” arrangements, also produce sexual content for paying viewers, photographing themselves in sexy lingerie and scenarios that resemble what they see in media and pornography.

Even those sugar babies who do not produce photos or videos, restricting their activities to going on in-person dates with sugar daddies to protect their privacy, recognize the aesthetic pleasure they bring men who seek to witness their beauty, youth, and sexual desirability first-hand. They are meant to be “arm candy,” as many sugar babies put it, a sweet treat for hungry eyes and paraded in public at restaurants, special events, or popular tourist destinations. Wherever they appear, be it in public restaurant or private hotel room, sugar babies shoulder expectations to appear flawless—fit, dressed well, face made up, hair done—and ready for public consumption. Chloe, a sugar baby in New York City, says, “you have to be close to perfect. You can't show up in pajamas. When I hang out with them, I would never look raggedy or come straight from work. I would go home. I always get ready.” When we spoke she was on a New York City subway, heading home from her job at a bank, preparing to do just that for a date she had later with a sugar daddy: “So, I'm going to go home and like put on makeup and look good,” she informed me. “Effortlessly good,” she clarified, “not like I tried too hard. I can tell what they want.” Like most sugar babies I talked to, Chloe recognizes what men want is to be in the company of a pretty woman—her presence boosts their moods. As Skylar divulged about the sugar daddies she dated,
they “just wanted to take a pretty girl out to dinner, go see a show. They just wanted to have someone who was like young and pretty and they could talk to them.” While Chloe and Skylar are both in their early twenties and presumably attractive, they also show men that they agree to these terms by putting in the effort to perform their youngness and prettiness to please men’s aesthetic sensibilities.

In these romantic utopias, women encourage men to feel free to derive pleasure from their eroticized bodies. To achieve a desired sensibility of hedonic indulgence, women in both scenes fashion themselves to be not only visually appealing, but also friendly and relatable, which assures their audiences that they enjoy being looked at as aesthetic objects and not as “real women” with complicated and stressful lives of their own. Women adopt a disposition characterized by positivity and playfulness, which is seen as fundamental to communicating this agreement and helping men to break free from the constraints of their everyday lives. One of my interviewees, Alexa, was in the process of opening her own cam modeling studio when we spoke, an endeavor for which she created a manual for cam models that emphasizes this duty: “Men come on to talk to you to get away from things going on in their life or to release. You are there to make their day a little brighter.” It includes instructions detailing the importance of cultivating an upbeat and uncomplicated disposition: Remember to “be cheerful, fun, and enticing,” it reads. “Do not “complain, brag, or bad talk other models” or “talk about money and bills needing to be paid.” Sugar babies are also responsible for creating a desired mood with their positive dispositions. Mavis, for instance, described sugar dating, as mostly a matter of “pretending you’re in a good mood when you’re not.” Resources created by organizations and individuals invested in these fields reinforce this expectation. In a handout created by the prominent sugar dating platform Seeking Arrangement for its 2017 Summer Baby Summit, the company reminded sugar babies to “keep [their profiles] positive, and don’t mention the troubles in your life” in order to attract sugar daddies.
Even cam models who indulge “female domination” fantasies or specialize in “bratty” or “bitchy” personae identify maintaining a buoyant mood as the bread and butter of retaining their predominantly male audiences. Popular on cam modeling platforms, female domination fantasies position women as “superior to men,” according to cam model Jessica, who specializes in this fetish. As part of a female domination show, women fulfill fantasies for men in which they demean them by engaging in acts such as “small penis humiliation,” “orgasm denial,” “sissy training,” and “jerk off instruction.” Jessica sees transformative potential in female domination fetishes. “Men are always in charge, so it’s powerful,” she told me. The inversion of gendered hierarchies implied by these fantasies would seem to remove the expectation for women to also perform positivity, a quality associated with patriarchal standards for ideal femininity, but that is not the case. Jessica also knows she is meant to “keep it sexual and sensual um, but friendly too.”

While women might tactically use female domination practices as outlets to express negative or scary emotions, they are also a prime example of how a normative gender regime is upheld even in acts that partially hold transgressive value. Female subservience is not required and is, in fact, pleasurably inverted in ritualized ways through female domination fantasies, but women know to hold real aggression and negative emotion at bay, lest they sully the playfulness of men’s fantasies and desire to escape real life and real women.

Another cam model, Blair, loses her temper with users who objectify her sometimes but, as a seasoned veteran in the cam modeling industry, she knows to return to a positive, almost robotic, disposition and works her frustration into her performance of a feisty personality:

People piss you off sometimes… I literally want to like throw my computer screen at their forehead. And then I’m like, you know what? I’m not even going to do that today. ‘How are you? Are you great?’ Like, ‘what would you like to do today?’ And I have to just be like a fucking Stepford wife and like scare them. And they’re just like, okay, this bitch is nuts! I like it. Let me pay her.

As Blair’s erratic behavior suggests, women are oftentimes conflicted about being objectified, but understand performing enjoyment to be part of the package they offer men. These performances should not veer into real aggression and negativity toward the men who seek their company. In
this way, the aesthetic feminine presence women create is formulaic, following what advice and experience deems commercially viable and relegating women into genres like “bratty” and “spoiled” or safely contained rituals for role playing “female domination.” Though progressive and seemingly more inclusive of different dispositions than sugar dating, cam models are still expected to exude a kind of feminine positivity reminiscent of highly feminized and sexualized positions.

The ways in which cam modeling and sugar dating position women as sources of sexual escape and visual pleasure is similar to women’s roles and responsibilities within other well-established sex industries such as pornography, stripping, and escorting and other feminized interactive service positions that require aesthetic labor, specifically the kind Mears and Connell call “display work,” for which “visual display of one’s own body – often sexualized – is the point of the job” (Mears, 2014, p. 1332). Though not formally recognized as display work, cam modeling and sugar dating hail women to independently adhere to implicit standards of beauty and sex appeal, producing themselves as aesthetically pleasing objects fashioned for public consumption. Like other display workers, cam models and sugar babies see themselves as responsible for producing a desired sensibility and accommodating the normative male gaze of sexual leisure and adult entertainment. The experience of escape from the constraints of normative gender relations and everyday life I have thus far described mirrors what Frank (2002) heard from male regulars of strip clubs about their enjoyment of these sexual scenes. In the strip club atmosphere, they felt able to openly appreciate women’s bodies without fearing repercussion and interact with beautiful women without fearing rejection, producing a pleasurable sense of masculine virility. This longing is also satisfied by cam models and sugar babies who agree to these terms of engagement.

In fact, many cam models and sugar babies work in multiple sex, leisure, and entertainment industries simultaneously, therefore they approach these scenes with a mindset geared to produce a feminine aesthetic that promises fun, freedom, and excitement. Training and
experience from other sex trades certainly helps, but relying on attractive women to create an aura is also not unique to sex industries. Many women who sugar date or cam model also work in what Ava, a sugar baby in Los Angeles, calls “sex adjacent” industries, those that pay women for representing the “idea” of sex or inspiring the thought, “Man, I would want to have sex with her if I could.” Ava works as a hostess at a bar that caters to private parties for businessmen and is known for employing attractive women whose presence keeps customers coming back and spending more. Ava sees asking questions like “Do they like the way you look? Do they find you sexy?” as routine and necessary to both jobs—not intrinsically problematic—because they are about “selling your sex appeal at the end of the day.” Like Ava, female interactive service workers are often hired for their physical attractiveness—for the aesthetic they produce—to set a mood or represent a brand, creating a sensibility of luxury and exclusivity or hedonistic escape, depending on a commercial entity’s needs. Entertainment, travel, and leisure industries routinely depend on feminized aesthetic and bodily labor to attract consumers and produce a desired sensibility. Cam models and sugar babies think of their roles and the aesthetic feminine presence they produce in these symbolic contexts similarly—as valued services and goods—even if they do not report to a distinct authority, institution, or space to structure this ritualized practice of gendered sexual leisure.

**Aesthetics of Power and Status**

In the spring of 2020, I connected with a sugar baby living in Philadelphia named Taylor, who had seen my ad on Craigslist and was curious about my project. Taylor is a professional model who found sugar dating an easy way to make money while in college and still receives gifts and money from former sugar daddies with whom she remains in contact despite having quit sugar dating a couple years ago. She described her ongoing connection to former sugar daddies as partly due to their “obsession” with her: “They think I'm like a god.” When I asked her why, she struggled to give me an answer, settling on, “I know they love the way I look. They think I'm super pretty. I think the fact that I give them attention makes them happy.” Taylor is no ordinary
beauty, but she is also not extraordinary. With long brown hair, big brown eyes, and a slim physique, she is certainly blessed with what White middle-class America has historically defined as “girl-next-door” good looks. But based on looks alone, it is not intuitive that she should command such worshipping attention. Most crucially, Taylor is an accredited beauty, which adds pleasurable cultural meanings to her aesthetic feminine presence. As a professional model, she is seen as having acquired a stamp of approval by industry standards that sugar daddies also use to judge her value to them.

A few years earlier, I had a chance to talk to Penny, a cam model now in her thirties who got her start on a Playboy-affiliated streaming site several years before. Like Taylor, Penny also sounded baffled when she described her immediate success to me. With long blond hair and a slim build, Penny felt pretty and confident that she would get attention when she started. But getting a stamp of approval early on as “a Playboy bunny” meant she had a built-in fanbase of men who found talking to her online as exciting and fantastical as seeing a pin-up jump off the page and into their arms (at least in the early days when streaming video and social media were still novelties): “They were just obsessed with Playboy, and they were like, ‘Oh my gosh, there's this Playboy model! I'm going to take her private.’” This proximity to Playboy-approved beauty was enough and worth paying for: “Being Playboy Live was always like, whoa, you're a Playboy Live girl? We just got more attention.” Penny is no longer a cam model for Playboy and has taken a step back from the industry in recent months. Still, like Taylor, she has a few guys she still talks to, all these years later, who have been with her from the start.

Being a formally recognized beauty in scenes of cam modeling and sugar dating is an elevated position that connotes status, which is worth something to men as much as women wield it as a form of power, or sexual capital, as I will discuss in Chapter 5. Even if Taylor does not appear on a catwalk or Penny on a magazine cover, they bear marks of legitimacy that help us recognize them as worthy of attention through a process Bourdieu (1987) calls “inter-legitimation,” a “play of cultured allusions and analogies endlessly pointing to other analogies,”
which he argues, “leads one to find 'an actress's robe or a society woman's dress beautiful... not because the cloth is beautiful but because it is the cloth painted by Moreau or described by Balzac’” (p. 53). The intertextuality of aesthetic feminine presence, the way it glistens with meanings gleaned from culture and media, creates an aura around formally recognized beauty and provokes idolatry similar to that described by Bourdieu. In other words, recognizing a legitimate beauty like Taylor or Penny is an exercise of taste. Like an exquisite painting, the rarity of which inspires a bidding war at an auction house, Taylor’s beauty feels undeniable, but its aura—what men pay to be near—is entirely culturally and historically contingent. Initiating a cyclical process of recognition and evaluation, cultural industries such as entertainment media, celebrity, and social media shape men’s tastes for beauty already deemed worthy of male attention.

Cam modeling platforms play a similar role, sifting through what can be thousands of women online at the same time and making judgments about who to feature more prominently that inform users’ tastes. For example, women who rank highly on cam platforms according to algorithms that sort the thousands of registered cam models by popularity, competition performance, and earnings gain men’s adulation easier and tend to be those who already fit hegemonic standards for beauty and sex appeal. Despite the appealing insinuation that the transgressive and even taboo sexual tastes of cam modeling platform users make normative beauty ideals null, men’s idolatry creates a vicious cycle, making it difficult for models outside of these elite circles to break through the glass ceiling that separates them from the kind of scalability and special treatment reserved for women who are attractive according to mainstream standards (their looks resemble that of porn stars, celebrities, or models). It is true: cam models of all body shapes, sizes, and colors find a modicum of success on platforms if they adjust their expectations to fit more modest goals. Doing fetish work and owning one’s niche goes a long way to making a decent living and being treated well by adoring fans regardless of a woman’s size, shape, or skin color. Still, women who gain visible recognition as fan favorites on mainstream cam platforms like MyFreeCams tend to reflect conventions of Western beauty and sex appeal:
they are typically White, slim yet voluptuous, and young. Hazel, a thirty-nine-year-old cam model who displays her alternative taste proudly with wildly colored hair and a tattoo-covered body, lamented the ease with which conventional (“vanilla”) models gained attention on platforms and money in their pockets. Jordan, a model of Middle Eastern ethnicity, also found it difficult as a “brown-skinned girl” to move up from being a mid-tier model. She makes a good living, but cannot shake her frustration over cam platform users who gravitate to women with status—because they have status—while sometimes better-looking models, in her opinion, go unnoticed and make less money.

Not simply satisfying erotic desires for visual pleasure, cam models and sugar babies produce an aesthetic feminine presence that is articulated to fantasies of masculine power and status. Because women are consumed as aesthetic objects, being in a zone of proximity to a woman with recognized beauty is like visiting or owning a special work of art; the experience promises something to its viewer: a fantasy of imaginative possibility, both an exit from daily life as much as it is deeply rooted in the structuring impulses of capital, status, and power. For men with aspiring tastes, being in the company of a woman with aesthetic status promises them temporary access to a fantasy of exclusivity that is exciting and even “extraordinary,” a romantic experience “cut off from the entanglements of and connections to everyday life” (Illouz, 1997, p. 170). In both scenes, women with aesthetic status prop up a cultivated and aspirational self-image that is achieved through “conspicuous consumption,” which includes the conspicuous consumption of women (Veblen, 1899). Through their conquest-like interactions and associations with such women, men gain a sense of social status and masculine power.

For instance, many sugar babies recognize that men want to be seen in public with them because of the connotations their aesthetic feminine presence invites. Many sugar babies claim to never have sex with sugar daddies, who women say simply want to enjoy the company of a young, pretty woman and the attention she brings him. The “company” women provide indeed includes conversation I will discuss in a later section, but the value of verbal exchanges is based
on their first fulfilling an undisputed aesthetic function—to be seen by men and in public with men. Ava, for instance, tends to accompany men to “events—business events—because they want someone pretty to show off to their business partners.” In an image-based society, status is increasingly based upon the cultivation of the “right” aesthetic, managing the “optics” of a situation to tell a desired story. Ava is aware that her youth and beauty—her performance of ideal femininity—is integral to setting a scene of hegemonic masculinity:

If we're at a party with your friends… I’m happy to kiss on your cheek and be on your arm and kind of wear whatever you think is cute. And I'll happily give your business friends or your friends or your business partners the illusion that I'm sleeping with you for your ego and for your reputation, but that's not actually going to be happening.

Highlighting the performative nature of status, Goffman (1959) states, “A status, position, a social place is not a material thing to be possessed and then displayed… [it is] something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized” (p. 75). In this way, masculine power and status is not something men have and then display by being with a sugar baby, but is actively created by women valued for their aesthetic appeal.

Cam models also bolster public displays of masculine power and status that men seek to create by their association to women prized for their beauty, which is perhaps surprising since privacy and anonymity are often regarded as sought-after benefits of internet sexual consumption. Challenging this assumption, active cam platform users engage in rituals of tipping during “public chat,” when a model is livestreaming and interacting with a group of users, which are displayed for other users to see. When a user sends a model a tip in public chat, a text appears on screen that announces to the group who gave the model a tip and its amount, which is accompanied by a sound that alerts the group a tip has been given. In other words, a tip rarely goes unnoticed. Users gain status in these domains by becoming big tippers, or “whales,” who take on a commanding presence in a particular cam model’s room by siphoning her attention with their tips and attempting to control her with their requests, and sometimes even in the broader cam modeling community by circulating as folklore (i.e. Did you see the tip so-and-so gave her? Biggest tip I’ve
ever seen!). Whales are known to flock to women who perform well on cam platforms, and women who perform well do so partly because of their appeal to whales. Masculine and feminine status are, it seems, two sides of the same coin.

In this vein, competitions created by cam platforms to rank cam models can also become displays of masculine power. One member of a camming online forum called the Miss MyFreeCams contest “more [of] a tipper competition than a camgirl competition” since the hype around big tips given to the highest-ranked models tends to generate more interest and earn more social rewards than actually winning the title. “Maybe they should rename the contest Mr MFC and give out a belt buckle like the rodeo,” this person writes. During final stretches of the Miss MyFreeCams competition, usually at the end of each month and year, members rally around models with the highest “camscores” and attempt to move their favored models up the ranks with extraordinarily large tips. While this practice demonstrates the kind of fandom, fun, and community cam modeling inspires, some users see the Miss MFC competition as a way for men to use their association to top models and control over her success in the competition to prove their own worth. An online forum contributor presumed to be male based on his comments acknowledges he cannot compete with whales for the attention of top models, who treat him differently if they are in the running for Miss MFC and on the lookout for tippers who will help them get there:

With these kind of dollars being thrown around I might end up having to find a way to block/ignore everyone in the top 20. Right now its getting that feeling of mistakenly wandering into a Rolls Royce showroom when you were looking for a pickup truck. Once you realize you don't belong, the objective becomes get out before you get thrown out.

This comment likens the rooms of women highly ranked on a cam platform (the “top 20”) to a “Rolls Royce showroom,” implying class-based barriers to accessing the promise of a high-status feminine aesthetic presence and the experience of hegemonic masculinity articulated to it. The performance of masculine power and status is most available to men who can spend more money on a cam model even in escapist spaces designated for fun, freedom and excitement. The ensuing
A forum discussion brought to light an interesting fold for men: the feeling that they were being manipulated by money-minded cam platforms to predictably engage in male competition that helps their bottom line. One contributor does not buy into this practice:

I seriously don't get why some members feel their favorite model should win Miss MFC. It's not like they're getting a cut of the tokens they spent back if she wins. Unless the member is her real life husband, he ain't gonna see any benefit to the model winning or not. It's just stupid.

Another defends his more modest tipping practices, seeing the practice as personally meaningful:

I am not sure that the average more experienced member really falls for the hype. Some of us may take our little moment of moderate spending glory with some of these extraordinary women, knowing full well our contribution is minimal. I don't think it devalues it, and can sometimes enhance it. So your argument, as much as it sounds good that it is bad for business, I disagree with: overspending on top models is usually a lot of fun.... they really are worth it most times.

Male contributors to an online forum meant for cam models are a particular sect of users that perform their own masculinity by critiquing these blatant and, ultimately, pointless exercises of masculine power and status or validating their own modest attempts. Their comments are both revealing and a kind of posturing that signals to women on the forum how even though they may not be able or willing to tip big, they still deserve access to the aesthetic feminine presence they desire.

**Personalizing the Commercial Sexual Encounter**

On a Tuesday morning in late July, I am nearly twenty minutes into one of my hour-long observations of a cam platform and find myself writing down the word *awkward* in my journal. Eyes glued to the screen, I watch—cringing at my researcher’s instinct and fascination—as a cam model struggles to get her room engaged and tipping during a public chat session. Her mood shifts from playful to petulant as time wears on and things get, well, awkward. “Come on, guys, don’t you want to have some fun?” she quips. Her words beckon the group to participate and contribute more, but her face has clouded over with a halting expression. No one makes a move. She’s absentmindedly biting her lip now and adjusting her bra to reveal more cleavage. “I want to get us to goal. Who’s with me? Anyone?” I want to help her out, but I have made a commitment.
to my institutional review board to silently observe cam platforms so as to limit any potential
disruption my presence might cause. Finally, thankfully, someone comes to the rescue, offering a
modest five token tip, and we all (I imagine) breathe a sigh of relief. Now that someone has
broken the ice, there is a sense the tide has turned for this cam model and a friendly vibe returns.
But this would not be the last time I found myself scribbling down the word “awkward” while
conducting this research.

As I accumulated more interviews with sugar babies, I noted that women repeatedly
referred to their conversations with men about money—specifically how much money they
wanted to receive as part of the “arrangement”—as “awkward.” Sugar babies can get paid for
their time and services in a variety of ways. Most commonly, they negotiate a “pay-per-meet”
rate, a per-date fee they expect to receive at the end of each date, or a fixed-rate “allowance” that
is not dependent on the number of dates they go on and they expect to be deposited into their
bank account or handed to them at the end of a month. Negotiating these decisions with a sugar
daddy is par for the course and can be done via private messaging before the two even meet in-
person, but often occurs on or after the first date. Either way, sugar babies described asking for
what they wanted and thought they were worth as “awkward” and sometimes
disappointing if
they had put in time, energy, and money to meet up with a sugar daddy and ended up never
getting paid because it never led to an arrangement. Those who had better experiences, like
Cassandra, still described money as “the hardest thing to talk about,” because “you can't really
put a price on someone.” She described herself as “dirt cheap,” accepting two hundred dollars per
meet with a sugar daddy even though her first thought after negotiating this amount was, “I want
more.” In the end, she felt at peace with the compromise, saying “I really don’t care. I generally
just enjoy being around [him], so I would do it for free… I generally just do this because of the
friendship that I can create with them, you know? Cause I don't get to go out very much.”
Because she already had a day job, or perhaps because she disliked asking for money, or perhaps
because she just wanted friends, Cassandra fumbled the money talk and arrived at less compensation than she desired.

Illustrated by these vignettes is an important irony: men routinely spend their money on cam models and sugar babies to access highly valued forms of aesthetic feminine presence that connote masculine power and status but requesting payment from them for services provided is still a delicate task routinely avoided or awkwardly handled by sugar babies and cam models.\(^2\) Despite being ensconced in many of the same symbolic systems that shape the social and cultural meanings of aesthetic feminine presence in similar industries, men seem to expect sugar babies and cam models to display a different disposition toward money and the consumer than other display professionals. This expectation stems from an important difference: Unlike sex industries they resemble and even intersect with such as pornography and stripping, in the case of cam modeling, or escorting and prostitution, in the case of sugar dating, cam modeling and sugar dating have emerged online as social media marketplaces where ordinary women connect with ordinary men. Because men consider women to be “amateurs” who sell sexual services as a hobby or side gig, the notion that they are not looking for the same experience they get from a “professional” who is accustomed to acting out a preformed script and routine sex acts for a paycheck—whether that is as a porn star or escort—circulates as common knowledge in both cam modeling\(^3\) and sugar dating. They seem to expect women are as invested in making friends as they are in making money.

\(^2\) The one exception being private sessions for which cam models earn pay-per-minute fees. Getting users to commit to these more expensive services is sometimes a challenge, but they can expect and sometimes set their own standard rates ahead of time.

\(^3\) My argument about the appeal of the amateur in cam modeling is limited to US models. Cam modeling is a global industry with many different styles of relating. International models in Eastern Europe or South America, for instance, tend not to speak English as a first language and work from professional studios. This study is limited to the US, and US cam models are expected to bring a more amateur effect, like sugar babies, than international cam models seem to do.
Performing an amateur identity, even or especially when it does not represent a woman’s reality, is part of what cam models and sugar babies produce for consumers. Doing so heightens experiences of these sexual scenes as romantic utopias where men seek to form organic bonds with women that transcend the limits of the market and commercial sexual exchange whilst remaining safely contained within a commercial sexual encounter. Men still expect cam models and sugar babies to meet professional standards for performing aesthetic and emotional labor that mirror other forms of sex work, and feminized service work in general (Mears, 2014; Hochschild, 1983), but they also seek to create genuine social ties from these economic interactions. Thus, while cam models and sugar babies produce an aesthetic feminine presence that paves pathways for men to experience a desirable sense of escape much like workers in other sex, leisure, and entertainment industries, they also perform an amateur identity to create a desirable affective feminine presence that personalizes the commercial sexual encounter. This section presents three situations in which this process unfolds: (1) gendered rituals of giving and gratitude (2) the production of customized experiences and (3) gendered rituals of being emotionally present.

**Giving and Gratitude**

Performing affect in gendered rituals involving the giving and receiving of money and gifts is an important way cam models and sugar babies personalize the commercial sexual encounter. Payment for services rendered is not guaranteed in these casual work contexts, therefore women must carefully consider how men prefer to hand over their money. Women in both scenes infer from experience and advice that men strongly prefer to pay for their company in ways that feel less transactional than a traditional commercial sexual encounter. One way they obscure the transaction is by engaging in rituals and adopting euphemistic language that reframes the exchange of money as “helping” a woman out, which plays into men’s desires for women to see them as having altruistic intentions. Women in these scenes identify a pattern of men who have “white knight syndrome,” a desire to be regarded as powerful and heroic by a suffering woman. Ophelia, who sugar dated before she started camming in the spring of 2019, sees
similarities in how cam platform users and sugar daddies approach her, continually trying to find ways to help her afford and improve her lifestyle:

A lot of my regulars in a way have sugar daddy like tendencies because they don't just tip for, you know, your boobs or your ass or whatever, offline they'll message me and be like, ‘Hey, do you need anything? Do you need groceries? Do you need your nails done? Here you go.’

Wanting to help a woman out with groceries or getting her nails done suggests men’s interests go not only beyond satisfying their sexual desire in these spaces, but also paying for a service. They seemingly prefer to personalize this exchange in a way that highlights the impact they have in an individual woman’s life, suggesting these scenes cultivate a romantic narrative around men’s sexual consumption.

While women acknowledge men’s desires to build and communicate a genuine social tie through these monetary gestures, they also know they are not to be “too real” with their needs or come across as demanding. Unlike women encountered in “real life,” both sugar babies and cam models are paid to not have concerns of their own beyond those a man can solve. One sugar baby blogger articulates this point well:

You aren’t allowed to have problems. Outside of gently suggesting that you don’t have money for rent or whatever, you don’t have problems. You don’t have friend drama. You don’t have coworkers you hate. You don’t have anxiety. You can only have a ‘problem’ every once in a while and that problem better damn well be able to be fixed with money. He can fix money-based problems without batting an eye but your emotional shit needs to be checked at the door. (Note: When you have been with an SD for a substantial amount of time you can slowly share more of your non-money problems but you have to gauge how much interest he truly has in them to *keep him from thinking of you as another wife-type* [emphasis added].)

Another sugar baby blogger reiterates this notion that women’s affective presence should not resemble that of a “wife” figure:

Time with your SD should be stress-free and carefree. Your SD probably has a lot of stressors in his life (work, kids, wife), and he looks to you to be his “escape.” I remember one of the last times I hung out with Red that he was visibly disappointed that he had to leave me early to go run an errand his wife requested. Being with a sugar baby means being with someone who can make you forget about your real everyday life. Do your best to be positive, happy, and funny when you’re with your SD. He has enough drama in his real life. I’ve never gotten visibly angry with my SD because he’s said before how his
wife can be a bitch and has anger issues. *The last thing you want to do is remind him of his wife* [emphasis added].

Still a safely contained commercial sexual encounter, sugar dating provides a pleasurable workaround for men to feel needed and valued without the institutional constraints of family and marriage. If men struggle with a sense that what they do or make is not enough, men can escape these realities and access a feeling of meaning and purpose by giving to a woman who they presume needs it. Because women do not have expectations (or coach each other to not have them because, as amateurs, they are not supposed to), men’s gifts and money come as a welcome surprise and earn them a more genuine reaction of gratitude. For instance, Ciara, a twenty-six-year-old sugar baby living in Miami, recounted a time when a sugar daddy offered to buy her a new phone when hers broke:

> At the time my phone was out of commission, and I was just texting him from an app and he was like, ‘you need another phone.’ So he sent me money to get another phone, and I went to go get another phone, and he was like, ‘I do not want you to go get a Galaxy. I want you to get an Apple. No matter the cost, I will send it to you.’ I was like, ‘Okay.’ I wasn't used to that. I woke up and there was $300 sitting in my account. At first I was like, ‘What's this? Was this a mistake? Did you mean to send this?’ And he was like, ‘I sent it to you on purpose. Go get your phone.’ I said, ‘Okay, you don't have to tell me twice.’ So I went to get the phone.

Ciara got her phone and was admittedly surprised at his insistence to pay for it. She was not accustomed to such treatment by men she met in the “vanilla” dating scene. While sending $300 to a virtual stranger is no small act, the lack of context in the relationship they developed (they talked on the phone and never met in person) is worth acknowledging. Anything this sugar daddy did for Ciara seemed generous, thoughtful, and kind. Kacy relayed a similar experience:

> The guy that I met that was back in Germany, he just said he was literally looking for a conversation. He also enjoys making a woman smile. Like some guys literally like that, just giving you money. The guy that I'm in a regular relationship with—a fake relationship with—he'll do little things just to make me happy and it's like, hey, you know, you didn't really have to give me money. I didn't necessarily need it, but some people really like doing that.

Ciara and Kacy had no expectations for the relationships they developed with sugar daddies, so gestures like sending them unsolicited gifts were not indicative of a history between them or
expectations for the future. They were simply gifts for these women to enjoy and the men sending them could immediately receive gratitude for.

Sometimes women play into a gendered performance in which they adopt a persona of a “damsel in distress” who needs a man to help them, which allows men to perform the role of “savior” in these safe and contained settings. Those that claim more success in these scenes also adopt a perspective that supports a romantic narrative and builds an altruistic ethos around their own acceptance of payment for services rendered, framing their requests for money and resources as helping men satisfy an underlying desire to feel “wanted and needed.” Chloe, a twenty-one-year-old sugar baby in New York City, articulates this perspective:

I believe a lot of men truly just want to feel like they’re helping someone. They’re at work all day. They're in their masculine energy…but at the end day they really just want like a female in their life so that they could feel wanted and needed.

As a college student with great ambitions, Chloe has benefited personally and professionally by networking with various sugar daddies, which I discuss further in Chapter 5, but she also sees herself as allowing men to feel important, resourceful, and needed in a very specific way. She sees them as wanting to be mentors, who enjoy having their brains picked by a young, beautiful woman with aspirations and contained expectations for the relationship:

All they do is work. They want to just feel like, okay, I can help a girl. But at the same time they travel often, they don't have time for drama. They don't really want like a 35-year-old woman that wants a family and kids because honestly they can't give it to them. So I think for them, if someone like me that's 21, in college, looking to build their career and their future, it's just perfect. It's fun. It's stress-free. I try not to cause them any stress.

As her comment illustrates, Chloe exhibits awareness that, as a young woman with fewer expectations and simpler needs than an older woman at another stage of life, she is able to provide men with a satisfying sense of accomplishment and impact. While they may not feel capable of embodying a provider role to a woman looking to settle down and start a family, they can experience the feeling of taking care of a woman in a safe and contained context of the personalized commercial exchange that sugar dating creates. Chloe, like many women in these scenes, operates under the assumption that men want to feel appreciated and achieving this goal is
easier when their financial contributions and social connections make a significant difference in an emerging adult woman’s life.

Cam models and sugar babies indulge in men’s longing to perform aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are at odds with, and arguably destabilized by, the influence of feminism on normative gender relations. Some privately mock these men for holding onto an outdated view of women that contradicts contemporary discourses of female empowerment and autonomy but learn to over-dramatize feelings of gratitude to accommodate men’s desires. When a cam model receives a tip, a ritual of giving thanks ensues, during which she will enthusiastically acknowledge the tip with a bright smile, making sure to address the user personally by their handle. Of course, women are thankful for the financial and other form of assistance men provide them. However, these interactions are also quite performative. Regardless of their interpretations of men’s motives, women often perform the role of “damsel in distress” to grant men a manageable set of feeling rules. By simply paying for a service, men are able to satisfy desires to feel they are meeting a woman’s needs—and they are on some level because women’s needs are simplified by the commercial exchange. But the visibility of women’s pleasure is often considered a fundamental part of the exchange. The performativity of gender in rituals of giving and gratitude is an affective experience some men are willing to pay for.

Still, some feel unable to perform the gratitude they know men seek from these gendered rituals and do not buy into a romantic narrative that they have altruistic intentions. For instance, Skylar, a sugar baby in New York City, felt uncomfortable when a sugar daddy began to give her twenty dollar bills randomly throughout the course of their date. The excessiveness of his ostensible generosity seemed almost degrading to her—or, more precisely, that he wanted to degrade her by throwing money her way for no reason. She remembers thinking, “how do I respond to this? How does he want me to respond to this?” She knew she should act a certain way, perhaps “wink at him or blush,” as part of an unstated ritual, but she could not bring herself to play this part. She described the whole ordeal as “awkward” because she is not the kind of
woman who can be “super flirty” or “put on this really cute girl face” and “call them daddy.” She ended up thanking him the best she could and keeping the money. She suspects degrading her may have been his intention and a feminist interpretation of this encounter, which she cares about, but help is help: “That might be something he got off on, degrading me,” she acknowledged, “but I felt like this is just a means for me to make money right now. I don't know. This guy, he's helping me buy groceries. I'm okay with this.” Skylar may not have produced the flirty and deferential gender performance she thought this man sought—based on her ideas about sugar daddies and what they want—but perhaps just seeing her authentic reaction to receiving an onslaught of money was what this sugar daddy wanted from the experience.

**Customized Experiences**

The desire for authenticity from sexual display workers may be surprising given simultaneous desires to use women’s aesthetic feminine presence to escape into a fantasy. However, this juxtaposition of idealized aesthetics and realistic affect is precisely what makes these scenes pleasurable. Cultivating “friendships” with cam platform users and sugar daddies and bringing “personality” into what is produced creates an authentic sensibility and product. Letting men think these relationships are friendships, as opposed to consumer interactions, is an aspect of this work that promises men cam models and sugar babies will stay flexible and responsive to what men want from these personalized sexual encounters. Connected to the shift in postmodern consumerism from mass production to mass customization, the personalized commercial sexual encounter cam models and sugar babies provide is tailored not only to an individual man’s needs and desires, but also a woman’s personality—her own capacities, style, and disposition. The customized experiences of sexual escape and connection women produce allow for the creation of romantic utopias in which sexual fun is co-created, and individual and increasingly specialized sexual tastes are expressed and celebrated.

For instance, the culture of cam modeling nourishes the exploration of niche sexual tastes and fetishes amongst groups of real people, who create moments of fun, freedom, and excitement.
together, in virtual “rooms” manned by a cam model who produces a vibe with her personality, and in private shows where otherwise unspoken fantasies come to life. Cam models understand from experience and peer advice that platform users expect a certain amount of novelty and interactivity in the shows cam models produce. Those who work on “freemium” platforms that draw larger crowds find ways to increase engagement by personalizing these services with games, competitions, giveaways, and fan club communities. Cam models discuss the importance of “having personality,” supplementing their looks, or aesthetic value, with sophisticated social skills and a distinct identity. They learn to integrate aspects of who they are as individuals, what makes them unique, into what they do to achieve a desirable sense of authenticity. Articulating this point, Birdie said:

You have to have a personality. You have to know what you like. You can’t just go in there and be like, ‘Let me show my pussy and make a lot of money,’ because that’s not how it works. Even if you’re pretty and you show your pussy, you’re not going to make a lot of money. That’s not how it works.

Similarly, Ophelia initially expected she would need to repress her true self and adopt a demeanor that fit the “sexy” and “feminine” mold she imagined cam models embodied:

I used to get in my way a lot of the time. I’d be like, ‘I don’t think people want to hear me be silly because you gotta be sexy. You have to be cute.’

She soon discovered that “it’s not always about that. It’s more about showing your personality.”

Though still aware she is a source of pornographic content the value of which hinges on her aesthetic appeal, she highlights her relatability these days and builds friendships with fans:

I goof around with my room. I don’t take myself too serious. We pick on each other, and it’s just a big old friend group. I love it. It’s just been fun to loosen up and let me be me.

Both Ophelia and Birdie illustrate how these romantic utopias are designed to produce pleasurable tension between the structure of “sexiness” as a recognizable genre of feminine aesthetic objects and the agency of taking risks and stepping outside of this commercial mold by being spontaneous, causal, and “authentic.” Cam models learn to reveal their “true selves” which are not necessarily out of the box enough to alienate or challenge users, but are rather a
compilation of eccentricities that are socially stimulating. For example, Josie is a Mexican-American cam model I interviewed who incorporates her ethnic identity into her cam persona, dancing and singing along to Spanish music as she interacts with cam platform users. “They really enjoy that,” she told me. Alternatively, Cora is an easygoing “pothead” who plays video games while on cam and connects with users who also enjoy these forms of leisure. Showcasing a distinct personality helps cam models to stand out, but also fit into a niche and find points of connection with cam platform users based on shared interests and tastes.

Built upon the peer-to-peer culture and community of cam platforms, cam modeling also offers consumers the prospect of shaping the sexual culture an adult performer produces. Describing the appeal of mass customization undergirding camming’s growing popularity, one cam model summarizes it as “a great blend of amateur, authentic, and curated sexuality” that “has evolved the idea of porn performances.” In “privates”—one-on-one cam sessions with the possibility of two-way video so models can also see the client—and “customs”—videos and/or photos they create for a specific client—consumers design scenarios and narratives that appeal to them, allowing them to be the director. Many consumers relish the opportunity to play director and will provide a cam model with notes, scripts, and more to ensure the show or product meets their specific sexual tastes, while others have simpler, or “vanilla” (i.e. mainstream), tastes that do not take much creativity or effort to please. Leslie joked about the divergent tastes of these two very different kinds of consumers she works to satisfy:

Many of them have a whole scenario, and they will write you on the website and be like, ‘This is what I'm thinking,’ and there'll be like five paragraphs. It's like Dostoyevsky! They want you to do this. They want you to have a white robe... roll around in lettuce leaves... They have very detailed descriptions of what you're supposed to be doing and you have to adhere to it, you know? And then there's the ones who are just like, ‘Can I just watch you play with your boobs?’

The very act of commissioning sexual content customized to their needs and desires is appealing to many consumers, who derive pleasure from seeing their internal fantasy worlds animated in
sometimes creative ways by a cam model. Penny told me about the spectrum of requests she gets in private shows:

They'll hit the button and I go in and I'm like, ‘So what's your fantasy?’ And they'll tell me and some of them, like I said, just want to talk and some of them are into certain fetishes like, jerk off instructions, or some guys want to have a cum countdowns, and some guys want to be told to eat their own cum, and some guys just have like all these specifications. So it's actually very rare that I—this is me personally—I actually end up using a toy on myself because these guys get so worked up in what I'm saying, that that appeals to them more.

As Penny mentions, sometimes her aesthetic presence is not the source of sexual excitement, it is hearing her say *their words* and act out *their fantasies*, the affective presence of a real woman animating their inner worlds and engaging in personalized sexual interaction. Alexa reiterated this point, emphasizing the titillation of “talking dirty” and saying specific phrases a consumer wants to hear:

A number one is just like dirty talk. Just like, "talk dirty to me" or they all have certain sayings they like. Sometimes a lot of them want you to call yourself a dirty whore or you know, talk about them being deep inside you, it's just all different types.

Sometimes, all consumers want is to hear their own names and interact one-on-one with a cam model, as Alexa notes in the manual created for the studio she is opening:

Make sure while playing that you look into the camera and are interacting vocally with the member… If they gave you their name at the beginning, a good way to personalize the private is to moan their name.

Alexa instructs models to find ways to personalize private shows, but also to respond to requests (“You want to always make sure you read what they say because they could request certain positions or toys”) and be an active participant (“I also always think it is good to switch positions about every minute or two to keep it interesting and exciting”). She has satisfied clients to prove these techniques work and, as she told me in our interview, also finds doing privates enjoyable and a fun challenge:

Everybody's different. That's kind of why camming's fun and different and interesting cause it's never really the same. Like, you kind of have a routine, but every person likes something different. It's learning what that person likes and just trying to accommodate that as much as you can.
Because of the interactive quality of shows, privates are a particularly enticing option for those interested in role playing with a cam model. Alexa specializes in role playing—incest and rape fantasies were not foreign territory for her—and walked me through a typical role-playing session:

Usually they’ll say what they like, and I’ll ask a lot of questions before we go, so I can understand what they want, because a lot of role play people, they're very specific on their fantasy. So, if they're in a role play, you want to know exactly what they want. Sometimes they want you to wear clothes that maybe to make you look more like a little girl. I've had some pigtails on. I've sometimes been asked to make my voice higher, which it's pretty high already, but talk like a little girl. It's all different… Just follow their directions as much as you can and sometimes you want to try to play along. If you've got stuff to say on your own, a lot of people like that. A lot of role players like that they don't have to think of everything or tell you exactly what to say. So, you just feed off what they're saying, and think of stuff on your own, and try to make it as good as you can.

In the next chapter I address the emotional labor of the kind of fetish work Alexa performs, but for now it is important to recognize her disposition toward the consumer—receptive, non-judgmental, creative. Seasoned in this line of work, she knows this disposition is instrumental in creating the romantic feeling of acceptance and freedom that men are looking for from a cam model. From its collaborative production to personalized products, cam modeling offers people adult content that is qualitatively different from an experience of consuming mass-produced pornography. These personalized rituals of sexual exploration create a transgressive and liminal space for consumers to pleasure in the expression of hidden and sometimes shamed desires and exert the self in ways that feels powerful and authentically connected to another, even when it is a fantasy made for commercial purposes.

Blurring romantic dating with the provision of sexual services, sugar dating also personalizes the commercial sexual encounter and provides men customized experiences. First, the romantic narrative frames used to distinguish sugar dating from sex work suggest sugar babies offer the excitement of a love affair without its emotional baggage. Consciously or not, women articulate differences they perceive in what sugar babies and sex workers do and create that romanticizes the work of personalized sexual cultural production. Sugar babies, they argue, create
seductive and pleasurable fantasies that inspire desire reminiscent of a passionate romance. One sugar baby writes: “Sugar daddies are paying to be enchanted… Any woman can fuck him for the right price. Your job is to make him fall in love every time he sees you.” In contrast to escorts or prostitutes, this sugar baby argues, a sugar baby is meant to “bring something to his life that he can’t buy.” Another sugar baby blogger reiterates this distinction from other sexual services:

I don’t sell my body for money. I sell my time, companionship, wit, beauty, intelligence, conversational skills, hand holding assets, shoulder to cry on capabilities, nicest lingerie, sweetest perfume, sassiest smile, wrinkle-in-the-nose-laughter. I retain full ownership of my body no matter how much money is in my hand.

Rather than shed light on what sugar babies actually do, these comments indicate an agreement that sugar babies should offer sugar daddies a personalized experience of sexual fantasy and escape that is more holistic or authentic than services offered in spaces for escorting and prostitution. These rhetorical moves to resist slippage between sugar dating and sex work are based in “whorearchical” biases that pit women against each other, which I discuss in Chapter 6, but they also carve out sugar dating as a symbolic space for romantic utopias that facilitate men’s desires for genuine connection and a customized experience tailored to the individual.

Unlike other sexual services, sugar babies are invested in the idea that they should get to know sugar daddies beyond a strictly sexual transaction and find a compatible match with a sugar daddy based on shared hobbies, interests, and tastes—cultural and sexual. Sugar babies set up profiles on platforms like SeekingArrangement that communicate a distinct, but recognizable and attractive, personality. They highlight their identities as students or budding careerwomen, interests men might find appealing, and disposition toward dating that comes across as casual, open, and fun-loving. Men might be attracted to a sugar baby based on her visual appeal and promise of sexual release like an escort or prostitute, but the best sugar babies bring more flavor to this recipe by integrating more personalized details about themselves and interest in what a sugar daddy has to offer. A sugar baby blogger offers a helpful reminder: “Never forget that this isn’t about sex, and it’s not about love either… it is about freedom and openness and connection.
and feeling desired and their masculinity.” Being able to offer personalized interaction that accommodates these elusive needs is a skill sugar babies proudly claim as necessary and hold up as evidence that men are not just looking for run-of-the-mill sex with a professional. Ava claims, “the most successful sugar babies are ones that can hold a conversation and can actually genuinely show interest in their sugar daddies beyond the money they're making.” In fact, relying on physical traits alone or showing too much interest in money is considered a sign of naïveté or arrogance of newcomers entering this field due to heightened media coverage and resulting public misconceptions of these practices as a clear sexual contract. Women with more experience regarded this attitude as not only misinformed, but also counter-productive because it makes women seem “entitled” and inaccessible, both of which can be turn offs to men willing to pay to look at and interact with a sugar baby.

**Emotional Presence**

Cam models and sugar babies also create an authentic sensibility through gendered rituals of spending time with men without an overly apparent agenda such as hanging out, passing the time, actively listening, engaging in small talk. Being, or at least appearing to be, emotionally present in these interactions is a necessary disposition to being considered authentic. By engaging with men in performances of low-stakes flirtation and erotic exchange that are not confined by a romantic subtext of courtship and committed love, but are also not overtly transactional, women demonstrate their willingness to be emotionally present, to spend time with men with “no strings attached.” They have clear yet contained agendas that men agree to and can fulfill if they have access to money. At the same time, they appear “disinterested” in money, or at least less interested than women imagine a traditional professional sex worker would be, giving off the impression that they perform these roles for their social benefits as much as the promise of economic returns. Cam platform visitors are typically aware that money guides cam models’ actions, but they still seem to respond to cam models that put in the effort to produce an affective feminine presence that personalizes the commercial sexual encounter. Like television viewers,
they suspend disbelief in what women produce for their sake and for money in their search for authentic connection from these interactions. This search for authentic connection by spending unstructured time together echoes the sense of “sacred atemporality” Illouz describes of advertising’s romantic utopias, where a “narrative of progress” and the profane march of time associated with both capitalist production and social reproduction halts, where “intimacy and consumption” reign supreme (p. 95). Sugar daddies expect greater levels of authenticity from sugar babies, favoring women who produce a sense of mutuality from these one-on-one exchanges and intensifying demands for emotional presence compared to cam modeling.

For instance, cam models on freemium platforms like MyFreeCams routinely “hang out” and chat with users without a clear purpose. While cam modeling is overtly a sexual service, consumers seem drawn to cam models for emotional and social comforts too. A cam model writes that some of her tips come from “being sexual and flashing the titties,” but “most of them come from interacting with members.” In my observations of MyFreeCams, I was repeatedly struck by the amount of talking and surprising lack of action. Flipping between cam models’ rooms at random, as I sometimes did, I would find many cam models sitting around, making small talk about popular culture, music selections, and hobbies, among other neutral topics, promoting their tags, and responding to tips. Casual banter seemed to be women’s default setting in between flurries of sexual favors, after enough tips have come in, and occasionally enticing users to start a pay-per-minute show by flashing a body part or playing with themselves. At first I found this attention to minutiae and performed banter boring and the disconnected conversation ensuing between text comments in public chat and women’s delayed replies on video unsatisfying. Who really cares to hear someone clicking away responses to private messages on their keyboard while we wait, patiently, for something—anything—to happen? But the more I returned, I began to feel soothed by the warm familiarity of a cam model’s demeanor. And I started to see how the women who seemed the most professional were the ones who created a relaxed yet exciting atmosphere, which they achieved by neither pushing an agenda too hard like getting to “goal”—a certain
amount of tips that lead to a sexual payoff listed on a prefix menu she created—nor forgetting the sexual provocation that boosts their room counts.

Like cam models, sugar babies also expect to spend extended, unstructured time with sugar daddies, which provides opportunities for moments of sexual connection to emerge organically, unconstrained by the transactional logic dictating how relationships with professional escorts or prostitutes might be allowed to develop. Women frequently use the term “companionship” to make distinctions between what they do from escorting and prostitution. Some sugar babies, like Mavis, claim these distinctions are simply rhetorical strategies women use to cling to an amateur identity and avoid being seen as a sex worker: “It is work, and you are selling sex, however you say you’re doing it. Whichever, whatever your parameters are, that’s what it is.” Still several others were adamant they did not have sex with sugar daddies. They also emphasized the continued nature of the relationship, which differs from the one-off encounters they perceive to be an escort’s job: “It's companionship and connection,” Ava explained, “as opposed to just like, ‘Okay, I want to like take you to this event because I need a date’ kind of thing.” Ava said maintaining ongoing, but unobtrusive, communication was necessary because “the sugar daddies that are really worth spending your time with… they really appreciate that because that's what they're looking for. They're not looking for a glorified escort.”

Ava clarified she has “nothing against escorting,” but the caliber of men she sought “just want companionship and attention. They're not looking for sex.” Ava’s claims that men are not interested in sex, echoed by other sugar babies I interviewed, is debatable, but the insistence that men want something more from sugar babies reveals the romantic underpinnings of these casualized services. It is possible (and likely) that men do want sex from sugar babies, but play along with a charade that they do not because sugar babies represent an exciting challenge: as amateurs and dating partners, women do not guarantee sex even if they receive money, a stance a professional escort is less likely to take; yearning for an authentic romantic experience, though
not a relationship with “baggage,” these men might still prefer the personalized meaning of earning a beautiful woman’s consent.

Sugar babies, more so than cam models, feel pressure to create a commercial sexual encounter that feels mutual. In recent years, there has been a noticeable rise in consumer demand for full-service sex workers to offer “girlfriend experiences,” services that include acts like kissing, cuddling, hugging, and conversation as part of the sexual exchange, inducing a sense of emotional intimacy. Sugar babies provide “girlfriend experiences” similar to escorts and full-service sex workers, but their investment in maintaining an amateur status makes them better suited to meet men’s desires for the sexual and emotional intimacy to be mutually enjoyed. For instance, sugar baby Hailey repeatedly fielded questions and encountered confusion with sugar daddies who sought to confirm her feelings for them. She told me about one sugar daddy she dated who assumed her feelings were real, and a second man she dated would ask her, “do you really like spending time with me?” Sabrina, a 19-year-old sugar baby living in Atlanta, had a similar experience when it came to sugar dating:

You have to act like you genuinely care about these men and act like they're special to you and that they're meaningful to your life because they like that. It's like an acting job... because I wouldn't go around saying like, ‘Yeah, I have a boyfriend. His name is Jason, and he's 56 years old,’ you know?

Another sugar baby, Skylar, elaborated on men’s desires to not only express their own desire for a woman but to also experience being desired and found desirable:

Essentially I think what I've kind of picked up is that there's a teenage boy inside of all of these men and they just want to feel desired again. They just want to feel wanted by a beautiful person.

This point reflects Frank’s findings about strip club regulars: that the desire to look is coupled with the pleasure of being the recipient of an attractive woman’s gaze as well. While veracity of underlying feelings is not necessary and even discouraged by sugar daddies, being eager and willing to present an experience of mutual enjoyment is what seems to matter most to them. A sugar daddy’s contribution to a sugar dating blog corroborates women’s assessments of what men
are looking for in these exchanges, stating a sugar baby should be prepared to offer “the whole shabang, conversation, going out with you, sex, listener, everything your woman would do.” This emphasis on mutuality and authenticity is likely more than what men expect from traditional forms of professional sex work or cam modeling and takes a different kind of emotional labor, which I discuss in the next chapter.

Sugar babies who do not, or would prefer not to, have sex with men say they offer them their “time and attention,” demonstrating a willingness to be a flexible, flirtatious, and free-spirited conversation partner. I heard stories from sugar babies about giving sugar daddies their undivided attention, listening to their stories, and laughing at their jokes, with the intended effect being to convey the impression that they were completely present and enjoying these men. For instance, Ava met up with a rotating list of sugar daddies four to six times per month, mainly for dinners and business events. At these engagements, she says she is expected “to just be there while they talk about their stuff and laugh at their jokes when it’s time.” Skylar described a sugar daddy-type relationship she formed with a man who regularly visits her at her job as a club dancer. She will do private dances for him in a backroom, which will end up being:

A lot of like sitting around and talking for a really long time. He always insists on buying me a drink. He just wants to like sit and hold my hand. He just wants to like put his arm around me and we just basically sit there for a great deal of time and just kind of hang out. And he always gives me way more than I would even ask for. He's really generous with compensating me for my time.

Like Ava and Skylar, many sugar babies I interviewed consistently referred to active listening as a fundamental part of the ritual of spending unstructured time with a sugar daddy as it was assumed to be an attractive female quality that helped to bolster the male ego—an implicit yet understood goal of these interactions. Mavis, for example, told me she felt “like they all just want like a pretty therapist.” After just a few dates with sugar daddies, she began to see a pattern that helped her develop something like a script to get through dates that otherwise felt agonizing and keep sugar daddies interested. She recycled lines on dates with sugar daddies such as "Yeah, you're right. I never thought of it that way,” and, “You're right! They shouldn't have done that to
you!” Summer also reported that she felt like she was “just being talked at” and expected to nod along, peppering in one-liners that communicated active listening, empathy, and admiration. She offered me a few examples:

Like, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’ Like, ‘Your divorce was so rough.’ Like, ‘Wow! How have you traveled to so many different countries?’ Like, ‘Wow, you’re so worldly.’ Like, ‘Wow, your art’s really good.’

The scripts Mavis and Summer provide attest to the passivity sugar babies are incited to perform for men through their affective presence, serving as a mirror that reflects back to men their ideal selves—more perfect selves—with which they seek to identify.

Sugar babies provide conflicting stories about their sexual activities, but it seems whether or not they have sex with sugar daddies, communicating a sense of mutual attraction through physical affection is often expected of sugar babies and hard to fake. As sugar baby Sabrina reminded me, “they want affection, and more often than not, they will want sex. Like you just got to keep them interested in, make them think that you are willing to give it.” Even though she has never been attracted to the sugar daddies she has dated, she advises sugar babies to “get used to it” when men “start like putting their arm around you or like touching you sorta, like rubbing your thigh.” In her mind, “you can't expect to go on a date and do absolutely nothing. You're not going to get paid to do absolutely nothing.” They have a right to ask for it, having paid her:

It’s not going to be completely platonic. You're going to have to eventually touch them or they touch you because you got to keep in mind, they're paying. This is an investment on their end. And the way I see it is you got to put yourself in their shoes. Like, I wouldn't want to pay a hundred dollars for a date just for me to talk and look at her. Like, I don't care how much money I have, but like, I could do that with literally anybody. So that's why I see it like that. Don't waste their time.

But it takes confidence and being comfortable in one’s own skin to convincingly perform mutuality in physical affection:

It's mostly a lot of kissing, but kissing can be really awkward, especially with someone you don't like. So you have to be able to like, kiss it, kiss them and make it seem like you're enjoying yourself, even if you're not. And that's why I think it's really hard to do that if you're like shy and insecure.
The answer, for Sabrina who had a tough time getting started in sugar dating as, she claims, a slightly awkward and chubby virgin, has been to adjust her disposition to better embody the role of a confident and sexually available woman. As aforementioned, the idea of sex is more important than actually providing it as a sugar baby, whose job is to create an intangible romantic aura of attraction and anticipation that resembles the early stages of love more than a utilitarian experience of sexual release.

In the end, what sugar babies do and create is different from escorting because they buy into the mystique of the amateur, who chooses to engage in paid sex, and distance themselves and their clientele from professional sex workers, who seemingly sell sex out of economic necessity. The disadvantage of “pure” sugar is that women may be shortchanging themselves by maintaining a façade of a relationship and identity of an amateur, in which the payment of an allowance is not guaranteed and gauche to outright demand. The reality many “professionals” who formerly sugar dated point out is that sugar babies end up performing more unpaid labor than escorts. One sugar baby-cum-escort on Tumblr states:

The biggest draw to escorting is that there’s no labor outside working hours, and the pay is better. Unless you’re in that ultra rare category of sugar babies that finds a whale, you’ll be spending ten times more time with a guy to get a fraction of what an escort would get.

Another blogger highlights how sugar babies’ amateur status works against them: “Hookers go to dinner with their clients too. They just get paid twice what you’re getting for it.” These overlaps are undeniable, but the preference for authentic connection is an added responsibility of sugar babies that goes beyond what a consumer might reasonably demand from a more transactional interaction with an escort or full-service sex worker. Armed with cultural capital that meets the taste demands of more upwardly-mobile men, sugar babies take on the production of personalized sexual commodities that are presently in high demand.
Intimacy and the Tragic Late Modern Man

Four years before beginning this study, I realized I wanted to write a dissertation on mediated intimacy while watching the film *Her* (2013), a science fiction portrayal of a sad and lonely man named Theodore who falls in love with his virtual assistant Samantha, a disembodied but still strangely seductive voice that fills his apartment (and headphones when he is on-the-go) with warm feeling. I was not so much interested in the existential questions of humanity and the future of artificial intelligence, as many were, or even the gendered stereotypes though these did irk me along with others. It was the *normalcy* of mediated intimacy in the world writer-director Spike Jonze created that arrested me. In the film, Theodore works as a letter-writer who helps people communicate the intimacy they feel but cannot form into words. They entrust him—a tragic man still fantasizing about the intimacy he shared with his soon-to-be ex-wife as he finds love in unexpected places (on his computer, in his own apartment)—with pictures, stories, and mementos that encapsulate the meaning of a relationship they hope his letters will continue to sustain. When Theodore wishes for physical closeness with a bodiless Samantha, he hires a sex surrogate, Isabella, to act out what Samantha’s words imply. This experiment does not go well, proving too much even for Theodore, but the job existed and Isabella was doing it. Theodore, Isabella, and Samantha were all employed to mediate intimacy in other people’s lives, to make their lives better—more fulfilling and honest, in some way, even if not entirely real.

When I saw this film in the theater, I knew we had already reached the world Theodore lived in, but also felt this world was built for a man like Theodore (or perhaps a man like Spike Jonze, who is known for writing such male characters), a man in a postmodern profession that leaves him feeling hollow and seeking the fullness of a woman’s affective presence and the romance she promises. Though I did not have this language or even a first interview under my belt, I was already thinking about sugar dating and cam modeling around the same time and marveled at the parallels between what I saw women doing and what Samantha and Isabella became for Theodore, even what Theodore was doing with his letters. This hunch, the feeling that
Spike Jonze did not come up with the idea for *Her* in a vacuum but drew on experience and the zeitgeist of twenty-first century America, became even more relevant after interviewing women for this project. At the time though, it simply sparked the question: Is “real” intimacy inherently better?

In my interviews with cam models and sugar babies, I asked them if they developed relationships with consumers and if they would define them as “intimate.” Most said no, which initially felt like a dead-end, but their explanations revealed even more about intimacy in late modern society than I had intended to capture with my question. Intimacy was still very much a part of this story. As the previous section details, women produce personalized sexual encounters that are unique, co-created, and feel like friendship and connection. They also prioritize spending time with men simply hanging out, talking, and being emotionally present, producing a sense of familiarity, comfort, and safety. Men come to them wanting concrete experiences of affection, attention, physical touch, and spending time together to more intangible experiences of companionship, sexual vulnerability, feeling special, and being truly seen.

But talking about intimacy is not easy because it means so many different things, from sex, physical closeness, and affection to a shared understanding that grows over time. In this sense, what we call intimacy is always mediated, never entirely “real,” because we look to language to define the contours of our experiences and as West (2018) points out, “to the symbolic resources of the public sphere” to express our inner emotions (p. 124). I soon realized cam models and sugar babies did not define relationships with cam platform users and sugar daddies as intimate because their experiences do not match this language. Like Theodore, Samantha, and Isabella, cam models and sugar babies do not typically involve themselves to the extent that they enter into a relationship with someone they would call “intimate.” As mediators of intimacy, they instead witness another’s search for intimacy, more like empathic observers along for the ride than partners invested in the journey. A better question would turn out to be, why are men looking for intimacy from cam models and sugar babies? This question, which
women readily answered, is meant not to uncover men’s true motives so much as understand how
women see themselves mediating intimacy in other people’s lives. Are they making men’s lives
better, in some small way, even if the intimacy they produce is not entirely real, like Theodore,
Samantha, and Isabella?

As it turns out, cam models and sugar babies do see themselves as making men’s lives a
little better, mitigating what their collective testimonies suggest is a widespread social problem of
men struggling with unmet and underserved needs for intimacy. As Berlant (2012) notes, “the
ways in which we live sexuality and intimacy have been profoundly shaped by theories—
especially psychoanalytic ones, which have helped to place sexuality and desire at the center of
the modern story about what a person is and how her history should be read” (p. 5). Sometimes
explicitly mentioning psychological theories, other times echoing popular psychology rhetoric,
women I interviewed offered well thought out theories about why men seek sexual and emotional
intimacy from cam models or sugar babies, elaborate ideas they had generated about men’s
histories and contexts that made women’s affective feminine presence necessary for men’s
emotional health. Seeing men’s sexual consumption as romantic not utilitarian, women offered a
particular narrative in which men are tragic victims of late modern capitalism and patriarchy,
dangerously lacking intimacy in their everyday lives. They expressed empathy for men’s
problems with finding intimacy in their everyday lives, namely being time-deprived, stressed,
lonely, and troubled. Their construction of a tragic male subject suggests the reification of gender
differences in emotional health and a feminized competency in healing men’s intimate wounds. In
the evidence I present, I see a similarity to what West (2009) described as the construction of a
gendered “communication gap” reinforced through the feminized practice of greeting card
communication. Here, we perhaps see the construction of a gendered “intimacy gap” that
reinforces the gendered division of emotional labor.

Women produce intimacy as a form of care provided to men with a “practical
consciousness” informed by cultural and psychological discourses that frame intimacy as a
fundamental part of an individual’s expression and health. Cam models and sugar babies talk about the intimacy they conjure for men in ways that resemble care work. Intimacy in the personalized commercial contexts of sugar dating and cam modeling is experienced for its own sake, because it feels good and improves the quality of an individual’s life. It is not meant to communicate an underlying bond between two people or sustain a connection. Though sustained connections are helpful to feeling a desired sense of intimacy, achieving an abiding social tie is not the goal. The production of intimacy as care work speaks to romantic desires to reveal a “true self” that lurks beneath a veneer of hegemonic masculinity men portray in public life.

First, many cam models and sugar babies find that men they encounter are too busy to cultivate deep relationships with women “in the real world” who would otherwise provide them emotional support. These men are time-deprived, lacking a crucial resource in developing and sustaining romantic relations. For instance, Ava framed sugar dating as a service that offers “connection and companionship to wealthy men [who] wouldn't otherwise have the time or access to build connections, especially with beautiful younger women.” In our conversation, she articulated a deft behavioral marketing profile of the modern-day sugar daddy and his tastes:

A lot of these men are very educated. They're very intelligent, and as much as they want companionship and they want somebody pretty on their arm at an event or something, a lot of these men want conversation. A lot of these men travel a lot. Most of the men that I've encountered actually are not, and have not been, married. Of course, there are women that they date in their personal lives as well as in their sugar world. But, a lot of these men travel a lot. They don't really have time to really build solid relationships. They're extremely stressed out with some of the high demand work that they do. One man that I dated for awhile worked for Bank of America and his job was extremely stressful. A lot of these men just want conversation. They want a break from their regular, fast-paced world with a lot of responsibility and it can be very enjoyable, especially if you're somebody like me where I just, I enjoy conversation and I enjoy hearing different people's perspectives.

Being able to enjoy conversation and companionship with a pretty woman without the added demands and responsibilities of a relationship is a boon for men who are overworked, tired, and crunched for time. Ava notably mentioned travel twice, which was a common theme for women I interviewed based in large urban areas with thriving industries such as New York City, San
Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles. According to popular self-help discourses, “relationships take work,” a truism about what is required to sustain romantic love that reflects what Illouz describes as “an experience of love as rational, utilitarian, and laborious” that circulates simultaneously with discourses about love as romantic utopias provided by cultural industries. Seeing love as work, men may opt out of relationships temporarily or altogether, according to women I interviewed, and prefer to have their emotional and sexual needs met within a personalized commercial sexual encounter that is intimate but still safely contained by the commercial context.

Though pleasurably obscured by women’s amateur status, the commercial context for intimacy in sugar dating includes an implicit agreement that emotions will be less complicated than a relationship developed from love and leading to marriage. For instance, Sabrina, a sugar baby in Atlanta, told me sugar daddies she dated who were high-achieving professionals “couldn't find people to date them because of their status and wealth.” They conveyed to her the drawbacks of romantic dating were “push factors” for entering the sugar dating world:

They were always terrified, I guess, of like being used and like becoming, marrying a trophy wife when that wasn't their intention, but they felt more in control by like having sugar baby.

If sugar daddies are already in relationships, as many are, women theorize these relationships are stressful, particularly because they put pressure on men to perform masculinity in social contexts where intimacy meets kinship (i.e. marriage and long-term romantic partnerships). Though men come to cam models and sugar babies to affirm desired experiences of masculinity, women operate under the assumption that men also seek to transcend these social identities as much as they enact them.

Some men come to cam models and sugar babies when the intimacy in their relationships has faded or loved ones have died or left them. Leslie, a cam model, calls these requests for companionship “sweet” in comparison to other requests she gets, usually from younger men, to perform explicit sexual acts or fetishes that make her uncomfortable:
I’ve had a 70 something year old man on cam whose wife died and he just wanted to sit with me. He wanted me to make a cup of tea and talk to him. That one was sweet. You know, he loved his wife very much and then he just asked me to show him my bra. And he was very sweet.

She likes performing the role of cam model when it involves “just being there for people who needed to vent.” People without intimate relationships in their everyday lives are lacking “somebody to talk to,” which is important, especially at times of crisis:

One of the guys I was talking to, he just had lost his mom and he, um, he didn't have anybody to talk to. He wasn't married or anything like that. So, um, he needed somebody to talk to and we talked and talked.

Penny relayed a similar story:

They come and go. But the older ones tend to stick. I have one guy that's like, he's in his seventies and he's like one of my number one fans and he had cancer. I was reaching out to them to make sure it was okay. Like I do feel bad for some of these guys and I do check on them if they say they have a birthday, I'm like, ‘Oh, Happy Birthday.’ So like my good fans, I'm always going to be asking about them, and I don't know, the older ones are the best ones because they're consistent and they pay. They might get a little attached, but they're enjoying it.

Importantly, sugar babies and cam models provide men opportunities for emotional self-disclosure. Men come to them to share secrets or privileged information, to be seen and understood in ways they do not reveal to others, oftentimes women who are their significant others or family members. Talking is important to developing and delivering the kind of emotional intimacy men are seeking, which stems from a desire to be vulnerable, as some women made clear. Ciara, for instance, said that sugar daddies are looking for “somebody who's willing to be that person that they can talk to about their long days” and share their feelings with:

I heard from various [men] that they couldn't talk to their wives or their fiancées about their day. They weren’t interested in it or what they had going on. So, a lot of men can't share their inner thoughts because of the fact that they will be looked down on as weak or not willing to be strong. I feel like everybody needs that person that they can be able to cry to.

According to Ciara and many other sugar babies I interviewed, performing hegemonic masculinity in the world and in romantic love constrains men’s ability to express their inner-most thoughts and feelings. Women see themselves as facilitating the pleasure of forming an organic
bond with another person and accessing a romantic “true self” men hide from public view. Men, they surmise, limit how much they share with romantic partners due to expectations that accompany these social designations, and a sugar baby represents someone who trains herself to have no expectations for the relationship, exist outside a man’s “real life,” and listen. Ciara went on to acknowledge this point:

I've heard them say they can't be who they truly are because they have so much bottled inside them. So, I feel like having somebody that is going to be there to listen or just simply to go to different places with [helps]. So that's where I feel like I come in, I'd be like, ‘Hey, how was your day?’ Or ‘What'd you do today?’ Things like that. Kind of the lines of a girlfriend, but not. There's really no title. It's just somebody there to be, you know, their go-to without having to deal with all the baggage.

The ways in which sugar babies like Ciara see themselves as filling an emotional void for men by talking to them about their feelings is perhaps surprising given the proliferating forms of connection available in late modern society. Social media and personal communication technologies make connecting with a friend or even a licensed therapist increasingly possible for a time-deprived single or unhappily committed man. Women imagine men cannot be themselves or let down their guards and show weakness in their most intimate relationships with romantic love partners, friends, and family.

People seek therapists for similar reasons, but cam models and sugar babies offer a similar service that pleasurable mixes in hedonistic escape and organic connection. Having an outsider’s perspective and being paid to care, give attention, and listen with compassion are attributes of the therapist who develops a relationship with a patient that is entirely in service of that individual’s self-growth. Similarly, cam models and sugar babies aid a project of romantic individualism, where emotional intimacy is a means to self-discovery and release from the constrictions of normative social life. These emotionally intimate exchanges are meant to be freeing and even transformative. Jessica sees herself performing this important role:

I always joke that I'm more of a therapist than I am a cam girl because a lot of these guys are just, I don't want to say lonely, that's not the right word, but looking for something that they're missing and therapy kind of helps you find that. We just steer them in the right direction. Like, sometimes a third party sees something that you don't, and a lot of
these guys say talking is therapeutic. I feel like I try to help them with their marriages or if they want advice.

Jessica stops at calling men “lonely,” but other cam models and sugar babies did not. Many women imagined loneliness motivated men to seek their attention and companionship, seeing themselves as making up for a lack of connection in men’s lives. Contributing to an online forum discussion, one cam model suggested people are “more lonely than ever” and “trying to fill a void in their life,” therefore they are searching for “warmth and connection” from cam models. Joanna, a sugar baby in Seattle, has dated several men who work long hours for a technology company. She told me how they seemed lonely and wanted companionship. Sugar baby Skylar, also in a big city, reiterated this sentiment:

I think a lot of times the men that I have gone out with who had wanted to see me again or who wanted to hang on initially, I think were sort of lonely and looking for someone who could offer support, a listening ear. I had guys who had gone through divorce and just wanted to like take out a pretty girl to dinner, go see a show.

Drawing on psychological discourses, a few sugar babies described catering to men with “mommy issues,” who seemed to yearn for affection and attention in a way that did not feel particularly sexual to them, but came from a deeper sense of loneliness and search for connection.

When Sabrina, for instance, brought up the term, I asked her to explain, which she did:

So basically they didn't have a good relationship with their mom or like they wanted to be loved all their life, but they didn't receive that love and affection... I felt bad for them actually. Just the fact that they needed to pay me to give them attention to make them feel loved, I guess. I felt bad. Because when they opened up to me, I figured out their things and why they are the way they are. All three of them had mommy issues.

Skylar also used the term “mommy issues” to describe a relationship she had that she described as “intimate in a very affectionate way, but otherwise there's no sex.” She told me she had an “instinct that he has mommy issues.” She went on to imagine how his interactions with her fit into a longer life history of longing for attention and affection:

I know that he's the youngest of seven or eight boys. When I first met him, and I had a dance with him at the club, he really wanted to hold me, and he really wanted to hug. And it was a lot of like, hugging and me holding his hand, and he just wanted to talk. And I noticed his body language shift when it went from talking at the bar to really talking to him and getting to know him more privately. He became very like... the way he held his
head down. There seemed to be this affectionate, child-like sort of energy coming from him. And it just felt like he needed like a maternal, loving source to listen to him and hold his hand and joke with him and be goofy. And it was really, really fascinating to see someone's body language change like that. He's not looking for sex… There's something deeper there that he needs, and it feels like affection and someone to talk to. That's what he's needing from me. Maybe there's this maternal thing that he subconsciously really needs. I just was able to supply that.

Women like Skylar pose as attractive strangers with whom men can share feelings like sadness, numbness, or secrets they hide from the world and develop a bond that is meant to be ephemeral even if impactful. The “bounded authenticity” of their contained yet freeing exchanges is akin to the exciting intimacy of confessing what is really on your mind to an attractive person sitting next to you at a hotel bar on a random night, an exotic person made into a captive listener by your story, a promising person you anticipate taking upstairs, but not home with you (Bernstein, 2007a; Bernstein, 2007b). But as commercial mediators of intimacy, cam models and sugar babies offer a sense of security in emotional exchanges that “real” intimacy does not. As West (2018) argues, emotional communication “can feel like a high-risk activity” (p. 140). Using commercial resources to communicate emotion—whether that be through greeting cards that West studies and our friend Theodore from Her writes for his clients or through emotionally revealing encounters with a cam model or sugar baby—can be a way of avoiding, or managing, this sense of risk by “fixing” emotions in a tangible object (or objectified person) (West, 2018, p. 124). In this sense, cam models “fix” emotions by becoming a solution to the gendered “intimacy gap” problem and capturing the feelings that seem to escape men in other social domains.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the ways in which cam modeling and sugar dating mediate desire, intimacy, and gender relations in late modern life. First, women create a sense of feminine presence through a performance of gender that has aesthetic and affective components. Their aesthetic presence transports men to liminal spaces associated with sexual entertainment and leisure, which are constructed as spaces for men to safely indulge in hedonistic pleasures, transgressive gendered rituals, and transcendent masculine identities. Fantasies enacted by and
with cam models and sugar babies are meant to provide male consumers a sense of freedom to play or satisfy desires that are socially unacceptable or unattainable in other social spheres. At the same time, they produce an affective presence through gendered rituals that personalize the commercial sexual encounter and generate feelings of connection, expression of an authentic self, and emotional intimacy.

Both of these productions—one leaning toward fantasy and escape from everyday life and the other toward connection and intimacy in the commercial sphere—are based in and construct a romantic narrative for the male consumer of sexual entertainment and leisure and late modern masculinity. Women in these scenes see themselves as emotional commodities that should satisfy a romantic male yearning to escape into a fantasy, embody an ideal self, and feel connected, which will provide relief from the dredges of practical life in which constraint is too starkly felt. Sugar babies and cam models claim men use interactions with them to gain status, stroke their egos, and make themselves feel more powerful or perfect and less disappointing than they might in other social realms and relationships.

As this chapter suggests, women construct feminine presence in the shadow of what men lack in their everyday lives. Seeing these spaces as articulating romantic ideals for male consumers reveals how sexual entertainment and leisure represents subtle proclamations and even reclamations of male agency, zones in which their freedom, control, and pleasure are reified, albeit in an uneven and limited fashion. Under neoliberal capitalism, constraint is acutely felt by both women and men, both subordinated and dominant social formations. Refracted through the lens provided by women workers’ experiences and perspectives, the weight of this pressure and its production of unfulfilled needs and desires for closeness and connection in men are foregrounded by women who seek to please them in order to be successful and make money. It seems that beyond sex, women are called upon to creatively produce the passion, intimacy, and transcendence of romantic love, as well as its side-effect: the sense of utopianism discovering a lover begets and the bliss of both losing and finding ourselves in their perfect image.
CHAPTER 4

“IT’S REAL WORK”:

THE EMOTIONAL LABOR OF BEING CAM MODELS AND SUGAR BABIES

Overview

In my interviews with women, I asked them if they wanted to address any public misconceptions about what cam models and sugar babies do, a question to which many responded resoundingly, “Yes!” A common complaint I heard was that contrary to media portrayals and popular opinion, being a cam model or a sugar baby was hard work. Hardly surprising – I began studying these practices because I speculated as much – the cascade of concerns that collapsed upon us when I broached this topic chafed against the overall tenor of our conversations, which tended to center on how much women enjoyed and valued these practices.

Unearthing a key tension, cam models and sugar babies launched convincing arguments about how these practices are not the “easy money” that many assume, just about having fun, or simply selling their bodies. Feminized work that looks fun or revolves around women’s sexualized bodies is often devalued as mindless or unskilled work, work that comes naturally to women, a sexist myth that undermines their labor (Mayer, 2014). A defensiveness, borne from their own inherited biases, colored their responses. According to my respondents, cam modeling and sugar dating are really about generating feelings and intimate connection—“emotional labor,” some explicitly mentioned, that requires technique, experience, and talent (Hochschild, 1983). Women capitalize on their beauty, bodies, and sex, but these factors are prerequisites to performing the “real work” of producing romantic utopias: delivering affective performances of gendered positivity, emotionally authentic connection, and embodied emotional intimacy.

This chapter explores the conditions and features of the emotional labor that cam models and sugar babies do to produce the romantic utopias discussed in the previous chapter. In her flagship study of emotional labor, Hochschild (1983) remarked that “simply having a personality does not make one a diplomat, any more than having muscles makes one an athlete” (p. 13).
Likewise, in interviews, blog posts, and online forums, cam models and sugar babies address the emotion work and skills they deploy to meet the three most common expectations they face in these roles: to be positive, emotionally authentic, and intimate with strangers. Though such qualities and associated activities are feminized in Western societies, they are neither natural (i.e. biological), nor purely emotional (i.e. without rational motive). Not all women, cam models and sugar babies repeatedly asserted, can do these forms of work successfully. They must carefully negotiate consumer demands, their own mental and emotional faculties, and the unpredictable working conditions of platform-based labor to do well.

The focus of this chapter addresses the research questions: How does the erotic labor of cam modeling and sugar dating illuminate contemporary working conditions associated with the digital cultural economy? What do their experiences reveal about the constraints and possibilities of such work? Cam modeling and sugar dating draw attention to how digital cultures for monetized intimacy call on workers to perform self-directed emotional labor, in which they must actively negotiate sometimes competing demands for them to perform and also be authentic. The analysis I present suggests ambiguity built into this work creates possibilities but also problems, a finding that extends to other forms of digital leisure practices that hinge on monetizing intimacy.

**Conceptual Framework**

Practices of cam modeling and sugar dating involve highly gendered and sexualized forms of emotional labor, a process of managing emotions typically expected of service workers “in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Hochschild (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labor to describe the commercialization of feelings and selves, an overlooked implication of a growing service economy. Writing in the earlier years of what scholars have come to call “the feminization of work,” or a shift toward service-oriented work and labor that is increasingly reliant on the affective and cognitive resources of human capital, the concept has only grown in relevance (Arcy, 2016). The term “feminization of work” can refer to the increase of women in
the paid workforce who have historically performed unpaid emotion work in the home and family unit, but also skills and capacities typically associated with women such as relationship management and emotional intelligence that workers increasingly draw on to perform various kinds of work (Federici, 2020). The emergence of cam modeling and sugar dating can be explained a number of ways, but this study situates these practices within this nexus of an expanding service economy, the rising commercial value of emotional labor, and the feminization of cultural work.

Today, workers in a wide array of industries are paid to influence, improve, or transform the disposition of consumers through emotion work and affective performance of personality. Hochschild’s early work on emotional labor has helped scholars to understand “the affective turn” of production cultures, or the integration of emotion, affect, and sociality in creative industries like music, television, and gaming, and to examine the underestimated amount of time, energy, and skill that goes into meeting expanding demands placed upon performers (Gregg, 2009; Baym, 2018; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008). Research on “aesthetic labor” has also reworked and expanded the emotional labor literature in ways that address embodiment and bring much needed nuance to analyzing gendered performances of feeling and self in commercial contexts (Mears, 2014; Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006). Concepts like aesthetic labor and display work (Mears & Connell, 2016) take into account the relevance of bodily display, beauty, appearance, and sexuality to a worker’s job and successful delivery of emotional and affective demands in interactive service industries (Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003) and highly visual fields like fashion modeling (Wissinger, 2015), VIP clubs (Mears, 2020), and cam modeling (Jones, 2020). While Hochschild arguably shows embodiment is a significant mediator of emotional labor, these additions have centered the potentially discriminatory importance of “corporeality” in jobs that require culturally valued physical appearances.

Additionally, emergent forms of digital work are predicated on performing identities and creating emotionally authentic connections with internet audiences such as blogging, vlogging,
social media influencing, and livestreaming, generating research and theories on emotional labor as it enters new territories and transforms under changing working conditions (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Kanai, 2019; Mohamad, 2020; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). In these nascent occupations, workers monetized their intimacy with internet audiences, often blending the emotional labor of performing their identities, sometimes creating distinct characters like professional actors, with the emotional authenticity associated with play, leisure, and consumption (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). The popularity of these fields stems from the sense of intimacy, or what Abidin (2015) dubs “perceived interconnectedness,” which cultural producers offered. Like the reality television performers who came before them, workers who monetize digitally-mediated intimacy connect with viewers through the “emotional realism” of their performances (Ang, 1985; Sender, 2012), but their awareness of audiences produces more of a “calculated authenticity,” where they strategically deploy the self, personality, and intimacy as an emotional means to a more rational end (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 4660; See also, Pooley, 2010; Marwick, 2013; Duffy, 2017; Cunningham & Craig, 2017). Though often producing cultural content, these professions simply would not exist without a demand for “emodities,” or emotional commodities through which producers and consumers co-produce a performance of emotions that are “heavily mediated by cultural and moral ideals” such as emotional authenticity, intimacy, positivity, freedom, and friendship (Illouz, 2018, p. 16)

Because feminized work in the digital cultural economy is “disproportionately tasked” to women, many scholars have examined its gendered dimensions and implications. In her study of blogging, Kanai (2019), for instance, uses Hochschild’s concept of “feeling rules,” or the ways in which the self is “modulated, moderated, and managed” in service of creating connections and intimacy with online audiences (p. 7). Women worked within “traditional classed feminine requirements” to produce affective experiences by performing relatability and optimism. Duffy & Wissinger (2017) also found women’s stances on social media work, which they describe as “myths of luck and passion” and “the belief that social media work is easy and potentially
profitable,” were more performative than based in reality, which required hidden and often unremunerated labor. They argue that “myths” women workers circulate that perpetuate this work as “fun, free, and authentic” function as “individual coping mechanisms” to create seemingly carefree gendered identities that are more relatable, which is “crucial to ‘making it’ in these domains” (p. 4664). They offer freedom to the individual, but discipline women as entrepreneurial worker-subjects in ways that “sustain the circuits of digital capitalism” (ibid). I build on Duffy and Wissinger’s work, but also challenge their framing to a degree. Duffy and Wissinger present the pleasures of social media work as “myths” solidifying women’s investments in adopting an entrepreneurial post-Fordist subjectivity, but ethnographic research that considers the ambivalences, moments of impasse, and negotiations that women make along the way can help us to see the ways in which women actively engage with these myths, rather than be directed by them, as research sometimes suggests. Being more specific about these instances can help us to see how negotiations of work and pleasure are moments in which women exercise agency and attempt to transform their working conditions.

Gendered social media studies have tended to focus on work performed by women for women, in female-oriented online communities, but women’s work in sexual culture is less understood. This chapter addresses this gap in the literature, adding cam modeling and sugar dating as two forms of monetized digitally-mediated intimacy (Shade, 2014). This move is important for two key reasons. First, it honors what cam models and sugar babies relate about their own experiences. Women describe the performance of emotional labor as fundamental to both cam modeling and sugar dating. Of course, participants may have moral and strategic reasons for highlighting the platonic features of their activities (e.g. to manage stigma or impress the academic interviewer). But activities that are central to each practice such as engaging in conversation, hanging out, and being authentic represent a kind of sociality that is underrepresented or even invisible under a reductive title of “sex work.” Gendered sociality and the importance of women’s emotional labor in creating and sustaining relationships with men
who pay them for their company are easily overlooked in analyses that focus solely on the sexual nature of these practices. Second, the emotional labor of performing identity and femininity for women looks very different than that performed for (presumably) men. The weight of gendered and sexualized expectations potentially adds pressure to a base layer of happiness and even authentic connection expected from other service and cultural work.

This study also considers how cam modeling and sugar dating make the commercialization of women’s reproductive labor salient. In this chapter, I explore the emotional labor of cam models and sugar babies as it contributes to the social reproduction of male workers, a task typically tied to women’s roles as romantic partners and packaged with other domestic duties and emotion work. I consider whether cam modeling and sugar dating represent the outsourcing of intimacy as a form of socially reproductive labor, traditionally thought of as the role of the women in men’s lives (the mother or wife, girlfriend or long-term partner, female friends, and so on). The creation of jobs like cam modeling and sugar dating reflect the needs of capital: for workers whose access to intimacy is limited by social and industrial conditions, the unpaid reproductive labor that might otherwise be couched within the love, affection, and excitement of an intimate partnership is offered up as services for consumption. The positivity, emotional authenticity, and embodied intimacies cam models and sugar babies labor to create are fuel for audiences, who are themselves working under an “emotional capitalism” that requires them to be emotionally and sexually satisfied to go on to do their jobs well (Illouz, 2007). If they are lonely, stressed, overworked, or sad, as I argued in the last chapter, they are less capable of performing to these standards.

Fixing this problem, producing labor-power in workers, takes emotional labor that I address in this chapter. Thus, this chapter might be read as suggesting a continuity between the arguments put forth in the 1970s by feminists involved in the International Wages for Housework campaign (Federici, 2020; Fortunati, 2007). Women’s demand for payment potentially represents an attempt to attribute value to the normally invisible gendered labor of heterosexual
relationships. This possibility would complicate a common feminist critique of digital labor as straightforwardly reinforcing sexism, gender inequalities, and disciplinary regimes benefiting patriarchal capitalism. However, the cloak of leisure may conceal their emotional labor in ways that parallel the invisibility of unpaid “women’s work” conducted in the private sphere.

**Performing Positivity**

The work of cam models and sugar babies involves embodying ideals for femininity that hinge on a performance of positivity. The women I interviewed routinely likened the demands for them to be positive to the expectations placed on service workers. They tend to apply the same social and emotional skills that are useful to a customer service or sales position to these roles. In my interviews with cam models and sugar babies, it became clear to me that the exchange of money implicitly directed women to adopt similar “feeling rules” to service work, adopting a “service-oriented” disposition even in casualized contexts, the features and implications of which I will discuss in this section.

Viewing the fantasy of femininity, sexual desire, and intimacy they produce as a form of service work is a narrative that helps women adapt to expectations in these scenes. Mavis described sugar dating as “customer service-oriented” because “you are trying to get paid,” which illustrates an important underlying dynamic that applies to both practices. In addition to being happy, she felt obligated to act “more excited by a person” than she would if she did not receive compensation for it. She finds conversation with most of her dates “boring,” but works to hide these feelings in order to give the impression she is enjoying herself.

Unlike traditional service workers, sugar babies and cam models neither partake in prescribed training when they begin nor report to management about their performance on the job. As part of the informal economy, there is little to no oversight over their activities and policy or parties responsible for implementing a customer service strategy. Instead, women teach each other and internalize the dogma of service work (though not servitude) as the necessary disposition to be successful. One sugar baby on Tumblr acknowledged, “allowing yourself to get
into the fantasy without getting lost in it is a difficult line for many to walk.” Maintaining an awareness of the discrepancy between a consumer-driven fantasy and a worker’s reality does not come naturally; it takes diligence. Another sugar baby explains the difficulty of navigating this tricky emotional territory:

They’re renting you as a prop for their lifestyle. Never confuse that with YOUR lifestyle. Vacationing in Cabo with him’ is NOT the same as doing so at your leisure with your friends.

Sugar babies remind each other of these differences to manage their emotional processing of what would otherwise be quite seductive situations:

All those Roseshire roses, expensive dinners, fancy car rides, delicate lingerie are for HIS fantasy, and does very little for YOUR wallet. Don’t be blind sighted by the fancy tricks he pulls because it isn’t tangible. Never lose sight of your ‘paycheck.’

A service worker disposition helps to make sense of the disconnect between their actions and (lack of) feelings.

Weathering emotional distress with a positive attitude is a feeling rule associated with service work that women apply to these practices. As the last chapter described, Alexa, a veteran cam model, created a training manual for the studio she runs that included specific language about how, when, and why models should perform positivity for their audiences. In it, she conceded that performing positivity “can sometimes be difficult on slow days or, days you have rough things going on in your personal life,” but a cam model’s best asset is a reliable ability to smile regardless of her underlying feelings.

Similar advice circulates amongst sugar babies. Reminding her fellow sugar babies to keep their cool on dates with “rude” sugar daddies, one sugar baby wrote in a blog post:

Do you think the customer service at K-mart is allowed to cry and bang her head on the floor because she has a rude customer? No, and she’s getting paid $10 an hour to put up with that shit.

Service work requires a combination of manual, mental, and emotional labor, but it is the latter that is often most impressive. To act unperturbed by personal matters or as if social interactions
or situations do not negatively impact one’s mood requires a sophisticated ability to regulate emotions, tolerate frustration, and maintain a positive disposition despite daily fluctuations.

This sugar baby goes on to clarify a distinction she makes between “annoyance” (a service work standard women should expect to stomach to succeed) and “abuse” (unacceptable behavior), but determining where and when to draw this ambiguous line is left up to individual assessments. Her comment also suggests a worker’s wages permit unsavory treatment. By this logic, a sugar baby hoping for an allowance that falls in the average range of one to two thousand dollars per month or a pay-per-meet fee at the standard rate of two hundred dollars per date may draw the line between “annoyance” and “abuse” differently than a service worker receiving minimum wage. Her tolerance of emotional abuse may need to adjust according to the wage she desires. Compensation, from this perspective, buys her emotional cooperation to perform positivity.

Women across fields of cam modeling and sugar dating coach each other to adhere to service industry standards in these seemingly more casual and explicitly sexualized interactions. Many rely on individual strategies such as humor for handling what some might classify as verbal abuse on the job. Alexa, a cam model, told me that arguing with trolls or people who make insulting comments is fruitless:

If you argue with them, then that's just going to make it worse, encourage it, than if you just act like it doesn't matter to you and you don't care and you joke around with them. Then they go away.

She provided an example: “So like if they said, you know, ‘you look pregnant’ or something, be like, ‘do you want me to be pregnant?’” Here, a comment about a model’s weight and bodily appearance, which was likely meant to offend, is redirected by a playful disposition that refuses to acknowledge the attack.

Despite the emotional labor involved, women report benefits to a service worker disposition. Hailey, a sugar baby located in New York City, said she framed sugar dating as a form of service work “to motivate me to go out and be my best self.” Hailey also advised
prospective sugar babies to “see it as a job” in order to remind themselves they “can walk out any time,” revealing assumptions about the safety of commercial exchanges and the comparable risks associated with romantic relationships. There is a “morality to market exchange” that workers find safety in because it allows them to disconnect from emotions without guilt or shame, which is useful to compartmentalizing what they do (Prasad, 1999). In general, cultivating self-possession seems to make service workers’ lives more enjoyable because their moods do not fluctuate with the type of treatment they can expect from an organization, coworkers, or customers. They are also typically rewarded with greater longevity in positions, which come with pay raises, or promotions. Cam models and sugar babies adopt a similar disposition, recognizing that they benefit from developing an ability to register, but not react to, their feelings and how the quality of social exchanges in these settings might alter them. Developing a positive yet emotionally detached demeanor is a “technology of the self” that enhances enjoyment by allowing workers to feel less affected by these interactions (Foucault, 1997). It is understood to be in a worker’s best interest to accept this implicit contract.

**Cultivating Connections**

At the same time, cam models and sugar babies are expected to create a sense of emotionally authentic connection in these commodified exchanges, which contradicts the necessary work of emotionally detaching from encounters and relationships in order to perform positivity. The expectation that cam models and sugar babies are emotionally invested – yet healthily detached from – the relationships they build in these spaces adds complexity to the work of managing their emotions. Many cope with these dueling demands by equating the labor of producing a sense of connection, intimacy, and care as cam models and sugar babies to other professions in which these conventionally feminine qualities are valued.

For instance, the emphasis on women to be present, check in with, and listen to users and sugar daddies’ thoughts, experiences, and emotions leads women to report feeling like an on-call therapist. When I asked Birdie, a cam model, to describe this work, she called herself “a naked
sex therapist who gets paid by the minute.” Like her, other cam models say they help their all-male clientele express and alleviate feelings of loneliness, stress, boredom, inadequacy, and so on. Sensitive and nurturing, Kitty attracts fans who confide in her, leaving her feeling drained and underpaid for the level of care they seek. Industry conditions for cultivating such connections were weighing on her when we spoke:

I feel like you need the intimacy... It's something within myself that I need to work on to be able to give that to them. Because that's something that my viewers do expect from me.

Though she recognizes other models “make a lot more money” by lowering their guard and welcoming greater intimacy with fans, she is reticent to follow suit because she thinks fans will “get attached,” and she will feel start to feel confined by what she would rather be strictly professional relationships.

Cora reiterates Kitty’s point that users come to models seeking emotional intimacy: “They usually come and hang out with me... when they have problems or if they're like super depressed.” She sees herself as performing therapeutic work by “helping them through these needs, when they’re feeling low.” Sugar babies also use this metaphor, with one stating in a blog post: “it’s emotional work to act supportive and caring when he makes you his in-home therapist.” As these examples illustrate, women invoke the professional identity of “therapist” in ways that suggest they find themselves acquiring job responsibilities for which they are not adequately paid.

But these comparisons also help women to frame these practices in professional terms. In a forum thread about the emotional labor of cam modeling, a conversation ensued that portrayed the ability to “connect on a deeper level” as a skill valued across industries. One cam model wrote:

When you connect with people and they feel seen, you are more respected and earn more in any career. You earn bonuses, your bosses consider you for raises and promotions, your job is generally more enjoyable. You become a person and not just a cog in the wheel.
The emic circulation of “emotional labor” as a touchstone for the underestimated demands of intimately connecting with people yet detaching in order to produce positive demeanor is telling. Women piggyback on other industries in which the pursuit of authentic connection in commercial organizations and relationships has gained prominence as a recognizable value. Cultivating a connection with someone is “tiring,” as sugar baby Summer pointed out to me. It is not a natural occurrence, but a skill worth cultivating. In our interview, Hailey, also a sugar baby, made a critical point about how she approaches choosing relationship partners, in this case sugar daddies, and employers similarly because “every job has relationship components to it.” She chooses to date certain sugar daddies because she has “developed a trust and liking to them, same as with choosing a workplace.” As these comments suggest, relationships built on genuine connection (and by women) are increasingly regarded as the linchpin of contemporary feminized work.

Professionalizing narratives help women to make sense of and validate their labor, the relational boundaries they prefer, and the conditions they seek to manifest. They create openings for women to use emotion management skills that assuage worries about being “fake” or “too real” (i.e. not positive enough), both of which displease consumers and over time might alienate workers. Women use a variety of metaphors to illustrate the diversity of their duties in these roles such as the above comparison to therapists, but one of the most common refrains I heard is that they are “actresses” who provide someone an experience that can range from pleasant and entertaining company to a deeply transformative therapeutic service. This subjectivity allows them to deliberately differentiate the parts of their selves and feelings they agree to instrumentalize for public display and those they prefer to remain private and non-monetized in order to show up and perform the positivity expected of them. It also allows them to create professional distance from the feelings they perform for someone else’s sake.

Many women describe hiding what they feel, a strategy Hochschild (1983) has called “surface acting,” that maintains emotional distance and allows them to create a positive, yet still authentic, feminine persona that does not impinge on their sense of self. In her analysis of
emotional labor, Hochschild (1983) differentiates between surface and deep acting strategies workers might use to manage emotions in contexts where display is important. With surface acting, we disguise what we actually feel, whereas deep acting involves a process of transforming our underlying feelings by way of memory or thoughts to evoke the appropriate emotional response we wish to communicate. Both approaches, however, instrumentalize feelings; emotions “do not erupt spontaneously or automatically” in either surface or deep acting, but are the product of conscious or unconscious effort on the part of the actor to achieve a specific result, usually monetary compensation (Hochschild, 1983, p. 36).

Offering support on an online forum to a fledgling peer, one cam model highlighted the performativity of consumer-oriented work like camming despite the pleasure it occasionally brings her:

You're really an actress, and while you may genuinely really, really enjoy it sometimes, other times you're 100% acting, and that's fine! It's like working retail and smiling at everyone: you may enjoy talking and interacting with many of the customers, but a lot of time you're just putting in the motions, and that's ok!

This cam model reminds others that cam modeling is a job like any other that calls for emotional engagement and a cheery facade. Some days performing positivity comes easily; other days it feels forced. Feeling pressure to act happier than how you feel is to be expected and accepted as a condition of selling goods and services to consumers.

Sugar baby Summer quit sugar dating due to the tension she experienced navigating competing demands for her to perform feminine positivity and form emotionally authentic connections with sugar daddies. Passionate about progressive politics, she found it difficult to relate to wealthy men whose politics she assumed to be incongruent with her own. She could not perform the role of a sugar baby in a way that felt emotionally authentic:

I'm not particularly sympathetic to them, and I think we have very little in common. So, I just had to kind of keep my views to myself because I wanted money and didn't have it… I didn't really feel like I could be myself on those dates because it feels like a lot of the men that I was seeing kind of were just looking for arm candy, someone to just like look really hot next to them, and laugh at their jokes, and listen to them complain. So, I did it as well as I could, but it's really not me.
Summer learned through trial and error a crucial lesson one sugar baby blogger offered her peers in a blog post. To be successful at sugar dating, she wrote, you must learn to “bury your emotions. You have to be able to put aside your real feelings, slap on a fake smile and play the part of the fantasy.” With more angst, another sugar baby wrote about the constricting terms of engagement:

I can never ever ask for attention… I am supposed to be happy and sweet and horny and show no sign of annoyance. I am after all - their getaway. I am a flawless actress, this is why they want me.

Surface acting strategies are so ingrained in monetized intimacy cultures like cam modeling and sugar dating that it is sometimes jarring to witness aberrant emotions that put latent feeling rules into stark relief. For instance, one cam model posted online about how letting her true emotional state leak through threatened to rupture her connection to users and, ultimately, survival in the industry. It all began with a misunderstanding between her and a user:

Long story short, he said I was playing games and a token whore, that he didn't believe that I made a very honest and stupid mistake. Sadly... I was already getting back into my severe depression (thank you Seasonal Affective Disorder) and I cried on cam. Ugh. Ever since then my traffic went down considerably, not as many people, not as many tippers [emphasis added].

This model broke “the fourth wall” of this ordinary form of theater by allowing her mental state (“severe depression”) and real feelings to impact her work. By calling attention to the divide between what is meant by “authentic” and her lived experience, the model makes salient the machinations of unstated commercial protocols that are supposed to look and feel spontaneous and playful. The application of professional standards for emotional discipline and connection in these casual work scenarios is noteworthy in how it extends public dispositions into the private sphere of the home and transitional sphere of leisure. This phenomenon relates to what Gregg (2013) refers to as “work bleed,” an experience of being always “on” and on the job as digital technologies are increasingly used to conduct work in domestic spaces previously designated as “unproductive” and for social reproduction.
However, comparisons to other professions belied what, upon deeper consideration, is a more complicated matter. When we benefit from the emotional labor of an artist, therapist, or salesperson, we typically do not ruminate about the veracity of their feelings. Even when we are aware of the emotional labor involved in doing this work, we accept that their emotions are “put on,” to a certain extent, for our sake. We recognize how the public, institutionalized, and performative contexts of art and commerce limit the naturalness of behavior and interaction. We are still moved by an actor’s embodiment of a character’s emotional world, aided by a therapist’s thoughtful curiosity about our lives, and lifted by a customer service representative’s upbeat and polite assistance.

In monetized intimacies, workers shoulder greater liability to be authentic in their interactions with consumers. This demand is evident in how workers discussed the limits of surface acting – unsuccessfully performing the necessary emotions. In a blog post, one sugar baby reminded her peers, “These men want it to feel mutual.” Sugar babies are expected to demonstrate interest, attraction, and desire, feelings and dispositions that are easily mistaken as unconscious or natural, i.e. not “work.” Like other sugar babies, Summer felt pressured to produce a mirage of mutuality that means showing personal enjoyment in performing this work. She told me sugar dating felt different from regular dating because she could not be herself or express authentic reactions to the sugar daddies she dated:

It was very performative on my end... I had to keep a lot to myself and kind of just highlight the best parts and kind of lend this sympathetic ear to people that I didn’t actually have any sympathy for. Like, 'It must be really hard being independently wealthy.' Like, ‘Wow, your life is so hard. You were born into wealth? I’m so sorry.’

She eventually quit sugar dating altogether because she found it difficult to “drum up the enthusiasm” needed to be successful.

To make matters worse, audiences and sugar daddies are experts at spotting inauthenticity and rooting out surface acting. For instance, Birdie, a cam model, commented, “If you're having a bad day, it shows. Even when you try to cover it up, if there's something else
bothering you, people pick up on that.” Cam models commiserate about this issue in forum discussions. One wrote, “I find that if I'm less energetic, the room can easily tell.” Another wrote, “I always feel like they can sense it... I think it shows in my face. I think I also end up overshar
ing.” Comparably, women attending the 2016 Sugar Baby Summit held by Seeking Arrangement were chided at a seminar:

These are businessmen, they might be attorneys, entrepreneurs, if you’re not being yourself they’re going to see right through it. They know what to look for when someone’s being fake.

Cam platform users and sugar daddies are seen as hungry to connect, which makes them discerning judges of reality. Reflecting on a similar disposition in reality television fans, Couldry (2008) notes that some viewers also gain pleasure from the process of separating the real from the fake, exercising their roles as “experts” in reality. In this vein, cam platform users and sugar daddies seem to understand, on a rational level, that the contexts of cam modeling and sugar dating are performative stages, but they are still looking for a real person behind the performance veneer the same way many reality television viewers evaluate the authenticity of performers as a kind of game, though in these contexts they derive less pleasure from finding out a cam model or sugar baby is putting on an emotional performance for their sake.

Doing work that blurs boundaries between labor and leisure means cam models and sugar babies struggle to meet high expectations for emotional authenticity, which cannot be easily or successfully achieved by adopting professional subjectivities, dispositions, and strategies such as surface acting. The ways in which men are looking for real women on the screen or a date suggests conditions that demand women have to work harder than they might in traditional industries to properly deceive others and even themselves. Cam models and sugar babies are expected to connect with people as “real people” not obliged by commercial strictures, which can make them self-conscious about whether discrepancies between display, feeling, and self are a sign of inauthenticity and failure of the feeling rules for these ostensibly casual encounters and authentic connections.
Because it can be difficult to fake the level of authenticity of emotions expected of them, most women find surface acting to be ineffective and cause strain, turning to deep acting to conjure the desired emotion. For instance, they encourage each other to integrate their true selves and real “personality” to make their acting more believable and less emotionally taxing. “Be yourself within your sugar persona,” a sugar baby wrote. Tacking on a contradictory requirement, another advised: “Be yourself and always happy.” In our interview, Mavis elaborated on her own experience of integrating personality into her persona: “you play a character and try to play up and add your personality into that, but you’re definitely not going to act like yourself.” She added that it is a process of “seeing what people want and playing to that.” Playing a character creates the problematic potential for alienation; playing yourself alleviates some of this concern. But, it also leads workers into confusing territory, blurring the lines between labor and leisure.

**Embodied Intimacies**

Comparisons to other forms of digital work that monetize leisure demonstrates their shared pressures to perform positivity and emotional authenticity, but they still fall short of capturing the particular dynamics of *erotic* forms of monetized intimacy like cam modeling and sugar dating. By addressing these differences, I do not intend to portray the sexual nature of this work as a “negative accelerator” that necessitates heightened scrutiny because it makes bad things “worse,” (Henderson, 2008, p. 221-222). This is a hazardous critical reaction that historically leads to “moral panic” about the special kind of damage of sexual progressivism. It is important, however, to interrogate when and how sex work converges and diverges with non-sexual work in women’s stories to better understand its possibilities and constraints. The emotional labor of sex work is, in quite important ways, different from being a salesperson, therapist, actor, and even other gig workers in the digital platform economy who also trade in cultivating authentic connections and friendships, despite their similarities and some cam models and sugar babies’ motivations to align themselves with these classes of workers.
The pressure to be positive, authentic, and sexually appealing creates pressure and cracking under this weight is common. There is a vulnerability to doing fantasy work that centers on beauty and bodily appearance, which makes it hard for workers to preserve boundaries that protect them from being psychologically and emotionally affected by interpersonal dynamics. For the most part, cam models interact with fans and sugar babies date sugar daddies who shower them with compliments, but participants reveal the psychological danger in taking any feedback — good or bad — too personally. One cam model articulated this stance in a blog post:

Camming can really affect your self image, and not always in a positive way. Self esteem has to come from liking yourself and knowing who you are, not what random strangers say to you. People will say over-the-top nice things, and over-the-top mean things, and none of them are necessarily the truth. Customers are there to give tips, not to give you advice on how to see yourself - never let them take a more important role in your life than that.

Cam models acknowledge that constructing emotional and psychological boundaries is not easy, especially when compliments from strangers “feel good” as Blair told me. “It’s a blessing and a curse,” she admitted:

Cause it’s like, as soon as someone tells you, like, ‘Oh, you’re beautiful,’ you could get someone like a troll on webcam. or even on the internet, social media be like, ‘Oh my god. You’re fat. You’re ugly. Like, you’re the ugliest girl I’ve ever seen.’ And if you’re not strong enough mentally, that can really just break you down.

While models coach themselves, and each other, to remain emotionally detached, sexual intimacy performed for and with users approaches real closeness for cam models as well, creating internal confusion. The model who recommended holding customers opinions at bay went on to say:

It can be hard if you spend a lot of time on cam, and then show intimate parts of your body or sexuality, to ignore their comments and not take them personally. Camming can be lonely, and sometimes these might be the only people in your life that see you naked, or that you tell certain things to.

Defining intimacy, Baym (2018) writes, “Intimacy is a fuzzy concept, but common to languages sharing the Latin root intimus is ‘that intimacy means an awareness of the innermost reality of one person by another; it is a privileged knowledge of what is disclosed in the privacy of an interpersonal relation, while ordinarily concealed from the public view.” Models may discuss
their work as service providers of intimacy, but because they are also required to share themselves with their audiences, providing them with access to private information and privileged knowledge about their lives, these can be difficult relationships to maintain clear boundaries in over the long-term. Placing value in positive feedback on one’s appearance gives power to the negative as well, which is a dodgy place to be, which is why this model concludes, “it's best not to believe what they say, whether positive or negative.” Ultimately these are “fantasy relationships,” she writes, “they say it only to get power over you, to try to matter in your life. Just like you will say things to try to encourage them to stay in your room, and tip you.” In this way, models remind themselves of the transactional nature of the relationship in order to contextualize the intimacy they develop, which can otherwise too easily impact their self-esteem and body-image.

The emotional labor required of cam models is most pronounced when they confront requests for roleplaying fetishes and “kink work” that “can be quite lucrative,” but also threaten to undermine their values and cause psychological harm (Jones, 2020, p. 203). Cam models are tasked with providing a sexualized therapeutic service that allows consumers to exercise and fulfill their needs and desires for interpersonal closeness and individual attention, and even to express and act out sexual fantasies that are secret, shameful, or simply unshared in other contexts and relationships. They are frequently asked to fulfill fantasies or be a container for desires users are afraid to bring up elsewhere, arguably the most arduous part of this work even if cam models sometimes find it rewarding. Many comment on how the context of fetish work and the culture of kink creates conditions they are unlikely to encounter in other professions due to the expectation that they will receive requests without judgment and cam modeling is a safe space to explore non-normative sexual desires and practices. Nearly all cam models told me their best advice to a new model is: “Never do anything you do not want to do. You always have a choice.” The popularity of this advice is apt – and telling. Models do have a choice, but the advice resonates because it is so hard to follow when models depend on satisfied users and good ratings to maintain their
reputation on particular platforms and earn a living. A few models described how, over time and with experience, they learned to manage the emotional fallout of fetish work that their former self or others might find too offensive to perform. Enacting rape scenes makes cam model Alexa “uncomfortable,” but she has “gotten used to it over the years.” As she explained, “When I first started doing it, I think it maybe bothered me a little bit more, but now it doesn't bother me at all. Like I just do it.” Alexa’s story reveals how choice changes over time and with experience. Many cam models like her have developed a thick skin perhaps due to necessity and the imprint of industry experience.

Many cam models I interviewed consistently field requests to act out socially prohibited desires and scenarios involving incest, pedophilia, and racial and religious oppression, which are respectively referred to as “incest/family play,” “age play,” and “race or religion play” within the cam modeling community. These are controversial practices that not everyone within the cam model community condones and performs because of the ethics and potential harm of cam models becoming participants in acts of power, degradation, and violence—even if cam models are consenting adults and their actions are a performance of a fantasy. Some cam models claimed to be emotionally affected by such fetish work. When we spoke, Penny was dealing with a moral dilemma. She had been receiving requests to indulge pedophilic fetishes, which she finds “disgusting,” but she also viewed this work as therapeutic like Alexa who regularly performs roleplay scenarios in which she acts like a young girl. As a service provider, she felt backed into a corner:

Because of their pain... I can’t react and go, ‘You’re fucking sick.’... I don't know the right thing to do, but I talk with a lot of my fellow cam models, and we just see all of these sick guys that are into kids, and it's starting to take its toll on us because there are more sick guys out there than we ever realized. And they flock to cam sites because they can openly do it without really doing it...But it's only a matter of time before some of them start doing it, and that's where we start feeling guilty. Where we're like, are we creating this? Are we making it a better? Or are we making it worse?

These are relatively new questions for Penny to ask herself. After six years in the industry, she is now married and getting ready to start a family with her husband. She did not think so much
about the impact of her work in her twenties, but being thirty-four and considering motherhood has changed her and made her work more difficult:

I have one guy on my Snapchat... He finds little kids in new stories and he'll send them to me and he's like, ‘look at this cutie.’... It's definitely changed my perspective on going out in the world and like thinking everyone's normal. Most people are fucked up. From what I'm coming across, I'm just like, ‘Ugh.’ It's a scary world, and sometimes I wish I had never done cam modeling because I would be oblivious to everything... the little kid stuff, that stuff weighs on you and for any cam model coming into the industry, if you don't have your head on straight, this industry will eat you up mentally and it'll mess with you. So, six years in and it's now starting to mess with me, but I think it's little things that I'm just starting to notice more that maybe I didn't notice before.

Unlike the emotional labor of maintaining a cheery demeanor, pretending to accept fetishes that go against one’s moral code and then embodying them precludes the option of deep acting, necessitating a kind of surface acting that can be mentally and spiritually draining.

Race play, a fetish for roleplaying racial power dynamics is popular with cam platform users and typically requested of Black performers. As Jones (2020) notes, race play “often involves using racial slurs during sex acts and in many cases specific role-playing scripts, such as reenacting a master/slave relationship on a United States plantation” (p. 209). While Black female performers get requests for race play often, White female performers are also asked to play the role of the White wife of a plantation owner, for instance, or participate in other scripts and scenarios that ask them dominate and degrade a minority male client. Similar to Jones’ findings, the White women I interviewed were more likely to say race play made them “uncomfortable” and refuse to do it, while the Black women I interviewed had more mixed responses. For example, Kitty, a White cam model said doing race play did not “sit well with her.” She also feared someone would record this content and use it to blackmail her or use it out of context without her consent. Hazel, another White cam model, said she would probably not “accept a booking where I had to call somebody the N-word on video,” but also acknowledged she is in no position to determine for someone else “what’s too icky to do for money.” She is friends with Black female colleagues who participate in “slave girl degrading white master scenarios” that she sees as within their right and refuses to judge: “I don't think anybody can tell a black person that
they're not doing it right. You need to do what you need to do. If no one is being forced to do something, if there's consent and they're adults—stay out of it.”

Consistent with Jones’ study, some Black female performers I interviewed adamantly refused to do race play, while others agreed to perform this work but used personal discretion and placed conditions on their consent (i.e. refusing certain kinds of “race play” or detailing to clients the boundaries of talk and activities to which they are consenting) and found ways to individually manage the potential for harm. One explanation for the discrepancy between White and Black female performers’ responses to roleplaying racialized sexual domination and oppression is that Black women receive such requests more often and might have more reason to rethink their stances on the capitalist and White supremacist underpinnings of the industry in which they work. In other words, while many Black cam models refuse to engage in race play, some find accepting racialized sexual “kink work” to be their best option to combatting the “sexual racism” scholars have noted of cam platforms like MyFreeCams that disproportionately lower Black women’s ability to gain visibility and succeed economically in these spaces if they do not participate in highly requested acts like “race play” for which they are seemingly suited (Jones, 2020).

Some Black women I interviewed defended their decisions to exploit sexual desires, even those stemming from White supremacy, for personal economic advantage, but also highlighted the emotional labor involved in navigating racism as an online sex worker (p. 216). Blair, for instance, is a Black cam model who regularly gets requests for “race play.” She uses tactics to depersonalize and lessen the impact of these interactions, such as refusing to pay attention to and absorb offensive language and depending on sarcasm and humor to process these experiences in a way that leaves her feeling superior to clients. She told me about an experience in which a White male client paid her nearly one thousand dollars to engage in race play. The price tag of one thousand dollars was an important detail Blair emphasized in our conversation, perhaps as a way of acknowledging her discretion in negotiating an impressive price for which she would be willing to do this work. She knew ahead of time the client intended to call her a racial slur during
their session and clarified her stance: “I don't think racism is right at all, but you're paying me a thousand dollars to call me [the n-word]. Okay, give me a thousand dollars. Who's losing here?”

Next, she discussed how she purposely directs her attention away from the exchange, which is meant to degrade her: “It’s not like I'm even reading the screen. I'll just freaking stand up, pull my tits out. You can't even see my face. And the whole time you're talking shit, I'm fucking texting or something…” Then, she relayed a sense of superiority over this particular client by questioning his intelligence and emphasizing her own entrepreneurial instincts to exploit racialized desires even if their intention is racist and meant to demean her: “Are you freaking dumb?” She said. “You could have just called me that for free, but you're actually paying me to call me that. But yeah. I'm going to take your money. Give me your fucking money. Idiot… Go ahead… say whatever you want.’

Importantly, Blair frames her thick skin as good business sense and part of being successful as a sex worker. She did not always have a lenient attitude toward race play or other controversial requests, but after years in the industry, she now touts the benefits of developing a willingness to lower her standards, like Alexa, and personally manage her feelings about what these acts mean for her in the context of her own life, of which cam modeling is just a job and race play is just a fantasy. The transactional context creates a buffer for Blair to see her acquiescence as simply good business, as a shark always on the lookout to make a sale:

Maybe it's just my hustle. I got shit to do. I don't have time for it. I got student loans. I have a sick grandma. I drive a nice car. I like the way I live. I don't have time for it. But you know, some people, that's their preference. Some people just really don't want to do it. It triggers them. It doesn't trigger me.

While Blair’s tactical defense against sexualized racism is not for everyone and arguably reinforces a system of White supremacy, it also allows her to exploit these desires for personal benefit. Underlying her complicity and compromise is a great deal of emotional labor to develop a disposition characterized by humor, emotional detachment, and a strong sense of self that remains unaffected by racist interactions and solely focused on the economic outcome. For this
reason, race play is a shining example of the emotional labor involved in both physically performing and mentally processing the performance of embodied intimacies. It also suggests differences in cam models’ racialized bodies and identities are associated with different kinds and degrees of emotional labor. Unpacking the racialization of emotional labor required of sex workers is beyond the scope of this study, but I would argue is a fruitful line of inquiry for future research.

**Intimacy Fatigue**

Many women who perform the embodied intimacies of cam modeling and sugar dating enjoy these practices, but some experience what I call *intimacy fatigue*, an emotional and psychic toll of balancing tensions produced by work in which positivity and emotional authenticity in sexual exchanges is a demand and expectation, not a choice or luxury. Sustaining positive energy, cultivating authentic connections, and feeling sexually desirable are essentially required of cam models and sugar babies, but everyday realities create internal distress that makes it difficult to meet this demand. Many spend time and energy figuring out how to negotiate this Catch-22. Cam models complain that the stress of inconsistent traffic and earnings on platforms makes it hard to exude the requisite sunny disposition on a bad day, when they might have received pennies or less for a day’s work in free chat. In my observations of a cam platform, I regularly witnessed this desperation unfold in real time. Far from connecting her to audiences, relaying true feelings of irritation or boredom makes a model less accessible to a room, usually leading to less participation and tips. Even successful models experience days when “you’re camming for six hours, and it’s crickets,” Birdie told me. Then, there are days when one tip from a “whale,” a big spender, meets a model’s weekly or even monthly goal. When traffic picks up, Birdie will “cam for as long as it goes away.” This pattern is “mentally draining,” as Blair put it. Unpredictability leads to not only dependencies on regular tippers, but also working grueling hours, which take a psychic toll and causes models to burn out.
That the emotional labor of pretending, of disguising one’s true feelings and self through surface acting, to enhance the consumer experience in these intensely intimate spaces leads to burn out can take cam models and sugar babies by surprise because the effort involved in managing the tension between consumer-directed demands for emotional authenticity and a worker’s reality is so well hidden. But, as Hochschild (1983) argues, “a separation of display and feeling is hard to keep up over long periods. A principle of emotive dissonance, analogous to the principle of cognitive dissonance, is at work. Maintaining a difference between feeling and feigning over the long run leads to strain” (p. 90). The flight attendants Hochschild studied would “go into robot” mode and revert to badly executed surface acting when they were feeling resistant to the work and customer demands (p. 135). In these moments, they were not as likely to earnestly surface act or attempt to deep act.

After interviewing several women who said they would unequivocally recommend cam modeling to a friend, I interviewed Leslie, a 42-year-old single mother who adamantly declared she would not. Leslie began cam modeling last year after she lost her job as a healthcare worker. She admittedly hates the work, but loves the amount of money she can make in a relatively short amount of time, especially compared to the other jobs she held in the past. Much like Hochschild’s flight attendants, she described the “mindset” demanded as “robotic,” often finding herself thinking:

I’m just going to get through this and make the money and be done. And I sometimes look at like, okay, a few hours from now it'll be over. I usually average about $50 to $70 an hour and I think I set a goal for myself and I say, okay, today I just want to make $200. And I know it's an easy day. But on the days where I say, all right, I should probably make a lot for it, I feel like I'm on a chain gang and I'm just waiting for that eight hour period to be over. And when it is over, I'm so thrilled I get in the bathtub. I make a bubble bath. I make dinner. And I'm like, I have to do this again?!

Leslie sees herself as an outlier because of her age and religious upbringing (she was raised Catholic). She is envious and awestruck by younger women who seem better equipped to emotionally handle being objectified by men than she does. She confessed:
I’m probably not somebody who should be doing cam work because I’m that not okay with how I feel emotionally yet I keep doing it. I don't get excited by it. And I think a lot of girls are like, ‘Hey, honey, how are you? Haven't talked to you.’ I'm just like, ‘Oh God, this one.’

Penny, also on the older end of the spectrum at thirty-four, had a similar distaste for the work and expressed ambivalence about her surface acting:

It's hard to not want to tell all these guys that they're dumb and to quit wasting your money and go out and meet a real girl because society says this is normal to sit here and talk to chicks and I'm like go out and meet a real damn girl. Like get out there, try it. But I can't say that because that goes right into my business, you know? It's hard.

Leslie and Penny’s stories provide glimpses into moments of tension when they were acutely aware of the emotional labor of camming and its affective aftermath. These impasses create doubts and questions that inform how they approach their roles and sometimes make this work more fraught for them than others who do not share their attitudes, backgrounds, and experiences.

As independent contractors in a gig economy, cam models decide their own working hours, which is one way they work around the demands on their emotions. Many described the emotional labor involved in performing positivity as “draining” because of the amount of energy involved in amplifying feelings that please and prove emotional presence while suppressing spontaneous reaction. Being “on” for an extended period of time can leave models feeling depleted. One cam model explains, “camming full time is hard work, just a 2-3 hour shift can be mentally exhausting.” This work sometimes pays off—Jessica told me she was making a hundred dollars for a couple hours of camming in the beginning—but the emotional labor also makes it hard to work longer hours or even what constitutes a traditional full shift. She told me, “A couple of hours can be exhausting. Even four hours feels like nine because you’re constantly moving and talking up the energy.” Illustrating this claim, Leslie told me about a time she earned $700 in one day only to take off half a week to recuperate, a routine she has grown accustomed to. “Anytime I make a large amount of money,” she told me, “I go off for a little bit... because I just am so burnt out by it.”
Many set their schedules and plan to take breaks—during the course of a day, week, month, or year—to ensure they do not burn out. Birdie attributes her success to taking frequent breaks, limiting the amount of marketing and promotion she does on social media, and eschewing content creation for clip sites, which many other models incorporate into their work: “[S]ome girls are at it all the time and then they burn out and they get frustrated really easy.” Another cam model explains how she cams throughout the day but in short sessions specifically because of the emotional energy needed to perform: “This helps me stay fresh for both times, because I don't get too tired and lose my charisma.” Alexa trains models to “take a day off” when they feel off “because you’re not going to make any money.” While a helpful form of self-care, this advice is moot if a model needs to work that day and does not have the freedom to let her emotions dictate her schedule. As Penny put it, “some girls, they depend on this to eat and if they don’t have a good day, they’re not eating or they’re not paying rent.” This advice also contradicts what is described as good practice in cam modeling: being consistent so people can find you and you can build a following. Cam models can manipulate their working conditions by taking frequent breaks to cope with emotional taxation as many end up doing, but this individualized solution also potentially limits their success if they are unable to develop a robust set of emotion management skills that allow them to consistently appear on cam. This quandary creates conditions that incentivize women to deftly manage their emotions.

Since this work is built on connecting with people, models talk about the power of their moods to pull in or push away traffic, which adds to the personal responsibility they feel for their success and failure on a platform. For intimacy work like cam modeling, the link between one’s mood and money is both obvious and misleading. For example, one model noted on an online forum:

Some weeks I put in a lot of effort, and those are the weeks I do the best. When my mood is awesome, my health is cooperating, and I have time to sit and be on cam, it helps. Some weeks just suck and are completely draining.
By maintaining a positive disposition, models gain some semblance of control over their work conditions, though they tend to be more random, inherently inconsistent, and platform-controlled than models like to admit. But models also cannot afford to let frustration affect their mood lest they want one day’s disappointing work conditions to extend into a streak.

**Hold Fast to Leisure**

To better accommodate consumer demands for gendered performances of positivity and authentic connection, whilst navigating the risks of burn out, many women are as invested in narratives of leisure that make their work more enjoyable as they are in professionalizing narratives that validate their work and provide emotional tools. When surface acting fails us, we reconcile this tension, Hochschild claims, “either by changing what we feel or by changing what we feign” (p. 90). In sexualized display work like sugar dating and cam modeling, changing what is displayed is not typically an option, therefore women work on their feelings. In this section, I discuss how a dialectic forms between practitioners and consumers in zones of monetized intimacy to uphold a *fantasy of leisure*. Workers are just as invested as consumers in enacting a *non-professional or amateur* interactive style and highly intimate level of emotional engagement, a condition that defies the traditional boundaries of professional work. Though the use values of finding pleasure and friendships as cam models and sugar babies can help women thrive in these positions, they are also self-preservation strategies that respond to working conditions that require them to intimately integrate themselves in their paid activities.

As the last chapter illustrated, in order to create the proper setting for visitors to cam modeling sites and sugar daddies on their dates, women are expected to enjoy themselves. Alexa’s cam model manual stresses, “You need to act like you are not there for a job but to have fun.” The imperative for women to have fun and even love doing jobs that involve high degrees of emotional labor is not new. Nearly forty years ago, Hochschild (1983) stated that for jobs in which “the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself” to reveal that “enjoyment takes effort is to do the job poorly” (p. 7). Moments of tension that I have mentioned
in this chapter, in which surface acting strategies failed cam models and sugar babies, exemplify the stakes of not trying to enjoy oneself. Like the flight attendants Hochschild studied, cam models and sugar babies are expected to perform feminine positivity, emotional authenticity, and sexual desire in a way that seems “effortless” (p. 20). As she argues, workers in these kinds of positions learn that “actually trying to love it, and to enjoy the customers” helps them achieve their goals in the end (p. 19). Trying to enjoy themselves is a task cam models and sugar babies continually work on because it makes their work easier (and more enjoyable), which in turn helps them do this work.

Enjoyment is seen as the antidote to less than ideal working conditions such as inconsistency, low to no earnings, and emotional abuse, which lead to burn out. In a forum post, one cam model shared techniques she uses to manipulate her mood to be more relaxed and ready to have fun, which resemble mindfulness tactics popularized in current self-help literature:

I just try my best to put all those feelings on hold. Focusing on your room as much as possible is honestly the best way to not let your mind wander. Try not to talk about negative things, play happy music, focus on fun topics, etc. It can make your room a nice place and a bit of an escape from what's dragging you down.

This technique showcases ways workers like this model work on disciplining the mind to create the mental conditions for enjoyment to occur.

After burning out once, a cam model who came back said she realized “taking [camming] too seriously before made [her] unhappy.” She felt “a need to look perfect at all times on cam,” which was “stressful.” Her new strategy involved “thinking of ways to stay on camera, doing things I would do anyway. And not being too attached to getting paid for the first few months.” She summed up her plan as approaching camming differently, specifically taking the job less seriously and having more fun with it:

This time around... this will be a side job, unless and until things really pick up. So I will be doing things like chatting with people when I feel lonely, ignoring them if I feel like it (I've seen tons of models who make bank ignoring customers anyway, including fairly new ones), exercising, doing yoga, playing instruments, listening to my favorite tunes, playing games with the customers if I feel like it but not if I don't, telling gross guys to fuck off instead of trying to think of a way to be polite so they'll pay me chump change...
I also plan to start with much shorter hours. Last time around, I was on all over the day and night, with a crazy schedule because I was trying to make money... This time, I may just do a few hours, a few days a week very consistently, and possibly stick to that. Whatever I have to do not to burn out.

Another model, seemingly further along in her camming journey, shared what she does to create a “healthy work environment” for herself, which sounded similar in finding strategies for having more fun and finding more joy in work that is potentially, and likely, emotionally draining. Her advice centered on creating standards for work that reduce the chance she will have emotionally draining encounters:

I do not keep contact with people that stress me out. Sometimes a tipper comes along that pays me a lot but I don't enjoy their personality or their particular kinks. I learned the hard way that keeping contact with that person ultimately drains me and sours my mood for cam. I cut it off and from now on, I don't let someone immediately buy their way into my life. Their interactions must leave me feeling better and more turned on.... I keep most access to me limited. The bread and butter of my camming experience happens live on the site. Interacting with me and getting to know me all happens within the 4 hours that I am broadcasting. I do not talk on the phone, text, do personal skypes, etc. This means that when I do chat with someone off of the site it is because I genuinely want to be talking to them. I do not feel obligated. This is all to make sure I don't burn out.

By enjoying the work more, workers shield themselves from what they see as the trappings of a dead-end job. For instance, one cam model writes to her peers about finding enjoyment on slow days of camming:

If you can find something you enjoy doing, while being able to give your attention to potential customers, it can definitely help make the slow days more enjoyable.

Seeing this work as a personal choice, rather than a necessity, also helps. One model asserted on an online forum, “If you treat it like work, it will never be something you can enjoy.”

Sugar babies also try to enjoy themselves to be more successful and make their lives easier. Unlike sugar babies who create barriers between their “sugar” and “vanilla” lives and migrate into “sugar-escort” territory, many sugar babies find enjoyment in this work, and do it better, by selectively dating sugar daddies with whom they actually like spending time.

According to one sugar baby blogger, actually enjoying a sugar daddy is a boon, as long as
women remain vigilant in applying a feeling rule of emotional detachment and are clear about the limited parameters of these relationships:

I want to crack open a pretty controversial subject: feelings. I see a pretty mixed bag on attitudes towards [sex work] and feelings on here. Honestly, a part of me really roots for that “who-cares-get-that-money-he-sucks” attitude, but at the same time that seems super callous. Yes, men are trash and we need to be focused on the money, but I feel like that attitude gets in the way of genuinely enjoying yourself... I advocate for a safe balance of feelings because they will make your time spent with your SDs MUCH more enjoyable. Stay measured and know the limits, but it is also important to not be too transactional... while the money is important, the time you’re spending should be worth something even without the money. You’re doing fabulous activities and eating at chic restaurants - lighten up and enjoy yourself! Yes, you’re paid to be there, but hell! You should like who you’re with, right? Money isn’t everything, and make sure you choose your own happiness above all else, ok? Yes, we ultimately are only with our SDs for the money... you potentially will catch feelings, and that’s okay.. arguably even good.

This pleasure imperative relates to “passionate work,” a gendered practice germane to post-Fordist working conditions identified by McRobbie (2016) as particularly appealing to young women of this era. She sees passion for work expressed as “a bodily style” and “exuberant enthusiasm” for work, a diversion of young women’s desire from romantic relationships to careers (McRobbie, 2016, p. 113). Genuine enjoyment in work is a demand we see in other feminized professions, such as restaurant work. McRobbie discusses Emma Dowling's study of affective labor in restaurant work, particularly the demand of "new managerialism requiring staff to bring their own intelligence and their personalities to the job, creating a relaxed and enjoyable 'dining experience'." As McRobbie describes it:

Dowling was encouraged to entertain the guests as though they were personal friends, taking care to order a taxi home. Affect is therefore something required of staff, a fundamental condition of the job; it is also, as Hochschild argued in her study of cabin crew, something that must be sincere, the waitress has to be able to convey her genuine enjoyment in what she is doing, she has to demonstrate ‘pleasure in work’” (p. 106).

While Dowling experienced an organizational demand for pleasure, cam models and sugar babies reflect an individualization or internalization of these same directives in their entrepreneurial work. This kind of industrialized pleasure represents a deep acting strategy that is different from the pleasure they still might also get from doing this work.
Seeing work relations as friendships is another deep acting strategy that comes with benefits and drawbacks. Many cam models, for instance, reveal they have regulars who have been with them “since day one,” whether that was one (Sophie and Tanya) or ten years ago (Abbie, Avery, and Stephanie). When asked whether they defined relationships with fans and sugar daddies as “intimate,” most women I interviewed were more comfortable describing them as “friendships” with men they “genuinely cared about.” Cam model Jessica explained her unusual relationship status and affection for her “regulars,” mostly male users who she has known her whole career:

I genuinely care about these people... if something happened to them, you know, that would really affect me because you do feel like they're friends. I have a few clients that have been around the entire time since day one... if anything happened to them, I would be devastated... I always joke that I'm wifey, girlfriend, and mistress. It's in a song, but that's kind of what you are.

Even those whose other comments revealed a desire to create distance from their fans—Penny, for instance—revealed these relationships contained more intimacy than she knowingly cultivates:

My dad was in the hospital last year, and they knew about it, and they would text me and tweet me everyday like ‘Praying for your dad. I hope he's okay.’ And some of them would send money to Naked and be like, ‘Go get some lunch.’ So in that aspect, like that's really nice.

While women reported enjoying this culture of friendship, the feeling rules for these commercial encounters seemed to migrate with time into more casual relationships and murky territory.

Reinforcing the need and desire for workers to see the relationships that develop in these contexts—work relations—as personally meaningful friendships presents an opportunity for platforms and consumers to mystify and devalue women’s labor. As these relationships develop, models struggle to maintain their boundaries, with several reporting that some male regulars mistake them for genuine friendships and expect to hang out without paying them, while others treat it like a game, seeing how much they can get for free. Callie explained this issue:

A lot of people will view your cam and come create a friendship with you and almost treat you as like a virtual therapist. And it's hard because you have to draw a line like how
emotionally invested do I get into these people and into their problems ...I'm trying to support myself, have this business that I'm running, but it's really hard when you care about people too. So if you can't like log on and just go blank face, like this is my job. 100% of the time, it can be hard. There's people, you know, I've become friends with, I've seen them go through emotional up and downs and losing relatives or friends. And it's just, it's something that like you log off and you think about, like, if you're a human with emotions, you can't stop yourself from thinking about it and worrying about these people. And a lot of the time they don't see you in the same light you see them because there's so many cam models they have to choose from. So they can just, you know, turn it off like an on and off switch and go vent to somebody else. Meanwhile, if you built a relationship with this person and don't know what happened to them or where they went, there's really no way to be like, where did they go? If they're gone, they're gone. And then you wonder why or what happened. And it can just be a little stressful. So you have to know not to invest all of your feelings into like these people, but then you also want to, because that makes the experience better for them. So you have to be really careful about where you draw the line.

As Callie illustrates, cam modeling involves feminized care work that comes with what Folbre (2001) calls the “care penalty,” the impulse to involve more of one's self, emotional resources, and time into a job regardless of whether or how well it is remunerated because these jobs incite a kind of “intrinsic satisfaction” that resonates with gendered norms and competencies. These conundrums of care disproportionately affect women who do the majority of low-paid care work (p. 45). In work like cam modeling, this impulse is combined with an imperative to be “authentic,” which builds a following and produces desired levels of intimacy, but the emphasis on friendship and connection can also undermine a model’s bottom line by subverting the value of her professional labor.

Additionally, models sometimes feel uncomfortably beholden to male users who will “hold the money over your head,” according to Cora. Big tippers, she said, expect a model to bend her rules for them, pressing her for sensitive information like her real name and location, and retaliating when rebuffed. Several reflected on fans who would remind them they had discovered the models’ real names and even home addresses but did not intend to use the information. Ophelia had a user send a greeting card to her home, which disturbed her, but she did not want to alienate the user who never tried to meet up, remained friendly, and continued to pay her. Models tend to downplay these threats and individually manage incidents of harassment.
or coercion because they fear the financial ramifications and it may come from users with whom they have developed a friendship. This dynamic shows how workplace sexual harassment follows women onto online labor platforms but is potentially harder to navigate since they are reframed as personal relations.

This section has argued that women accept the imperative to enjoy their jobs and reframe work relations as “friendships” in order to succeed and make work more tolerable, but this strategy also creates ambiguity in the value of women’s labor and the relationships they form doing it. This investment stems not from sheer (pure, uncritical, false) delight in the work, but because it is seen as making the work easier to do. Of course, women do gain pleasure from these commercial intimacies, but these semi-formal work contexts also make pleasure a work condition. Its dual nature is evident because the absence of pleasure impacts not only women’s desires to do the job, but also their ability to do it at all. Cam models and sugar babies who do not exhibit the appropriate bodily and emotional cues of eroticized social pleasure are denied success in these industries that count on them to enjoy themselves in doing this work. Pleasure is not only integral to producing their own labor-power (a form of reproductive labor to sustain their own working bodies), but also a sought-after commodity women produce for consumers (to reproduce male labor-power). Because pleasure is demanded of workers, and difficult to fake, they rely on deep acting strategies that I found were ingrained in the ethos of both communities: having fun and making friends. Seeing themselves as not only (or at all) professionals, but also (or simply) amateurs made the work more enjoyable and easier to do, but it also mystifies their labor, making it harder for cam platform users and sugar daddies, as well as outside observers, to identify what they do as work. Internally, they usually know they are working when engaged in practice-related activities—and do not confuse themselves about this fact—but they still veer into blurry territories of friendship and caring that can make it harder to place boundaries and conditions (like payment) on work they know they are doing. The ways in which they emphasize their own pleasure ultimately undermines the value of their labor.
Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has shown how cam modeling and sugar dating, as digitally-mediated monetized intimacies, require women to resolve a tension between producing a professional performance of positivity and cultivating emotionally authentic connections. These gendered displays involve emotional labor that women perform in varying ways and with varying outcomes. Some lean into professional identities and strategies, which work to an extent. Others, who are often more successful, learn to incorporate strategies that emphasize the amateur nature of this work because doing so differentiates them from the real professionals (escorts and porn stars) that are seen as less emotionally authentic and socially-oriented in their sex work. I have specifically included a discussion of where and when strategies fail cam models and sugar babies to highlight the ambiguity and women’s active negotiation of consumer demands. Women’s strategies are far from perfect. They do report possibilities of this work, which I explore in more depth in the next chapter, but this chapter demonstrated the constraints and pitfalls of performing this work.

This chapter highlights women’s experiences of the eroding boundaries of work as it creeps into domestic and leisure spaces where the forces of production are historically less recognized than those performed in a factory or office setting (Gregg, 2008). Ironically, cam models and sugar babies perform “women’s work” built for the private sphere, therefore characterizing this process as a movement from public to private is not entirely accurate. Instead, the benefactor of women’s emotion work now is not a loved one, but a consumer who is mostly separated from other aspects of women’s intimate lives. The blurring of labor and leisure creates conditions that are freeing, but also confusing to women who perform emotional labor in these spaces. Sometimes they are called on to adopt a positive emotionally available yet detached disposition associated with service work, which applies to these seemingly casual contexts (Hochschild, 1983). Women’s experiences of performing positivity signal what I, drawing on Gregg (2008), call “service work bleed,” the unstated expectation that women will apply
standards of customer service work to these casualized work spaces and relationships. Illustrating “service work bleed,” women invoke strategies such as responding to emotional abuse with a “customer is always right” attitude even when they are simultaneously called upon to enact a more casual, “I’m doing this for fun” demeanor. This consumer-directed disposition is increasingly normalized as monetization practices become more commonly blended with “use values” of peer-to-peer relationships cultivated using digital technologies and social media. This finding suggests that “the social factory” binds women to gendered roles and scripts more tightly because service work depends on feminized dispositions that are being reinstated in the home and leisure, even as women’s dispositions in their personal lives may have changed. Performing the relational labor of femininity, even in the private contexts of romantic and kin relations, involves emotion work due to cultural ideals and social norms that pressure women to be nurturing, receptive, and equipped and motivated to maintain relationships. But this demand on their emotions and attempt to control their reactions intensifies for women when the monetary exchange is made explicit as it is in sugar dating and cam modeling. Receiving money for socially reproductive labor seems to solidify the power of capital to interpellate market subjectivities that direct a woman’s behavior and emotional countenance for the right price.

At the same time, women are just as invested in upholding narratives of leisure and complicit in reinforcing them as cam platform users and sugar daddies. Women who do this work sometimes favor the rhetoric of leisure and pleasure because seeming to be uninterested in financial benefits in fact earns them more money, but other times playing “the amateur” mystifies their labor for their audiences. Even though women mostly recognize their own labor—as the chapter’s title suggests—they agree to play this game that makes demanding payment harder. Cam models and sugar babies trade in desire, sex and intimacy, which sometimes leads men to assume that women do this work primarily for personal pleasure. But women also participate in the circulation of discourses that refocus their energies around “having fun” and “making friends,” which undermines their abilities to create professional boundaries that work for them.
CHAPTER 5
TAKING SEXY BACK:
WHY WOMEN BECOME CAM MODELS AND SUGAR BABIES

Overview

Having presented a picture of what women do and create as cam models and sugar babies for an imagined male audience, and the emotional labor involved, I now turn to a curiosity that perhaps has grown by laying this foundation: given the constraints of feminine performativity in a sexual commercial context, why exactly do women become cam models and sugar babies? Feminist media scholars have long debated the gendered politics of sexual commercial culture. Much of this research analyzes media texts and cultural discourses, but less is known about the motivations, lived experiences, and understandings of women who engage in practices that seem to sexually and emotionally objectify them like cam modeling and sugar dating. Shedding light on aspects of women’s engagement with commercial sexual culture that remain largely unexamined, this chapter addresses the research question: What meanings and values do women participants associate with cam modeling and sugar dating?

Based on my interviews and qualitative analysis of online forums and blogs, the analysis that follows explores women’s relationship to sexual commercial culture—how they not only feel beholden to it like an implicit social contract that preceded their arrival on the scene, but also emboldened by it, creatively using it in ways that sustain them. I argue that cam models and sugar babies share common values and perspectives that lead them to these scenes and practices for reasons that are easily misunderstood. First, they find meaning in cam modeling and sugar dating as practices that transform women’s sexual objectification into a valuable resource, or form of capital, they can use to improve their material conditions. Instead of seeing sexual objectification as a negation of their sexual agency, they reclaim it as feminine erotic power and value cam modeling and sugar dating as practices where it is recognized and rewarded as sexual capital, which is one reason some women describe these scenes as “empowering.” While scholars tend to
focus on the sexual component of empowerment women might find in sexual commercial cultures, I argue that women stress their desires for economic independence much more than the literature currently acknowledges. The women in this study articulate sexual commercial culture to discourses of empowerment because they are invested in sexual games that allot them higher positions than other games. Playing into their own sexual objectification is instrumental to enacting gendered strategies for thriving.

Second, women find meaning in cam modeling and sugar dating as alternatives to what they call “vanilla” lifestyles and choices, signaling their discontent with conventional or normative ways of being in the social world. From sugar babies’ discontent with “vanilla” relationships to cam models’ discontent with “vanilla” work, I argue that their discontent leads them to search for alternatives and find possibility in sexual commercial culture. All too often, women’s expressions of sexual agency and search for sexual possibility—or even writing about it from an academic perspective—is disregarded as unpolitical or overly celebratory. Drawing on Berg (2021), I shift the feminist gaze from celebration of sexual commercial culture to dissatisfaction with normativity, exploring women’s discontent as a form of critique that exposes their micropolitical struggles and builds a “politics for the meantime” (p. 9). Rather than see women’s participation in sexual commercial culture as “postfeminist,” meaning devoid of political motive or value, I argue that cam modeling and sugar dating have very clear, though still relatively untapped, political stakes and meanings for women in these scenes. They are, in fact, making moves that engage with structures that limit their economic and sexual sovereignty and creating tactical forms of resistance to avoid being subsumed by these forces.

Though cam models and sugar babies share similar dispositions toward the possibilities of erotic power and the constraints of normativity, they invoke distinct strategies and tactics based on differences in their social locations. While certainly not representative, my sampling of women who sugar date was younger and more educated than my sampling of women who cam model, which suggests sugar dating might be a form of sexual commercial culture only available
to women with more cultural capital (see tables in Appendix B). Women who sugar date were also more likely to frame their engagement with sexual commercial culture as a side gig—a part-time, casual activity that they did not spend too much time on and may or may not generate income. Cam models may have started with this mindset, but eventually the majority approached it as a full-time, income-generating occupation. These differences are meaningful because it connects to the kinds of strategies and tactics available to women in each scene and how their social positions bring different constraints and possibilities into their awareness.

As this analysis will show, cam models see themselves as sexual entrepreneurs breaking free from the constraints of corporate capitalism and gendered ways of being in the public sphere. Sexual entrepreneurship has been critiqued as an extension of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and consumerism (Gill, 2011; Evans and Riley, 2014), but less has been said as to how the underlying desire to leave work and become self-employed, self-managed, and self-reliant is based on a deep-seated unrest, malaise, and struggle against the status quo. Counter to this claim, I argue that cam modeling is a tactical use of gender and sexuality that resonates with feminist antiwork politics (Weeks, 2011, Berg, 2021). Sugar babies, on the other hand, use compensated dating to escape the trappings of heteronormative dating culture and produce alternative gendered ways of being in the private sphere (for the time being). Though this lifestyle is sometimes characterized as transactional and therefore an extension of neoliberal market logic infiltrating intimate life (Birkás et al., 2020), I argue that this tactical use of gender and sexuality represents an attempt to use activities in the commercial sphere to revalue women’s social reproductive labor in sexual relationships, an individualized strategy that echoes the more political agenda of the 1970s International Feminist Collective’s Wages for Housework campaign (Federici, 2020).

**Conceptual Framework**

Feminist media scholars engage in heated debates over the proposition that women might be or feel empowered by sexual commercial culture. The viewpoints expressed in this debate typically adopt one of three predominant perspectives (Gill, 2012). The first perspective in the
empowerment debate represents a “sex-positive” stance. This perspective considers how women’s engagement with sexualized culture including commercial sex industries like pornography and stripping might expand women’s freedom of sexual expression, therefore engages with women’s “empowerment” as a matter of sexual liberty and transgression of restricting gender norms. The second perspective, which some call an “anti-porn” stance, regards women’s claims of empowerment through sexual commercial culture as “cynical rhetoric, wrapping sexual objectification in a shiny… packaging that obscures the continued underlying sexism” (Gill, 2012, p. 737). The third perspective questions the focus on “empowerment” as a goal in the first place. This perspective critiques how empowerment is “normatively demanded” of women in a neoliberal capitalist patriarchy that calls on women “routinely to perform confident, knowing heterosexiness” (Gill, 2012, p. 737). Because of its extreme position, the “anti-porn” perspective tends to be overshadowed by a debate between the first and last perspectives. Evans and Riley distill the divergence between these two worthy perspectives and the puzzle it produces in the juxtaposition of two questions.

The first, derived from Gill’s works (2003; 2007ab; 2009) and perspective, asks: “How are we to speak of women’s pleasures and talk of empowerment in the context of neoliberalism that requires women to understand their practices through discourses of choice, pleasure, and empowerment?” Scholars who discuss women’s sexuality in relation to a “postfeminist sensibility” demonstrate a keen awareness for moments of disempowerment in women’s engagement with sexual commercial culture because they focus on the structures that constrain women’s sexual subjectivities and make women complicit in their own oppression. For instance, Harvey and Gill (2011) discuss an important concept for this study—sexual entrepreneurship—as a repertoire typical of a postfeminist media and culture that tethers feminist ideals of sexual empowerment to the traditional and normative goals of keeping a male sexual partner satisfied. Looking at discourses that circulate in women’s magazines, they claim these texts endorse an ethos of sexual playfulness and openness, which is in fact “tightly policed” by patriarchal
objectives, betraying the liberated tone of a sexual entrepreneurial discourse. In another study on the same theme, Gill (2009) argues that the intense and extensive level of “intimate self-surveillance” women are expected to engage in is a mode of governmentality, in the context of which women are evaluated on their performance and active engagement in a sexual life that is now “compulsory” (p. 365).

The second question Evans and Riley see feminist media scholars grappling with is one more in line with a sex-positive perspective. They contrast the first question to a quote from Duits and van Zoonen (2007): “What does feminism gain—politically and analytically—by immediately countering any girl’s or woman’s appeal to autonomy by pointing out her false consciousness and putting her under all the constraints of patriarchy and capitalism?” (p. 168). In recent years, a growing bloc of feminist scholars have questioned this impulse to see sexual representation and subjectification as much of a problem as the “postfeminist sensibility” camp does.

Some feminist media studies attempt to bridge these perspectives by acknowledging women’s sexual agency and the possibility of subversion, but also recognizing postfeminism, consumerism, and neoliberalism as structuring forces. Dobson (2015), for instance, examines women’s self-representations as cultural producers using digital media technologies. She argues that though these practices and representations fail to meet general standards of being “resistant” or “subversive,” they are still “politically significant in terms of what they reveal about negotiating the conditions of postfeminism and femininity” (p. 2). Like my study, she examines how women “simultaneously utilize and complicate the kinds of strong and sexy, hot and assertive, autonomous and confident constructions of a ‘postfeminist’ young femininity that have become ubiquitous in globalized mediascapes through advertising, music, videos, film, TV, and celebrity culture in recent years” (p. 4). Evans and Riley (2014) critique the limitations of seeing women’s engagement with sexual commercial culture as a form of false consciousness, but do not go so far as to suggest it represents the possibilities women claim. Comparing younger and older
cohorts of women, they identify younger women as “pleasure pursuers” and older women as “functioning feminists” that interface with ideologies of neoliberalism, consumerism, and feminism to construct sexuality as a technologies of the self—a “technology of sexiness.”

Different in many respects, both groups:

produced their subject positions in part through the othering of women, so that whether one rejected or embraced new female sexualities enabled through postfeminist consumerism, part of the identity taken up involved threat, anxiety, and the policing of other women (p. 138).

Attempting to move beyond a sex-as-danger narrative, Evans and Riley (2014) arguably remain ensconced in a sex-as-discipline paradigm. Both Dobson (2015) and Evans and Riley (2014) provide good examples of how “strong theory” might produce “paranoid readings” that make it hard to see women’s sexual agency as anything but damaging (Sedgwick, 2003).

Feminist debates over sexualized culture continue to unfold with some new dialogues forming. Those who see possibility in women’s sexual expression (Paasonen et al., 2021) and those who see in it a form of “intimate governance” (Harvey & Gill, 2011) seem to agree that, in the contemporary cultural moment, feminist media scholars should focus on locating and critiquing sexism and other -isms if and when it intersects with sexualized culture to develop a political “rather than a moral sensibility about sex” (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 1317). Paasonen et al. (2021) see the collapse of performing sexual desirability and sexism within feminist discourse, but also broader academic inquiries and public debates, as a problem because it conflates sexual subjectification with the reproduction of social power (p. 18). But, as they argue, sexism “is a different concern from both sexual depiction and sexiness, despite the ease with which these notions are routinely conflated” (p. 8). Playing into the feminine sexual object motif is not inherently an objectifying act, in that it is not always about “becoming someone else’s tools lacking agency, becoming interchangeable, or being owned” (ibid). A growing faction of scholars has also produced inward facing critiques of second-wave feminists’ “paranoid readings” of women’s pleasure in sexual media and culture to shape new directions in feminist knowledge
production (Evans & Riley, 2014; Wilkinson, 2017; Berg, 2021). Addressing gaps in the literature, academic feminists now collaborate with sex workers and activists (and emphasize how these categories are not mutually exclusive) to produce accounts based in lived experiences that counter what they see as puritanical, counter-productive, and/or elitist assumptions about the value and meanings of sexual commercial culture (Taormino et al., 2013; Ditmore et al., 2010).

Still, an overarching debate between seeing the emancipatory potential of women’s engagement with a sexed up culture and seeing its compulsory nature has fragmented the area of feminist media studies and created “stagnation” in thinking beyond terms of empowerment, choice, and freedom that seem to immediately push scholars into their corners. As Evans and Riley (2014) argue, feminist debates over the gendered politics of sexual commercial culture result in “analytical sideways oscillations that reproduce and rehearse somewhat tired, but still emotive, arguments, seemingly unable to develop forward momentum” (p. 18). I would add that this debate has potentially pushed scholars outside the dominant “postfeminist sensibility” camp away from feminist media studies in favor of a more open-minded sexuality studies.

This chapter builds on these debates, discussions, and new directions in feminist media studies by drawing on a different set of theories and concepts and offering empirical data to rethink women’s sexual agency in these scenes. Scholars continue to use the framework of “empowerment” to argue for or against the emancipatory potential of women’s engagement with sexual commercial culture, but as Evans and Riley (2014) found, and I too found in conducting this study, real women do not actually bring this term up that often. Evans and Riley (2014) write that they found “little talk” of empowerment “even while feminist academics and advertisers alike seem so eager for this experience to be had” (p. 37). In comparison, some of my interviewees did use this term to describe various experiences and perspectives, but they more often talked about what academics refer to as “empowerment” in other ways. Therefore, I refer to empowerment more to align this project with others that talk about possibility and women’s agency. I try to bridge this gap between academic and practical discourse in this chapter by
unpacking how women define power and the experience of having or embodying it. I argue we must look at what women actually talk about, besides or in addition to or in place of “empowerment,” since the experience and meanings of feeling powerful are highly subjective, and women adopt ideologies in reflexive and partial ways. Furthermore, sticking within the terms of postfeminism and empowerment obscures the complex affinities women develop with and through erotic labor, which are largely underestimated and even misconstrued (Agustin, 2007; Chapkis, 1997; Ditmore et al., 2010; Grant, 2014). Moving away from approaches that diagnose women’s sexual agency as symptomatic of a disciplinary mechanism involves adopting approaches that complicate a simple definition of agency and what it looks like in practice.

In her ethnographic study of porn workers, Berg (2021), for instance, provides a framework for agency and pleasure that I adopt as well. She draws on the works of scholars and activists across multiple disciplines such as studies of porn and sex work, feminism, queer culture, antiwork politics, and contingent labor to build a case for understanding softer forms of agency that do not look like grand exits from structures such as patriarchy and capitalism. Often, she argues, agency looks like contradiction since its real world manifestations are “a matter of both/and” (p. 5). She looks for smaller moments of transgression, contemplation, and dissatisfaction as forms of critique that are important if not immediately revolutionary. Evans and Riley (2014) also argue for an understanding of agency as “a self-reflexive method of adopting, and potentially subverting one discourse over another, even if that subversion is limited by the necessity to cite the norm” (p. 56). Though they land on different conclusions than I might, I find their definition of agency useful to exploring how cam models and sugar babies work within the bounds of sexual commercial culture, but also find creative ways to subvert its meanings. Many cam models and sugar babies indeed adopt discourses that reflect what many feminist scholars would likely critique as highly problematic. However, interviews with cam models and sugar babies reveal meanings and values that such a reading does not permit to exist. They particularly reveal pleasures that are suppressed in the “sex-as-discipline” discourse of analyses that only see
postfeminism in them. Just as Schalet (2011) saw a need for American culture to move away from a “sex-as-risk paradigm” and toward acknowledging the “potentially pleasurable, connecting, and empowering aspects” of adolescent sexuality in order to socially progress, I see a need to rethink the reliance on discipline as the ultimate determinant of female sexuality in a commercial context in order to develop a healthier understanding of American women’s sexual agency that serves their interests (p. 209). Schalet (2011) calls for “cultural innovation” to move “beyond the drama” of American adolescent sexuality as dysfunctional—feminists could also heed this call as both sides of the debate tend to dramatize the implications of sexualized culture for female sexuality but in opposing directions (ibid). The following analysis brings new material to this debate and a spirit of acceptance of women’s realities that I hope inspires new thinking.

**Investment in Erotic Power**

Despite the now dominant cultural notion that contesting the sexualization of culture and resisting objectification are in women’s best interest, cam models and sugar babies embrace both as sources of erotic power, which they are not interested in relinquishing. Growing up in an increasingly mediated and visual consumer culture, women enter scenes for sugar dating and cam modeling already acutely aware of the premium placed on women with sex appeal. For example, young women enter the sugar dating scene aware of the command their youthful presence and good looks wield. Sugar daddies “want to date you,” Skylar told me about her experience as a sugar baby. She advised women not to discount the influence they have over men who see their youthful energy and beauty as important resources in achieving a desired feeling state. “You’re cute, and you’re young,” as she plainly put it. “You definitely have some vitality and passion to offer them that they feel is lacking in their own lives.” Sugar baby Summer reiterated this point: “They’re also trying to impress you because you are significantly younger and better looking.”

Though sugar daddies have more power by traditional measures of money, stature, and influence, young women entering these scenes without such resources, armed only with a sense of their sexual desirability, do not necessarily see themselves as lacking power. Sometimes they
recognize the ephemerality of erotic power defined by youthfulness, with Mavis telling me, “I feel like my power in this game is in my looks, which only lasts for as long as I am young and like in this ambiguous-twenties-looking age. I feel like I know the game that I’m playing. I know that it’s very little space.” This awareness that her appeal to sugar daddies has an expiration date does not stop her from seeing her “looks” as a resource available to her now. Sugar babies on Tumblr welcome the opportunity to exercise what feels to them like a misrepresented form of gendered power. One blogger, for example, hints at the untapped resources available to women who are not afraid to emphasize their gender and its advantages:

I once heard a man say that if he was a woman, he’d be rich. He’s not the first man to say this. Men know the power that women hold. You could literally become rich just because you’re a woman.

Reevaluating the erotic power they hold, even if temporarily, as objects of desire is a predominant theme amongst sugar babies.

Similarly, cam models recognize the power of being conventionally attractive for gaining the attention of an online audience. As Birdie relayed about her early experiences getting started as a cam model, “I was banking on the fact that I was a pretty girl. People wanted to watch me.” But cam models also talk about the importance of confidence in producing an aura of sex appeal that draws people in as much as feminist scholars bemoan it as a postfeminist dictate (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Vanessa, for instance, explained how women who gravitate toward sex work are more comfortable with their own erotic power:

I feel like there’s two girls, two different types of women in this world. No matter what size you are, no matter how small you are and no matter how you pretty your features are or whatever. I feel like there’s two types of girls. There’s girls who are absolutely confident in themselves and then girls who are not. And, you know, some girls who aren’t confident in themselves could be like beautiful. Beautiful. They’re just insecure. So, I think the girls who are able to do stripping and cam modeling, we are confident. Hands down. Absolutely. That’s why we can do this kind of thing… whenever we walk into a room and we think we’re hot shit, we think no one is hotter than us, and that’s why we can do this.

Not every woman has this confidence or feels comfortable embodying sexiness the way a woman who thinks she is “hot shit” does, as Vanessa points out. Because of the attention bestowed upon
attractive and confident women in media and popular culture, cam models and sugar babies intuitively recognize how their disposition toward their own desirability as sexual objects affords them a “degree of power” that scholars refer to as “sexual capital” (Green, 2014, p. 48). As a result, they are invested in the sexual value attributed to them, not merely because they feel empowered by the attention they get from men, but because this attention connotes a certain amount of status, power, and capital in their possession.

Women are also aware that feminized competencies such as socio-emotional skills are a form of erotic power, therefore they value the sexual scenes of cam modeling and sugar dating for recognizing and rewarding relational capacities they identify in themselves and may have spent time, money, and energy cultivating. For instance, being persuasive and charming like a good salesperson come in handy in these sexual scenes. Cam model Blair described herself as someone who “could talk a peanut out of its shell” and proudly shared with me her well-honed technique for getting men who are in a just-browsing mode to stay in her room longer:

- Just like overpower them where they can't even think about it... like when people go buy a TV, and you're working commission. You don't let them say no. And that's what I would do. I would not let them say no. Even like with camming. Like when guys come in, like, I'm just like, ‘Well, where are you going? Why do you want to leave? You're already here. You came in here for a reason. Right. So why don't we like, you know, make the most of it, like this could benefit me and you.’ And then they'll start thinking about it. Like, ‘Yeah, you're right.’ If I get some guys like that, they're like, ‘Oh, I'm just passing by and checking out the girls.’ I'm like, ‘But, why? Like, why would you want to pass me by? What if you never find me again? This is a once in a lifetime moment we could share.’ And they're like, ‘Okay, how was your day?’

Similarly, a sugar baby on Tumblr describes her method of “finessing” men she meets on non-sugar dating platforms to “spoil her” and consider adopting a sugar dating lifestyle:

- He kept telling me that I was so mature (and sassy because I would tease him a lot). He was hypnotized by me, as I was just very calm and alluring which is what made him continuously complement this part of me...There were a few points in the conversation where something came up and I would make a joke that it wasn’t in my budget and he would tell me, “Okay then, I will get one for you.” Basically, he knew that I was expensive, classy and mature and he loved it... So, I’m going to milk this one. I feel like he’s 100% a spoiling, I get that vibe from him. It’s like he thinks it’s cute if I say that I want something. I want to be his spoiled girlfriend. So I’m going to message him that I loved spending time with him etc etc. Eventually, I’ll reiterate what it is that I’m looking for that I basically want to be taken care of, and propose an allowance. Obviously, he
didn’t give me a sufficient amount of money but since I met him off Tinder and it was our first date and sugar was never explicitly stated, I’ll have to work on this one. He was so smitten that I think I can really negotiate this one and turn this man into my [sugar] daddy.

As these examples indicate, cam models and sugar babies describe themselves as capable salespeople and negotiators who skillfully use their feminine charm. They welcome the opportunity to use these skills to sell themselves in sexual markets as in-demand emotional commodities (Illouz, 2018).

While it may be common sense to think of the sexualization of culture as exacerbating the objectification of women, or a greater “autonomization” between sex and emotion, these practices reveal the desire for contained emotion, for the control over emotion, not necessarily its removal from late modern sexual culture. In fact, the affective pleasure of a woman’s company is sometimes worth as much or more to men they interact with than their physical appearance and adds to their erotic power in both scenes as I discussed in Chapter 3. Those who consider themselves good listeners and conversationalists report doing better in these scenes. For instance, Ophelia sugar dated before she started cam modeling, which helped her because she had already developed valuable social skills: “I think that might be why it was so easy for me. Like I remember my very first show, a lot of the comments were like, ‘Have you cammed before, have you done this before?’ And I think it was just because I was so used to talking to older men, not that obviously my audience is older, but just knowing how to talk to them.” This emphasis on emotion fits within a broader “feminization of work,” which has made feminized capacities such as the production of feelings, specifically of intimate bonding, increasingly valued forms of human capital across a wide array of industries. Despite this general trend toward “emotional capitalism,” some feminist perspectives tend to downplay or even demonize the eroticism of emotions desired of women by men. This phenomenon has also prompted scholars to consider how the expectation that workers of all genders embody feminized skills may lead to a “detraditionalization of gender,” but there is an erotic and gendered component to the
performance of emotional labor that cam models and sugar babies embrace as a form of power. Women appreciate cam modeling and sugar dating as sexual cultures that recognize the erotic power of feminized human capital.

Recognizing the feminine erotic power they hold, cam models and sugar babies are highly invested in an underlying “game,” as Mavis eloquently put it, of getting rewarded for positioning themselves as objects of erotic desire in sexual fields. Theorizing fields, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define investment as a “sense of the game and of its stakes that implies at once an inclination and an ability to play the game, both of which are socially and historically constituted rather than universally given” (p. 118). Like most American women growing up in the early twenty-first century, sugar babies and cam models have been socialized as sexual agents in a patriarchal capitalist cultural field replete with images, discourses, and practices that position them as sexual objects for men to consume. As girls, most women develop a sense of a game they are expected to play, in which their status depends on the state of their desirability as defined by a dominant “male gaze” – the heterosexual male perspective undergirding mainstream cultural norms (Mulvey, 1989). Accepting the terms of this game, they might acquire the ability to play this game, fashioning themselves in accordance with this desirability decree. They might spend time, energy, and money maintaining and improving their appearance through their consumption of goods and services produced by a web of beauty, diet, fitness, and fashion industries. They might craft personalities that cater to what others, particularly men, seem to desire, whether that means being positive and approachable or confident and seductive.

However, thanks to the social influence of feminism, many women are less inclined to eagerly participate in this game nowadays. Cultural shifts in thinking best capture why Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) refer to investment in the game of a field as an illusion or “collusion” amongst players that “the game is worth playing” (p. 98). The worth of a game is not self-evident, but it is maintained by social actors who continue to believe in and accept the premise of the game and its stakes. With alternative ways of embodying femininity available to them and
material gains that have lifted their social positions, many women find such acquiescence to patriarchal double standards unappealing, unnecessary, and passé. The prevailing sentiment is that American women need not or should not be invested in heteronormative sexual games. But cam models and sugar babies are part of a faction of women who are both able and inclined to participate in sexual cultures that objectify them, a perplexing affective attachment to compromised conditions (Berlant, 2011). Cam models and sugar babies share an underlying investment in feminine erotic power for reasons that are arguably misunderstood or overlooked. I argue that, contrary to mainstream distaste and critical concern for what this game means for women as a sociopolitical bloc, women find value in cam modeling and sugar dating as cultural practices that reify their erotic power because they rely on them to enact gendered strategies for thriving under precarious conditions.

**Gendered Strategies for Thriving**

Sugar dating and cam modeling not only represent spaces where women can reframe sexual and emotional objectification as erotic power, but they also invite women to trade on their sexual capital, which stands in stark contrast to cultural scenes that ask women to downplay or discount their erotic power or give it away for free or someone else’s gain. In these scenes, sexual capital is not a metaphorical resource, but a quantifiable attribute on par with other forms of capital that women are willing, able, and expected to deploy to improve their social positions. Sexual field scholars refer to sexual desirability as “capital” because it relates to an individual’s “capacity to reap the field’s rewards” and is “interconvertible with (but irreducible to) other forms of capital,” making it “not just an index of power within a field, but a structural bridge that can connect one field with another” (Green, 2014, p. 48). Along these lines, cam models and sugar babies seek to harness what they acknowledge is a transient and elusive asset—their sexual capital—to acquire more enduring forms of capital that might improve their future material conditions and social status. Doing so is a gendered “strategy of action” that responds to and
solves problems in their lives such as meeting their basic needs for food, shelter, and security or even more exalted desires for self-actualization (Swidler, 1986).

First, women in both scenes see sexual capital as helping them to gain access to economic capital, the most publicized and coveted stake of each game. While their strongest motivation for entering these sexual scenes tends to be the prospect of making money, most women dismiss presumptions that their participation in cam modeling and sugar dating is a product of coercion, exploitation, or desperation. They vehemently rejected claims that they are not acting in their best interest because they participate in sex work and value commercial sexual cultures that objectify them. For example, Jessica, a cam model in Utah, told me:

I want to do this. I do it by choice. I love it. It's not work for me. I’m happy. I’m healthy, healthier than ever. I take care of myself more than ever because I have to. My life has never been more stable.

Likewise, Skylar, a sugar baby in New York City, identified herself as a feminist, but felt judged for “letting females down” by engaging in sex work. She clarified her motives for me:

I’m doing this because I’m young, and I do need money. I’m not doing this ‘cause I need to buy crack and I want to be degraded and I think women should be subservient to men. I think it’s important to make the distinction that I’m doing this for myself and to empower myself.

Since they typically do not portray themselves as acting out of depravation, they see their participation in cultural scenes that objectify them as a smart albeit surprising choice. They find value in being able to unabashedly possess their erotic power in ways that secure them more money than they had prior or imagined they could have relying on traditional measures.

For instance, dissatisfied with the wages and workloads of other industries such as healthcare, retail, and hospitality, women turn to cam modeling because they sometimes find informal sex work is more lucrative and time efficient than other full-time feminized jobs. Between tips, per-minute fees for exclusive shows, and merchandise sales, cam models may average a higher hourly rate than that of other work they might be presently qualified to do. I spoke with several women who began cam modeling part-time as a “side gig,” but shifted away
from jobs and careers in other industries when they realized they could make more money as sex workers. Jessica formerly worked at a phlebotomy practice, but began camming full-time after an accident left her with a physical disability that made it difficult to continue working. Once she transitioned into full-time cam modeling, she has gained economically. She urges other women to reconsider judgments that might be barring them from taking camming seriously as a career:

If you go about it the right way and you’re safe, and you’re serious about it, it can be a career. It really can. A great one…. it’s been my only source [of income] for five years. What are these girls doing? Like why aren’t they doing it full time? You would be making more money than you are at work if you just did it full time.

Josie also made the transition from part-time to full-time cam model a few years ago. She was working at a coffee shop and pursuing a career in film animation when she began camming on the side to make extra money. Already busy with unpaid internships expected of her as a creative aspirant, she began camming full-time because it saves time; She makes what it would take a week to make as a barista in three to four hours of camming. Similarly, Alexa said camming gives her “more time, more freedom, and more financial stability to afford school again,” an opinion shared by other interviewees who cam to pay off or avoid student debt.

Because they do not see themselves as lacking choices, cam models and sugar babies are not typically despondent about using sexual capital to meet their economic needs. Indeed, they use much loftier language, framing their needs, choices, and goals in terms of desires for greater economic freedom. Cam models, for instance, lament the notion that sex work is considered a “last stop” for many women, who they judge and pity for not taking advantage of the sexual resources at their disposal. They see their willingness to turn erotic power into something as valuable as economic freedom as an example of their resourcefulness, grit, and street smarts.

Penny, a thirty-four-year-old cam model in South Carolina, told me:

I no longer have sympathy for people that don’t have jobs. Coming from the recession where I was doing anything and everything to keep the two jobs I had and I was scared I wouldn’t have a job, and then there’s all these people, they’re like, “I can’t find a job.” And I’m like, ‘okay, there’s lots of jobs out there, and this isn’t a bad one. And guess what? This can get your life right back going… It’s changed my outlook on a lot of things like that. A woman never has to be on the street. A woman always has the power.
guess that sounds kind of bad to use a woman’s beauty to make money, but women have that option, whereas some men just don’t. And I think women should use it if they have to.

Penny’s impatience with the unemployed may not be shared, but like Jessica she questions dismissals of sex work as a legitimate option to feed, clothe, and better oneself. Women have this option, as she points out, but predominantly due to shame and stigma, they might not avail themselves of the resources in their possession like she has. Penny also speaks from experience. With several unemployed and struggling siblings, she sees herself, the sex worker, as doing far better and acting more responsibly than them.

Similarly, Kitty, a twenty-seven-year-old cam model, is currently using her earnings to take college courses and work toward getting an undergraduate degree with a major in sociology. She feels strongly that cam modeling is a better option for women in her position, women who have a certain amount of sexual capital and are willing to use it, than the alternatives, which may be more compromising:

I think cam is an opportunity for people, especially when they don’t have other ways to like make ends meet because a regular job, like you really can’t, especially if you don’t have the education yet… this allows you a way to be your own boss and not have to be in a relationship with anybody that’s controlling you for money… We don’t have to rely on somebody for money and we don’t have to be with anybody for financial gain and we don’t have to have sex unless we want to.

In her pronouncement of cam modeling as an attractive option, Kitty alludes to a spectrum of ways people “make ends meet”—regular waged work, a relationship, or full-service sex work—and finds cam modeling comes out on top as a less exploitative situation. Getting a college degree is part of her plan to transition out of cam modeling and into working in media, but for now she is proud to be financially independent, untethered to a minimum-wage job that fits her qualifications, a man who controls her as a financial provider, and the expectation that she will have sex for money.

Like many young people, cam models and sugar babies have grown up accustomed to managing a sense of uncertainty about the future and herald their abilities to make money in
unforeseen places and relationships, to be creative in their uses of time, and use their resources effectively. Precarity is a fundamental part of their habitus—what Berg (2021) describes as a “tendency” that “should be understood not just as a liability but also as a source of craftiness and alternative vision” (p. 3). Women’s investment in feminine erotic power as a form of cultural capital like any other is just one manifestation of an instrumental-rationality with which they have learned to approach life. There is honor for women to do whatever they need to do to create a future for themselves that is based in economic independence.

At the same time, there are differences between the capital women seek and gain from the game of sugar dating versus that of cam modeling and the capital they must already have to be able to play each game successfully. The prospect of making money from sexual exchanges attracts women to these scenes, but women in both scenes also complain about money being inconsistent or more inaccessible than they initially imagined. Often, they find themselves disappointed by “timewasters,” “scammers,” or “salt daddies” who ignore the implicit cultural contracts of these communities and consume their time and attention without offering money in return. As a result, having less capital at the outset and being in a position of needing quick access to cash harms women’s odds of doing well in either scene. Neither sugar daddies nor cam platform users reward women who seem too demanding, eager to make money, and uninterested in interacting and developing social bonds (see Chapter 3).

Less focused on immediate economic capital gains, successful cam models and sugar babies instead emphasize how sexual capital and sexual fields provide access to social and cultural capital they would not otherwise have. First, both practices are relationship-driven, enabling women to expand their social networks, whether that means meeting many potential sugar daddies or regularly chatting with cam fans online. These interactions also increase the worth of their social networks, or their level of social capital, by growing the quantity of connections, in the case of cam models, or their quality, in the case of sugar babies. For example, cam models typically focus on highlighting what makes them attractive to men—Is it their girl-
next-door good looks or hot stoner vibe? Are they a “big beautiful woman” or traditional Playboy bunny type?—to make as many connections as possible across a variety of channels that may or may not include “whales,” or big spenders. Like other social media workers, they build potentially useful friendships with a virtual network of internet users attracted to the way they look and act. Sugar babies focus on elevating their looks and tastes to signify higher cultural capital that will result in fewer but more enduring face-to-face connections with powerful men (those who possess higher levels of capital). They go on dates and cultivate one-on-one relationships with potential sugar daddies that may turn into a formal “arrangement” with a monthly stipend known as an “allowance,” but frequently results in friendships they maintain even when an arrangement ended or never began.

Successful cam models and sugar babies use sexual capital to cultivate as many or better social connections in an effective strategy for ultimately converting social capital into economic capital. They adopt a capital transfer and conversion strategy, promoting the profit to be made by women who have the time and resources to invest in social capital that may indirectly lead to better economic rewards in the future. “No one likes to hand out money to strangers. No one likes to give away money. But when they feel they’re investing in a person or relationship? People love that. Use it,” a sugar baby on Tumblr claims. Both cam models and sugar babies capitalize on the affective attachments they inspire in men as objects of their desire, noting that cam platform users and sugar daddies are more generous and prefer to “help” them monetarily or otherwise after developing a friendship (Berlant, 2011). Cam models gain followers, communicate regularly with fans through clubs they create, and develop ongoing relationships with “regulars,” users who consistently visit them, tip and pay for private shows, and subscribe to and buy content they produce. Sugar babies gain trust and affection from sugar daddies through consistent mobile communication and meet ups, which sets the stage for negotiating a monthly allowance or “pay per meet” fee, receiving gifts, going on trips, and requesting assistance with paying for a customized list of bills and personal expenses.
But there is also a cost, which is “labor-time,” the time and energy an individual must invest in the conversion process. The labor-time required of cam models and sugar babies differs. Cam models spend unpaid time in “free chat,” an expectation of most cam platforms that they will interact with visitors without guaranteed pay. They also spend unpaid time cultivating a social media presence and personal brand to communicate a clear personality and content for fans to regularly engage with. A bigger payoff takes more labor-time to cultivate, a lesson not lost on sugar babies, who spend a great deal of unpaid time learning how to attract “quality” men if they lack certain detection and attraction skills (cultural capital): creating and continually updating their profiles; fielding messages from scammers and unsuitable candidates; chatting online; and meeting up with potential sugar daddies in order to eventually secure an arrangement with one or more with whom they have chemistry and connection and will offer them an allowance or an agreed upon pay-per-meet fee for their dates.

Not every sugar baby or cam model is able to incur these costs, but those that remain laser focused on monetary reward without cultivating social bonds, out of necessity or inexperience, are much less successful at both games. Those with staying power in these scenes are typically women with cultural competencies that are taken for granted such as knowing the value of consistency in communication to creating social relationships and reserves of capital through family (including a spouse in the case of cam models) or another job. Having this know-how and access to resources enables some women to value the social capital their sexual capital begets and accept the labor-time demands of each game. Culturally and socially inscribed, this willingness and ability to do unpaid work is a hidden requirement that not all cam models and sugar babies can meet based on their cultural and economic starting points.

Sugar Dating as “Hypergamy”

Because the economic gains from sugar dating are not immediate or reliable, women who sugar date tend to claim they are less motivated by money and more interested in acquiring intangible benefits like mentorship, cultured conversation, and better taste that sugar daddies have
due to their wealth, influence, or simply being older and having experiences to share. Already possessing higher cultural capital, sugar babies are more inclined and able than cam models to value it and see sexual culture as a space in which they strive to gain skills, taste, and knowledge that might further elevate their social status and help them to fashion themselves for the kind of careers and lifestyles they aspire to manifest. Some sugar babies describe sugar dating as a sexual preference for “hypergamy,” or strategically engaging in romantic relationships to achieve upward mobility or maintain high social status. One Tumblr user made a case for the democratizing potential of sugar dating as a populist form of hypergamy that elite groups take for granted:

Hypergamy is not a bad word!... Rich people don’t feel dirty about teaching their daughters to practice hypergamy. Their daughters aren’t told that they are goldiggers, even if they are living off their parents’ money and using their parents’ connections to meet other wealthy people.

As this sugar baby’s comment makes clear, there is a class component to women’s uses of sexual capital to advance their social positions and boundaries created by social distinctions, which suggests using sexual cultures of cam modeling and sugar dating as gendered strategies for thriving is potentially disruptive to social reproduction.

Illouz (2012) argues that the modern autonomization of sexual fields creates pathways for women to achieve social mobility that circumvents historical barriers to the upper echelons of society, such as their family’s social standing and socioeconomic status. She writes:

the rise of sexual fields has given rise to new forms of domination of women by men… [since] most property and flows of capital are controlled by men, thus making marriage and love crucial to women’s social and economic survival (p. 55).

Many women use sugar dating as a means of circumventing these hindrances. Indeed, women who sugar date gain economically from intimate encounters, a deployment of sexuality colloquially called “goaldigging.” This semiotic play on the stigmatized “goldigger” persona (women viewed as marrying for money instead of love) suggests cultural contestation over women’s instrumental uses of intimacy, generally characterized as shallow, vapid, and
manipulative. It also means something quite different to “dig” for goals and not gold in relationships with powerful and/or wealthy men. Adopting a strategy of using sexual capital to gain social capital that men provide benefits women navigating a social world in which the underlying structures supporting systemic gender inequalities have yet to catch up to progressive cultural ideals.

While using feminine erotic power to gain access to capital is not democratic in the sense that everyone has equal opportunity and success with such a strategy, the distribution of sexual capital is not so neatly tied to class-based divisions. Individuals can also manipulate their perceived status by strategically altering their consumptive habits. One sugar baby I interviewed, Ciara, was twenty-six when we spoke and living in Miami. She started sugar dating when she was nineteen but took a break after little success. She re-entered the community just before our interview with what she described as a more “mature” perspective: “My mindset now is way different from when I was nineteen. When I was nineteen, I was only thinking about money.” Since she was not that successful in finding quality sugar daddies before, she has invested money and time into marketing herself better by improving her profile and physical appearance. She changed her wardrobe, consistently styled her hair. She hired a profile expert to help her choose the right language and pictures to attract the kind of men she seeks. Sugar dating companies like Seeking Arrangement connect women with such services and provide such advice at events such as their Sugar Baby Summits. When I asked Ciara what kind of men she hoped to attract by making these sorts of changes, she spoke about her desire to find someone who can teach her about investments and “connect on that level” with her.

After her own disappointments, Sabrina, a nineteen-year-old sugar baby attending college in Atlanta, also transformed her appearance and demeanor to better sugar date. Describing her initial look as chubby and awkward, she began wearing wigs and dressing more provocatively. After her transformation, she connected with a few sugar daddies, one of whom is a middle-aged lawyer she credits with helping her to further her goals to become an immigration attorney. They
attended political rallies together, conversed in a foreign language they both spoke, and discussed ideas she had not encountered before. Thus, in the same way consumer society “empowered” people to mingle in higher echelons of society and afforded them a kind of access that their lack of title and upbringing did not, women use sexual capital to access social arenas previously unavailable to them or at least imagined to be out of their reach.

For instance, Chloe is a college student and sugar baby currently living in Manhattan, New York City, who grew up in a working-class community in a neighboring borough. Still, she asserted, “For me, it’s not even about the money.” Instead, she lauded sugar dating as a portal into a social world she observed with envy as a child growing up in close proximity to wealth and status and wished to inhabit as an adult:

My family and my neighborhood is very blue collar. My dad owns his own business. It’s a construction company. He works very hands on, so it was blue collar. That’s what I was taught. My mom was a stay-at-home mom and didn’t work. I knew from a young age, I wanted to establish myself as a career woman. But of course, you never know how to get there, especially when your family doesn’t have connections in a white-collar industry. I knew I needed to get there somehow. I just didn’t know how to. So, living in New York City and I always went out from a young age. I was always exposed to very high powerful men, because even at like 16, 17 and in Manhattan, you go out to bars and clubs, even when you’re under age, and these guys are not shy to hit on you. So, I was always exposed to it. I was exposed to people with a lot of money and power… From a young age, I kinda knew I wanted that and I aligned myself with the right people to get that because at the end of the day, it’s not what you are, it’s who you hang out with. I even distanced myself from my old friends because they don’t want the same things as me, but being closer, just dating these types of men, they bring you into their social circle, and you pick up on their habits and their behaviors and you learn like how they act in social settings and you realize, wow, that’s probably what gets them further than the average person. And I think I learned the difference between these people and the people I grew up with and it was very obvious to me, like, okay, this is why they are successful compared to the people that I grew up with in my neighborhood. You know, my family and people behave differently in social settings. Their daily activities are very different than what I was, what I grew up with. The schools they went to are different than the ones that I go to, I don’t have access to Yale or NYU, but I do have access to these great guys.

As she articulated with startling clarity, Chloe thinks of sexual capital as a means of gaining social and cultural capital she could not otherwise get from her schooling, family, and normal social life. Unlike past generations of women, however, she is not interested in marrying and settling down with a man as a way of securing these resources (at least for now). Identifying
herself as ambitious and independent, she is most interested in mentoring, connections, help, and advice on building a career of her own:

I’m very career-oriented, and I really want to build myself a career in banking and finance. So, one of the biggest reasons why I use it is because these guys offer me so many connections and the possibility of a job. Some of them that I met have helped me like finetune my resume and help me get the job I have today or put me in contact with people.

She went on to tell me about one sugar daddy who sent her LinkedIn profile to his best friend “who was the CEO of a huge national bank.” It is unlikely that the social capital Chloe successfully found as a sugar baby is typical since she has access to particular circle of men who live in one of richest cities in the country, but her attitude about going on dates to learn from men was certainly shared by other sugar babies.

Another sugar baby based in Las Vegas, Veronica, spoke of her desire to date sugar daddies who could teach her about business and the corporate world. She too said her goals for sugar dating “had nothing to do with money” and everything to do with “mentoring and trying to get ahead.” She strategically sought out “a certain type of man” to sugar date in order to observe and absorb the masculinized skills, attitudes, and mannerisms she associated with people in positions of power:

I wanted someone who was a high-level executive, who had some kind of college or just business background. So, IT, finance, and anything like that, or healthcare because I knew that it would be a good mentoring and networking space for me. I wanted that structure, the maturity… the way I see it is I work in a business where it’s very male dominated and I was kind of like this little girl in the office, you know?... So, I wanted someone who was definitely in corporate that I could learn from, and I knew that if I wanted to get higher in corporate, I would have to look at the way a man does business. You can’t do business as a woman until you get to [a certain level], which is something I was noticing and learning. So, I wanted to see how they handled situations, how they did meetings, how they talk to other people, how they got what they wanted out of the meeting or for their company. So, I really wanted to learn how to do that and how to be dominating in that aspect of the board room.

Observing powerful and successful men is a benefit of social capital that Veronica wanted for herself and used sugar dating to achieve.
Other sugar babies shared similar desires and epiphanies as a result of being close to, and beginning to identify with, masculine wealth and status. Mavis, a sugar baby in Philadelphia, had a difficult childhood, but she is smart and driven and found a way to attend college for a short while before hard times struck and she could barely afford food and shelter let alone college tuition and course materials. When I asked her what she liked most about sugar dating, her answer revealed the subtle possibilities of using sexual capital to gain access to social worlds that formerly felt foreign or even hostile to her:

The ways I’ve pushed myself to be in spaces that I normally wouldn’t think I would have access to or would be allowed in. I think part of my issue earlier on was that I was just so impressed to be in certain spaces that I forgot about everything else. You know? I forgot like at the end of the day you need money… I think that is really important to me because there are so many spaces that I would just walk past ‘cause I don’t think I have enough to be in those spaces. Like I would have never thought about starting a business if I didn’t know so many people who started businesses. I wouldn’t learn. I wouldn’t have thought about investing if I didn’t meet so many investors, you know? Like I wouldn’t have thought these are real things that real people are doing.

Through the practice of sugar dating, Mavis began to imagine herself as less of an outsider to the social world of elites. She also became familiar with power in a way that removed some of its mystique. Elaborating her point, she subsequently stated that if mediocre White guys could be successful, so could she, a young Black woman. Whether this hope of hers that success befalls those who have the right mindset and knowledge is a fantasy, a form of “cruel optimism” as Berlant (2011) might characterize it, is a legitimate point to consider. But this fantasy also propels her to imagine possibilities for herself that escaped her before. Swidler (1986) notably argues that people come to value ends for which their cultural equipment is suited. Furthermore, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) write about the habitus:

Without being rational, social agents are reasonable... they have internalized, through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning, the objective chances they face. They know how to ‘read’ the future that fits them, which is made for them and for which they are made… (p. 129-130).

Both of these statements attest to the power of structures to limit what we imagine to be possible or even want. Women like Mavis, Veronica, Chloe, Sabrina, and others share a similar habitus
that propels them to imagine and want a life that is very different from the one they were born into and they use strategies and equipment that are available to them. They are actively filling their cultural arsenals by using their sexual capital to strategically date men who they aspire to be, not marry. Women’s investment in erotic power is not necessarily rational in the sense of achieving what feminist scholars deem most important, but it is certainly reasonable given their conditioning and the objective chances they face in a competitive social world.

**Tactical Investments in Compromised Conditions**

Drawing on sexual capital to gain access to resources is not new or unusual and, in fact, has a long-gendered history. As one sugar baby put it: “We aren’t the first generation of hoes, women have been using what they’ve got to get what they want since humans evolved sexual reproduction.” In her work on emotional labor, Hochschild (1983) explicitly states that “lacking other resources, women make a resource out of feeling and offer it to men as a gift in return for the more material resources they lack (p. 111). Still, relying on sexual capital for material gain is a hotly contested and highly regulated practice, seemingly only permissible by middle-class respectability standards in certain fields of distinction such as the fashion and entertainment industries. Women who use sexual capital independently and tactically to further their own personal and professional objectives are often attacked and ostracized for being morally bankrupt, superficial, manipulative, or even outright dangerous.

Underlying many of these criticisms is the judgment that there are certain rules to how and when women can use their sexual capital and those who use it in non-prescribed ways are seen as cheating the system. Offering an imagined dialogue between “Society” and “Woman,” a post that circulated amongst sugar babies on Tumblr exposes an implicit rule or limitation placed on women’s exercise of erotic power, which they attempt to circumvent by sugar dating:

Society: Your only valuable asset is your beauty. That is the most important thing about you as a woman.
Woman: Okay… ? *uses her beauty to get what she wants and become successful*
Society: Wtf you can’t do that tho??
As this commentary on “society” indicates, women who sugar date feel they are constantly navigating contradictory messages that constrain their uses of erotic power. But we can also look to how sex and sexuality are formulated within contemporary social movements like feminism to understand women’s reappropriation of sexual capital as culturally disruptive and a form of resistance. In the wake of second-wave feminism, flagrant enjoyment of sexual capital seemed to go underground. It was passé and gauche—not “feminist” enough—to unabashedly be sexually objectified and modern ideals of middle-class femininity leaned heavily in the direction of a more masculine or androgynous woman who cared about her appearance but also should not draw attention to her sexual capital in the workplace or use it to get ahead. Even contemporary politics such as the #MeToo movement take an arguably liberal feminist stance on women’s sexuality that veers into “sex as danger” rhetoric with its singular focus on combatting rape culture and instituting anti-sexual harassment policies. These movements are good and necessary, but it also seems women who cam model and sugar date are asking themselves how they can reclaim or hold onto the value of sexual capital in a feminist political context that turns its nose up to such tactics. Their investment in erotic power despite middle class cultural distaste highlights a divide between their lived experiences and the privileged position of liberal feminism that women’s sexuality is dangerous and has no place in spaces for work. #MeToo and liberal feminist agendas of de-sexualizing the workplace are counterintuitive to those for whom sexuality is a large part of their self-esteem, lifestyle, and instrumental to sustaining their livelihoods.

As this section has argued, cam models and sugar babies are invested in the sexualization of culture as a means to economic freedom. Their shared experiences of economic and social conditions structure both a desire for freedom from economic constraint and the attendant belief in the value of sexual capital for women to have their needs met. In turn, they express an affective attachment to sexualized culture to achieve their goals. Feminist critics often regard the pleasure and sense of empowerment women gain from receiving sexual attention from men as suspect and likely a form of false consciousness or governmentality. However, cam models and sugar babies
associate this patriarchal pastime with the possibilities promised by erotic power and offer reasons that are not adequately captured by these propositions. Rather than see themselves as passive or victimized by sexual culture and objectification, cam models and sugar babies emphasize their roles as active participants in perpetuating the value placed upon women’s sexual capital. The way in which they use it, consciously and instrumentally, to their own advantage suggests that women’s investments in sexual power is not simply a psychic screen shielding women from their own hidden compliance with patriarchal ideology. Investment in erotic power is intimately tied to desires for economic freedom, which permeated women’s stories about why they decided to start cam modeling and sugar dating. Women with limited access to economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital may be especially invested in sexually objectifying culture because it pays off. In a patriarchal culture that ties women’s worth to her beauty, body image, and sex appeal, a woman may be rich in sexual capital and poor in all the others, and to frame her use of the power available to her as less than the strategies available to the woman who has other forms of capital at her disposal perpetuates class-based biases and divisions within the feminist movement.

Still, valuing erotic power as a capital accumulation strategy does not solely explain why women cam model or sugar date. Many women want the same outcomes and use their sexual capital to some extent to achieve them, but still avoid digital industries for sexual leisure like sugar dating and cam modeling. What separates women who choose to cam model and sugar date from those who do not?

**Contesting “Vanilla” Culture**

Driving women’s participation in sexual cultures of cam modeling and sugar dating is a deep-seated discontent with certain aspects of “vanilla,” or normative, lifestyles, relationships, and work arrangements, which they see as not working in their favor. In this section, I argue that women’s oppositional stances on normative culture, and the institutions and traditions that support it, inform their engagement with sexual culture and their perspectives on cam modeling.
and sugar dating as gendered strategies of action. Perhaps because of their investment in feminine erotic power—which manifests as compliance with hegemonic beauty standards, binary gender roles, and self-objectification—the notion that cam models and sugar babies also critique patriarchal capitalism and characterize their activities as culturally disruptive may come as a surprise. Despite their ostensible complicity in the hegemonic gender order, women find meaning in cam modeling and sugar dating as subtle forms of resistance against the constraints of normative culture.

Though similar in their oppositional stances, cam models and sugar babies differ in the ends that they value, the horizon of possibilities they imagine, and the constraints they deem worth negotiating, due to differences in the cultural equipment they have at their disposal (Swidler, 1986). Specifically, sugar babies are more likely to express discontent with the underlying patriarchal forces that shape normative romantic dating culture, while cam models are more likely to express discontent with the normative work arrangements of corporate capitalism. Sugar babies oppose the patriarchal structure of normative romantic relationships by re-imagining intimacy and ways of being in the private sphere. Women who participate in this subculture emphasize reshaping their dispositions to emotions, expectations, connections, and time, which I argue suggests women are contesting the emotional and unpaid labor of heterosexual romantic relationships. While their refashioning of the self is a form of self-disciplining within sugar dating culture, I lean towards an interpretation of it as a micropolitical defiance of patriarchy. Cam models, on the other hand, oppose the toll of capitalism by re-imagining work and ways of being in the public sphere. I argue that their emphasis on creativity, community, pleasure, control over time, and bringing the private (intimacy and gendered emotional labor) into the public represents a micropolitical defiance of capitalism.

**Contesting “Vanilla” Dating**

One way to assess what sugar dating means for sugar babies is to pay attention to the contrasts and distinctions they make in defining it vis-à-vis related practices. One of the most
prevalent distinctions sugar babies make is defining sugar dating as a strategy of action that is not just different from “vanilla” dating, but a direct response to its failures by women who reject normative romantic relationships as their only option. First, women are frustrated by the way in which they give their time and energy away for free when these are valuable and exceedingly scarce resources. “Being in a relationship is a job,” one sugar baby proclaims in a Tumblr post, expressing a widely held contemporary belief that all relationships take work. Another sugar baby blogger reminds herself that she does not “vanilla” date because “it’s probably going to suck ‘breaking up’/hurting him when he becomes too demanding/time consuming.” The culture of sugar dating allows women to place boundaries on their time and energy and cut off relationships that demand more emotional involvement than they are willing to put into a relationship because, as sugar baby Veronica claims, “Sugaring… is not dating. I don’t want to see you all the time. I’m busy. I have my own schedule.” Asserting these boundaries is a key distinction between sugar and normative dating. Like many sugar babies, Veronica makes clear when she is and is not available to talk and meet up. She even publicizes her preference for dating men who do not live in her city. A resident of Las Vegas, she is used to tourists in her area and strategically searches for sugar daddies who regularly visit for work or pleasure:

I really prefer if they’re from out of town because it just kinda makes it easier… it also helps with the boundaries and with focusing on things that I have going on in my own life, work, school, anything like that. So, for me that’s perfect if they’re from out of town. If they only come about two to three times a month… I just don’t have time for a regular relationship.

Many sugar babies assert these boundaries by advertising they are looking for a “no strings attached relationship.” Emilia, for instance, does so to signal her desires for distance and contained communication:

Sugar relationships are always no strings attached. So, lots of people have ‘NSA’ in their profiles. I have it in mine. There’s a clear line. Like when we’re together, we’re together. But when we’re apart, then we live our own lives. Whereas if I’m romantically dating someone… we’ll probably be texting constantly and in constant communication.
Chloe also appreciates the boundaries sugar dating places on the time and commitment sugar daddies can expect from her. She was juggling two sugar daddies when we spoke, which sounded like a big time commitment to me. She corrected me by stating that, “Luckily, they’re both very busy.” I found her use of the qualifier “luckily” interesting. She explained that she doesn’t want a relationship that demands more from her either:

It’s not like they’re texting me all day long or they want to hang out every day or they want to hang out during the day. That’s why it actually works out because these people are so busy. And I’m so busy… They usually work late and we just meet up whenever it’s convenient, either like weekends or evenings. But luckily they don’t ever want to hang out during the day. Neither do I. So, it’s very convenient.

Like Chloe, Emilia, and Veronica, sugar babies are drawn to sugar dating because they feel free to set boundaries on their time and energy in a way that is not usually permissible or comfortable to do in romantic love relationships.

Sugar daters make clear these are not “vanilla” relationships, which are narrated by the gendered scripts of courtship and dating leading to marriage and long-term partnership. Oriented to managing neoliberal conditions, sugar babies express entrepreneurial intentions to have men value and pay for their time, which is not customary in romantic dating. For this reason, sugar babies sometimes present sugar dating as empowering for women—not because they claim to be freed from oppression, but because they acknowledge how all dating oppresses women and commodifying what are typically unpaid acts and expressions of emotional and physical intimacy is a proactive strategy for women to get their due. Defending sugar dating as a form of sex work, one sugar baby points out: “It’s crazy to hear a lot of women say they would never do sex work because they don’t want to deal with men mistreating them, when in reality men mistreat women everyday… whether they’re getting paid or not.” According to this sugar baby, misogyny and exploitation are not unique to sex work and show up in “vanilla” relationships as well. Making money from these exchanges makes it an even trade and seems only fair to sugar babies on Tumblr:
Just remember that being paid $2000/meeting or month is 2000 times better than some dopey 20-something, broke, uneducated loser who wants to feel you up in the back of his honda civic, cheat on you and try to run game. This is why I don’t go for men my age. They just don’t deserve me.

This message reverberates in the sugar baby blogosphere. Another sugar baby blogger writes:

Sick of regular people and their shocked face by saying ‘You are too pretty to be single’ ok vanilla people I would rather say I’m too intelligent to stay with stingy and non rich dudes.

Another sugar baby blogger writes, “So many girls in their prime are obsessed with falling in ‘love’; not in this economy, sis.” Like these sugar babies, many women in this community frame their intimate choices in economic terms and highlight the feeling that “vanilla” dating is an unequal exchange. They see themselves as having a greater awareness of gendered double standards, challenging the unstated responsibility of women to perform the unpaid reproductive labor of romantic relationships, and resisting the restrictive conditions of binding sexuality not only to monogamous heterosexual marriage, but also to romantic love. In this way, sugar dating is tactical resistance to the notion that dating must lead to marriage, and opens the market and ends of dating into a plurality of meaning. By disentangling dating from marriage, or dating from courtship processes, dating becomes a leisure activity whose meanings are not dictated by the structures of procreation.

Underlying sugar babies’ pronouncements against “vanilla” dating and romantic love is a desire for sexual liberation that is quite ordinary—casual sex is another way modern women flex this muscle—but articulating this desire to an entrepreneurial spirit is arguably groundbreaking for women. Highlighting the uncertainty of modern dating, Illouz (2019) argues for seeing how women are doubly disadvantaged by hookup culture since in many respects the structural conditions of patriarchy have not changed, but women’s individual sense of empowerment (postfeminist stances) can make it seem as though casual sex is in their best interest or the only sexually liberating choice available (p. 72-73). Rejecting the options typically available to women, sugar babies seek another that changes the terms of sexual liberation.
Still, sugar babies’ attempts to disrupt the patriarchal terms of dating by putting boundaries and a price on their time and energy is not easily accepted as the norm even in the sugar dating scene. Some sugar daddies attempt to shame sugar babies for asking for too much money or being too forthright with their objectives. In response, some women adopt an oppositional orientation to misogynistic labels such as “whore” and “slut” as a tactic to facilitate their goals, re-appropriating them to combat social stigma: “You’re going to feel guilty at first. Expect it. Ignore it. You’re not a slut, you’re not a liar. You are an entertainer.” Sometimes sugar daddies will accuse women of being “a professional,” invoking stigmatizing terms like “hooker” or “prostitute” to degrade her and discourage her from asking too directly for an allowance. Women call out this offensive language as another patriarchal tool to keep them from getting what they want. As one sugar baby observed, these insults are meant to “tap into your insecurity of being seen as a whore so you’ll feel ashamed when you bring up HIS side of the MUTUALLY beneficial arrangement.” This “whorephobic” ideology works against women who “don’t want to be seen as prostitutes.” Men are simply “playing along” to get the same services an escort might provide “at a discounted price.” Shirking social stigma is not an exercise in self-esteem building, but a means to an end—to be free to ask for the true value of their services: “Don’t let them slutshame you into submission. Be a hoe and be proud or you’ll be dating an old fart for free while your debts keep on stacking.”

Not all sugar babies are against “vanilla” dating later in their life, but many sugar babies consider normative romantic relationships a waste of time and missed opportunity to cash in on the sexual capital they still possess in their relative youth. “Do not give up sugaring for a basic ass vanilla boy,” one sugar baby warns her peers. They “never know your worth and toss you away after wasting months of your time that you could have been spending making bank.” If tempted by traditional dating and its promises, one sugar baby warns her peers, “if you have aspirations and he doesn’t have similar goals for himself, he will just end up dragging you down.” She advises them, “You are young and you have to think about only letting men into your life if
they are going to add to that.” Along these lines, Chloe told me sugar dating “restored” her “faith in men.” She called men her age “cool” but “nothing special.” She is twenty-one and describes men her age as “a mess.” Unlike the sugar daddies she encounters, twenty-one-year-olds “play games” and waste her time. Another sugar baby describes coming back to sugar dating after “falling in love.” “Half a decade with a vanilla man, and we broke up. Ever since, I decided to focus on my money and my career aspirations... love will be waiting for me.” For now, she is “fine tuning” her “aesthetics for these men” and “hustle for the Glow up has started.” Romantic love is a priority for another phase of life, and if not critically examined, could cloud judgment and detract women from achieving career goals, financial security, and self-fulfillment.

The progressive ethos and critique of patriarchy that I have thus far shown motivates sugar babies is not what most people expect from women who participate in a seemingly retrogressive practice. At first glance, sugar dating adheres to patriarchal tradition, using terms like “daddy” and “baby” to seemingly preserve a recognizable power differential that late modern normative culture classifies as outdated. The practice seems nostalgic for a time when embodying clearly-defined gender roles was culturally acceptable and power was neatly divided and stratified into masculine and feminine domains: wealth, status, and rational thought for men and sex appeal, subservience, and emotional intuition for women. Sugar babies embrace ideas and customs regarding gender relations that appear old-fashioned. The ways in which sugar dating positions men as financial providers and women as objects of desire and conquest, dependent on men’s attention to fulfill their needs for security chafe against the new boundaries of middle-class sexual taste, its underlying value of gender equality, and its ideal of “pure” romantic relationships freed from corrupting economic and gendered power relations.

However retrogressive sugar dating appears from this vantage point, sugar babies do not see what they do as incongruent with gender equality and sexual freedom per se, as these are values they too hold. Sugar babies embrace patriarchal gendered performances and power relations, yet they also believe sugar dating offers women avenues to achieve greater fairness in
intimate relationships than normative romantic dating. Companies market sugar dating as the pursuit of “mutually beneficial arrangements,” a hope for gender equality women echo in their own descriptions and experiences of this alternative form of dating. For instance, sugar daters generally follow a cultural logic of honesty, mutuality, asking for what you want and need, negotiating an expected exchange of resources, and honoring verbal contracts. While not everyone follows these “rules,” they are more explicitly regarded as touchstones of this community, which is not the case with other forms of dating. Chloe emphasizes these differences:

For me sugar dating is like being very honest. If I was in a relationship with a guy… the end goal is either sex or marriage. So, it's either you want to be friends with benefits or you want to be in a relationship, and then relationships turn into a couple, and that will turn into marriage. But with sugar dating for me, it's a lot different. If I meet you on a site or I meet you at a bar, and we're talking and you tell me straight up like, ‘Hey, I just got out of a relationship. I don't really want to be serious, but I want to take care of you. I like hanging out with you. Do you like going on dates? Where do you like to go? What do you like to do? I can do that for you.’ And then I say, ‘What do you need from a woman?’ And they say, ‘Oh, like I need someone to be there for me. I got out of a relationship and she never did this for me. So, I would love if a woman could do that for me.’ And it's just like very open and honest. It's very like, what do you need from somebody? What do I need from somebody?

Unlike normative romantic dating, once chemistry and potential connection are established, negotiations begin: how many times will we meet up per month? For how long each time? What kinds of economic and sexual benefits will be provided? Do we text or call when we are not physically together? Sugar dating invokes a now traditional dictum that relationships and romantic partners should add value to an individual’s life and that relationships should not be initiated without a plan or thorough assessment of one’s own goals and whether two people are on the same page. Keeping emotions at bay helps the sugar baby accomplish this mission. Chloe prefers sugar dating because “vanilla” relationships bring up too many emotions that make her less honest:

I know for myself, the reason why I don't like relationships is because sometimes you're afraid to ask for what you want. You're afraid that person's going to leave you. You're afraid that person's gonna judge you. You think you're going to be feel needy. But you know, like a sugar relationship, Like right off the jump, you say, ‘Hey, this is what would make me stay. This was what would make me do this.’ And they say, ‘Hey, this is what I need.’ And it's just a mutual thing.
Chloe values sugar dating for safely containing emotion just as much as sugar daddies do, a point I discuss in Chapter 3. As Illouz (2019) notes, predicting the outcomes of a budding relationship is increasingly difficult in an era defined by the rise of a modern self, one that experiences overwhelming freedom and heightened uncertainty in the roles, rituals, and outcomes to be expected of late modern courtship and partnership. To compensate for the decline of social structures that constricted, but also comfortably contained, the formation and experience of intimacy, modern society relies on psychology as an organizing paradigm for understanding the self, sexuality, and making intimate choices. Sugar dating’s emphasis on mutuality, self-awareness and advocacy, and honest communication reflects this modern orientation to intimate relationships and impulse to construct a more reliable sense of self and other in response to increasingly precarious structures for intimacy and its intersection with popular movements for gender equality and sexual freedom. Sugar babies, particularly the vocal faction on Tumblr, openly express disdain for the ways in which traditional dating boxes women into assuming a passive role, allowing men to unilaterally decide the terms of a relationship that may or may not deliver on its unstated promises. “Vanilla” relationships are fraught with game-playing, and these women see men as the house, always holding a winning hand. The “Sugar Bowl,” a term used to describe the sugar dating scene, is a space in which they may disrupt unequal gender dynamics, redistributing the cards in a way that gives them leverage to weigh in on what are normally unspoken and even unseemly demands. Expressing dissatisfaction with the gendered implications of romantic discourses that guide women’s intimate choices, they seek to expose these contradictions and rectify them by adopting an instrumental-rational disposition toward intimate relationships. They argue for an understanding of sugar dating as a strategy of action borne from an oppositional stance on the inherent limitations and biases of normative romantic dating.
Contesting “Vanilla” Work

Cam models also invoke the term “vanilla” to describe traditional “nine-to-five” jobs they either did in the past or never want to do, framing cam modeling as an attractive alternative to this normative path. First, many women compare camming to feminized fields in which they also worked such as office administration, education, and healthcare, household, and childcare services, finding camming better rewards their skillsets. Penny, a former hospital worker, felt “underpaid, overworked, [and] under-appreciated” when she started camming part-time for extra money. She eventually quit, but skills she honed as a healthcare professional such as geniality, self-motivation, and time management were helpful for developing a fanbase, increasing her earnings, and consistently producing content for multiple outlets. Disillusioned by the demands and low-pay of care work, she describes camming as offering her a better quality of life and financial stability. She and her husband have used her camming income to take vacations, buy investment properties, and build savings. Others shared similar stories of drawing on skills gained in devalued economic sectors and finding greater monetary success as cam models. Considering sex work is socially devalued, it is puzzling that many cam models report earning more and feeling valued more than in socially acceptable feminized professions. Some allude to what I call a “stigma bonus,” the payoff of doing work that other women, fearing or sitting in judgment, are unwilling to do. Choosing this life is difficult but brings a sense of possibility given their alternatives.

Like other gig workers, cam models value flexibility and working from home as individualized strategies for managing their needs. With multiple jobs and college coursework, some interviewees appreciated camming as a gig performed at night, on weekends, and during free time, allowing them to preserve normal business hours for other commitments. Working from home is also a respite from the pressures of traditional workplaces to optimize productivity at the expense of personal relationships and family matters, an expectation women negotiate alongside the persistent gendered division of labor in which they are overwhelmingly responsible
for managing the household, childrearing, and elder care in their extended families. Blair, for instance, started camming to care for her grandmother, who recently suffered a stroke and has Alzheimer’s. Abbie and Stephanie homeschool their sons and cam while they sleep. While the flexibility of gigs is likely overstated, it is also not an abstract virtue of camming, but a concrete gain that gives women control they are sorely lacking in other labor sectors. Many cam models have worked in industries without paid or unpaid leave and risk being fired if they miss a pre-assigned shift. For these workers and caretakers, flexibility is all they have.

Traditional workplaces can also be inhospitable to workers with chronic physical, mental health, or behavioral conditions who might need to take more breaks. Kendrix started camming after she had two car accidents that left her with severe brain trauma. She had to quit the jobs she previously held and defer college enrollment due to physical and cognitive limitations. Jessica also suffered a car accident that halted her work as a nurse supervisor at a medical office. She began camming after a doctor told her to do less physically taxing work. Other interviewees had anxiety, depression, attention deficit disorder, bipolar disorder, or autism spectrum disorder. They all appreciate camming as a job without rigid protocols. Flexibility, then, is less about neoliberal mantras of freedom and choice and more about recognizing individual needs and limitations, an instinct that is discouraged, shamed, or even penalized in traditional workplaces. Workers’ preference for flexibility over stability calls attention to the underlying systemic failure to create humane employment policies that address their needs and reflect their values.

Opportunities for creativity and recognition also drive cam models to view sex work in a positive light compared to normative work they are presently qualified to do. Full-time models are independent content creators like other social media workers, with live cam sessions representing only a fraction of their creative output and revenue, which includes more lucrative ventures such as photo and video clip production for social media and fan club subscriptions. Successful models operate like one-woman multimedia companies, perpetually creating and promoting shows, content, and merchandise. As sex work becomes more mainstream or at least
more visible, some models hope to leverage their experiences in the adult industry as expertise they carry over into careers in media, sex therapy, business consulting, marketing, and sales. After a decade as a phone-sex-operator-cum-cam-model, Avery has authored two books, offers one-on-one consulting with models, and delivers an online teaching series. Callie runs an online industry publication and hosts a podcast on camming. An industry that represents the marriage of sex, performance art, business, and technology, camming is a hotbed for innovation that appeals to women invested in becoming “sexual entrepreneurs.” Sexual content creation can become a source of creativity, self-esteem, and community even if begun under financial strain. Several interviewees proudly told me how they had earned “best cam show” and “fan favorite” awards at conventions. These achievements are noteworthy since gaining recognition for female amateur content production is unusual in other creative industries.

Additionally, part of a cam model’s job is to “hang out” and “have fun,” highlighting self-expression and pleasure. Some showcase and practice their skills and talents for an audience; Models are known to paint, sing, dance, cook, and play videogames as ways to entertain and interact with users. Cam modeling can be pleasurable work, but acknowledging this pleasure is tricky because doing so might put the legitimacy of their labor into question. But these joys differentiate this work from other gigs my interviewees considered like catering or driving for a car-share service. The search for pleasure and passion in camming and other gig work is important to take seriously as indications of what is missing in workers’ everyday lives under increasingly unstable and alienating economic conditions (Jones, 2020). Work that scholars simply see as precarious also promises to transcend normative realms of possibility.

Summary and Conclusion

With this chapter, I have attempted to shift the conversation within feminist media studies away from its focus on what the sexualization of culture does to women to make space for curiosity about what women do with commercial sexual culture. To this end, this chapter has examined the meanings and values women associate with cam modeling and sugar dating. I have
explored their experiences and perspectives to intervene in what I see as a lack of ethnographic data to support arguments made in feminist media studies regarding the gendered implications of sexual commercial culture. I have organized my argument by focusing and elaborating on two overarching themes that I hope will expand scholarly understanding of women’s allegiances to sexual commercial culture: (1) their investment in feminine erotic power as sexual capital that aid gendered strategies for thriving by creating access to economic capital, but also social and cultural capital that can be converted into material gains in the future; and (2) their oppositional stances toward the constraints of “vanilla” life. The juxtaposition between these two themes highlights important tensions. Cam models and sugar babies exhibit dispositions toward playing heteronormative sexual games based on their sexual desirability and objectification that seem retrogressive in their appeals to the “male gaze,” but this interpretation is often based on class-based and sexist value-judgments about women’s independent uses of sexual capital to pursue individual interests. Though academic arguments against seeing sexual capital as a gendered strategy do not typically end with a scholar proclaiming such women “whores” or pejorative uses of the term prostitute, it still comes with a hidden agenda for regulating women’s sexual agency to assume a more acceptable form. What that acceptable form looks like in today’s highly commercialized and sexualized cultural landscape is still unclear.

At the same time, cam models and sugar babies are also aligned with a progressive sexuality that disrupts how a woman is expected to be in both the public and private sphere. Cam models reject “vanilla” corporate jobs in favor of work that looks like play and sugar babies forego “vanilla” dating and romance in order to ask for a “wage” (also known as an allowance or pay per meet fee) to cover the work of being a woman in a relationship. I have suggested that instead of focusing on how interpretations of women’s agency look like ‘celebrations’ of problematic sexual commercial culture, we should be looking at women’s disengagement from corporate work and traditional heteronormative dating as a form of tactical resistance against cultural normativity. These aspects of their engagement with sexual culture are often ignored or
dismissed, because they are contradictory or difficult to reconcile, or seen as irrational or uncritical. But, I argue, these tensions are central to understanding the complex draw of cam modeling and sugar dating for women who participate in these scenes.

Throughout this chapter I have identified differences between cam modeling and sugar dating that I have suggested mean these gendered strategies of action are not to be seen as democratically accessible or the same, despite their similarities. I also do not see these strategies as forever in place. Strategies that look very similar have come and gone throughout American history. In New York City, during the turn of the twentieth century and a highly unsettled period of early industrialism, a cultural practice known as ‘treating’ gained prominence as a form of commodified intimacy distinct from prostitution and meant for “good women” (Clement, 2006). Treating was considered an “intermediary” between pre-commercial “courting” (which was concurrently transitioning into modern dating rituals) and prostitution (Clement, 2006, p. 48). Clement argues that treating is a practice, but also a language and identity, “a behavior with a clearly articulated set of rules, assumptions, and vocabulary” (p. 48). We can think of treating as an historically and culturally specific gendered strategy for thriving like cam modeling and sugar dating. Clement emphasizes how treating “opened up” a “social and sexual space” that “did not always benefit” women, but it was used by them during the Great Depression to make do:

asking for help with rent in exchange for sexual favors during the Depression had moved out of the category of prostitution. Instead, such behaviors now occupied an intermediate space of quasi-respectability that good women could occupy when their need was great (p. 216).

In this respect is important to note that cam modeling and sugar dating, as gendered strategies for thriving that commodify women’s beauty, sexuality, and emotionality, are not simply emergent, but have historical precedents. In the next chapter, I turn to how these strategies take shape in communities, and identities associated with cam modeling and sugar dating that similarly offer women a “vocabulary” for understanding their uses of commodified sexuality as ideal sexual subject positions for the contemporary cultural moment.
CHAPTER 6

PURSUING BETTER SEXUAL SELVES:

THE COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE OF BEING CAM MODELS AND SUGAR BABIES

Overview

In the last chapter, I discussed how women value cam modeling and sugar dating as spaces in which they enact individualized strategies and tactics for thriving that match their dispositions toward valuing erotic power and contesting normative culture. But women also find each other and a sense of belonging and identity in the process. This chapter explores how identifying as a cam model or sugar baby signifies membership in what Berlant (2008) terms an “intimate public” of women who are “marked by a commonly lived history” based on their supposedly ‘bad’ engagements with commercial sex culture (p. viii). Highly active members of these communities—those who attend events, plan gatherings, and use social media to reflect on their experiences and connect with peers—are especially keen on building a sense of shared experience, knowledge, and friendship amongst women with similar identifications. The connections women build with other women in these scenes transcend simply seeking advice and gathering information to better perform the work of a cam model or sugar baby. In the affective communities women create, they also find “a better experience of social belonging” and prototypes for reimagining better sexual selves (Berlant, 2008, p. viii). This chapter addresses the research question: How might their understandings expand, constrain, or complicate the meanings and identities available to them as sexual subjects in a changing cultural, political, and economic environment?

As members of affective communities, women adopt distinct subject positions, or modes of feminine sexual subjectivity, that each community discursively produces. Becoming a cam model or sugar baby is a process that inspires women to negotiate and transform their feminine sexual subjectivities in ways that align with the cultures of these communities and better their sexual selves in ways that sustain them. In other words, beyond providing individualized
strategies of action and a sense of community belonging, cam models and sugar babies find meaning in sexual entertainment and leisure as avenues to reconstruct the sexual self and help them thrive. Despite the shame and stigma surrounding sex work, they often turn to these communities and adopt the subjectivities of a cam model or sugar baby to improve their lives, not make them worse.

The “cam model” and “sugar baby” are related yet distinct subject positions available to women seeking to transform themselves to manage their needs and desires. Specifically, cam models borrow from promotional culture to redefine the sexual self as an entrepreneurial brand, while sugar babies draw from aspirational culture to refashion the sexual self as a future-oriented tool (Duffy, 2017). As the last chapter discussed, cam models tend to express discontent with normative work arrangements associated with corporate capitalism, which crystallizes in the entrepreneurial subject position of a cam model, who uses her sexuality to take part in a promotional gig economy. In contrast, sugar babies’ discontent with heteronormative dating culture leads them to embrace the aspirational subject position of a sugar baby, who redefines her sexuality as a productive and career-driven (not love-driven) tool (Duffy, 2017).

This chapter suggests that there is collective value to women’s individualized pursuits even when women are not overly working with political means and toward political ends. Critiques that emphasize the disciplining function of adopting subjectivities and discourses tend to lament how individualized strategies prevent or derail ideal collective action, but I argue this focus fails to see how women indeed come together in relation to their individualized pursuits and parse through meanings and identities in a collective way (Banet-Weiser, 2018). I am not suggesting that communities geared toward cultivating entrepreneurial and aspirational identities are necessarily working or struggling for social change, but they are talking about it in subtle ways in communal spaces where their goals and interests intersect. This “juxtapotitical” space is even more important for sex workers, including sugar babies who linger on the fringes of the sex industry, who have been seen as shamed subjects throughout most American history and culture.
Forging a sense of belonging and identity together, cam models and sugar babies transform the shamed identity of a sex worker into ideal subject positions fit for late modern times and find pleasure in helping each other imagine and achieve better sexual selves.

**Conceptual Framework**

In recent years, the area of feminist media studies has generally shifted away from examining how sexual media and culture uniformly impacts women to considering variance in women’s everyday sexual practices, the multiplicity of meanings women derive from sex and sexualized commercial industries, and the structuring of feminine sexual subjectivities. Feminist media scholars have been at the forefront of what some call the “psychological turn” in critical cultural studies, paying greater attention to the affective and intimate qualities of hegemonic ideologies. Scholars such as Rosalind Gill, Christina Scharff, Shani Orgad, and Akane Kanai among others have spearheaded research on “the psychic and affective life” of neoliberalism and postfeminism, how they operate at the level of “emotions, feelings, and subjectivity” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 4; Gill & Kanai, 2018).

Often this scholarship draws on Foucault’s concept of governmentality to argue that women’s expressions of sexual agency reflect structures that shape their bodies and minds to become “ideal subjects” of whatever form power takes on at the moment. In contemporary feminist cultural critique, the forces most commonly referenced include postfeminism, but also neoliberalism and consumerism (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill & Scharff, 2011). Gill and Scharff (2011) note that the overlapping discourses between postfeminism and neoliberalism suggest that women are, in fact, the ideal subjects of neoliberalism. They argue that both discourses emphasize individualism and the ideal subjects discursively constructed look similar: the “autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism” resembles the “active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism” (p. 7). Connecting this confluence of neoliberalism and postfeminism to the construction of an ideal sexual subject, Evans & Riley (2014) frame sexual choice and freedom as “compulsory” ways of being built into “the apparatus
of neoliberal governmentality,” which “disperses the power of neoliberal politics throughout personal, social, and institutional levels and at every level sexual identities are implicated” (p. 8).

They write:

Within this ‘freedom’ the neoliberal subject is offered a range of new identifications: The hard-working taxpayer, the upwardly mobile working-class family, the strong career-driven woman…. and more recently…. the female sexual entrepreneur, who works on herself and body to maintain an ‘up for it’ sexual agentic identity (p. 6).

In their theorization of the connection between governmentality and sexual subjectivities, Evans and Riley (2014) flesh out a term coined by Radner (1999), a “technology of sexiness,” to describe “women’s engagement with material and non-material practices in the pursuit of (hetero)sexy subjectivity” (Evans & Riley, 2014, p. 39; Gill, 2007a; Evans, Riley, and Shankar, 2010). They use this concept to understand the creation of sexual subject positions in relation to sexual commercial culture.

Many feminist scholars use Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and technologies of the self to explain women’s pleasure in exercising an agentive sexual subjectivity in relation to commercial culture. These analyses are valuable, but incomplete and tend to lead to the same conclusion: women’s pleasure in producing and participating in commercial sex cultures is not to be taken seriously or trusted. Women’s pleasure in sexual commercial culture has a bad reputation in feminist media studies that frame these practices as symptomatic of a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007b). Many scholars critique the ways in which women claim sexual media and culture to be liberating and empowering, arguing that the supposedly emancipated sexual subjectivities represented in media and reflected in popular discourse mask an insidious truth about the structural constraints of patriarchy and capitalism that ultimately define them. For instance, McRobbie (2009) offers the “phallic girl” as an example of a “pleasure-seeking subject in possession of a healthy sexual appetite and identity,” who participates in “assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men” (p. 732). However, her “playful female phallicism,” characterized by a display of “boldness, confidence, aggression and even
transgression,” is merely “superficial” (p. 732-733). For McRobbie (2009), postfeminism involves a trade by which women further feminist-inspired interests, but at the expense of the broader feminist movement. She notably calls postfeminism a “sexual contract” in which “women are able to come forward on condition that feminism fades away” (p. 56). Dobson (2014) too identifies the emergence of the “sexy” and “laddish” girl as other types that represent women’s adoption of “masculine” approaches to sex and sociality such as their openness to casual sexual encounters and explicit sexual banter, participation in drinking cultures, and “one of the boys” attitudes.

Though I take issue with their reliance on governmentality to explain women’s engagement with sexual culture, I agree with Evans and Riley (2014) that feminist media scholars must avoid making women the “problem” of sexualization (p. 39). All too often accounts that invoke concepts discussed here and in the last chapter—postfeminism, objectification, sexualization—overlook or undervalue women’s critical, reflexive, or ambivalent stances toward sexual commercial culture as participants or are quick to discredit their pleasure. While I do not wish to overcorrect and produce a depoliticized celebratory analysis, I do agree that we should look at how women’s culture that develops in relation to sexual commercial culture represent “spaces for contested meaning” and create “the potential for subverting identities” and expanding “the discursive boundaries of femininity” (Evans & Riley, 2014, p. 57). In this spirit, I offer ethnographic data to unpack the complex ways women take up or dismiss discourses in their own personal narratives and communal practices of narrativizing their lives through affective communities based on sharing stories, experiences, advice, hardships, and so on. Quoting Stuart Hall, Orgad (2020) reminds us of the importance of studying practices of narrativizing the self to understanding the formation of cultural identities:

Identities ‘arise from the narrativization of the self” (Hall 1996, 4) and, especially today, when this storytelling occurs increasingly on public mediated platforms, it has the potential to feed into and shape the “bigger” stories of society. Narratives—both personal and cultural—are key sites through which inequalities and injustice are articulated, sustained, reproduced, and normalized, but, also, where injustice can be disrupted,
resisted, and subverted. Thus, examining the connections and disjunctures between the realms of people’s personal and private stories of their experience and cultural and media narratives, offers a framework for understanding how social narratives furnish and condition our most intimate personal experiences and, crucially, how we might be able to negotiate, challenge, and change these narratives (p. 637-638).

Connecting discourse to personal narratives has political value (Orgad, 2020). Indeed, Orgad (2020) argues that connecting public discourse to personal narratives is imperative today, opening up “possibilities for change and even resistance” (ibid). Calling for more research in this vein, Orgad (2020) again draws on Stuart Hall’s work, writing:

Our analysis of discursive and disciplinary regulation, Hall contends, must be complemented with an account of the psychic mechanisms and interior processes through which subjects attach, or negotiate, resist, and fail to attach to the subject positions constructed by public discourses... how contemporary cultural and media narratives and technologies construct and normalize inequalities and power relations in neoliberalism, and how people experience, negotiate, and cope with these inequalities in their everyday lives, has remained largely unexplored (p. 636-637).

This chapter attempts to answer this call by exploring how women use affective communities created by their engagement with sexual commercial cultures of cam modeling and sugar dating to narrativize their experiences and form sexual subjectivities that draw on cultural discourses many feminist scholars would dismiss as evidence of governmentality. As my analysis will show, I prefer a reading that remains more open-ended and attuned to their search for possibility amidst what can feel like deafening constraint if that is all we take away from their negotiations.

A Sense of Belonging

As the last chapter suggests, women who cam model and sugar date share similar dispositions and experiences working in commercial sex culture that draw them to each other. Josie, a cam model in Los Angeles, said talking about what she does with her “vanilla friends” is “difficult” because “it makes a lot of people uncomfortable.” Now that she transitioned to cam modeling full-time, she invests more in friendships she has formed with cam models: “I kind of feel like all my friends are cam girls now. You kind of lose contact with people that aren't in that world.” She explains this shift as a matter of shared experience: “With other cam girls, you can relate. You talk about your experiences.” Josie feels an affinity to other women in her position.
that is lacking in her other friendships despite only meeting some of them in person. Another cam model explains this affinity as a certain understanding of being a sex worker and in this industry, writing on an online forum: “I'd much rather carry on a conversation with a model from these forums than 99% of the people I interact with in real life because these ladies don't judge me.” Many cam models told me they feel judged by outsiders and appreciate the spirit of cam modeling as a non-judgmental space of likeminded people.

This ethos of “letting your freak flag fly” may even be more pronounced in cam modeling than other sex industries. Vanessa, who also works at strip clubs, sees the camming community as less judgmental. Even amongst exotic dancers, she finds “prudes” who judge her. She speculates that women who strip are more private or ashamed than cam models, who publicly livestream their sex work. Distinguishing cam models from strippers, Vanessa’s comment reveals the limits of these affective communities. While I discuss how women within each group instill feelings of shared experience, this sense of belonging for the most part does not extend across practices and sex workers often lament the “whorearchy” that divides them.

Defensiveness against the “whorearchy” sometimes divides cam models from sugar babies, but it mostly brings women within each community together to combat stigma associated with either practice. While some sugar babies work to define themselves against other sex workers, including cam models and vice versa, women in both scenes mostly define themselves against women who do not participate in commercial sex, not each other. Women in sugar dating, for instance, emphasize being different from other women who do not have the disposition to sell sex and intimacy, women who lack their brazenness, confidence, and hustler’s instincts. Women active in the Tumblr community coach each other to adopt these qualities to succeed and a thick skin when it comes to defending themselves against moral accusations about their character and the stigma attached to performing any kind of sex work:

If you are going to cry for hours every time someone calls you a prostitute, tells you to get a job, and/or says no one will love you, you’re probably not ready to be in the bowl,
because I have never met or followed an established [sugar baby] who has not had to deal with this on a daily occurrence.

Another Tumblr post reiterates the inner strength a woman needs to be a sugar baby:

This lifestyle is not for the faint of heart. If you are insecure in the slightest bit, just stop. Society is VERY judgmental about this lifestyle. People who you thought were the closest to you, will call you a gold digger, prostitute, hooker etc and you just have to turn your nose up and pay them no mind. They don’t understand the lifestyle of a sex worker. Morally, if you can’t handle having a double life and lying to people, then stop. The money is not worth it.

Referenced throughout this research, the sugar baby community on Tumblr includes hundreds of users that share personal stories, advice, techniques, and beliefs about how to be successful as a sugar baby. While women in the community debate sugar babies’ sex worker status, public perception of the sugar baby aligns her with sex workers whether she identifies as one or not.

Overcoming societal judgment and stigma is a badge of honor and price of entry into a community of women with similar hopes for the future and a well of knowledge and resources to help each other realize them.

Because of the stigma attached to these practices, finding each other through social media, events, and gatherings they arrange can be transformative moments when women realize they are a part of something bigger, a female collective with shared experiences and tools for coping. Penny, for example, recalls feeling “empowered” while attending her first cam modeling convention. Struggling with the stigma of sex work, she felt a sense of belonging that helped her overcome her fears:

When I first started doing it, I had told one of my really close friends. He was a guy, and he hated it. He was like, ‘This is disgusting. I can't believe you do this.’ He almost shamed me for it. So, as soon as that happened, I just never told anyone. And I was like, oh my gosh. I am constantly living in fear. He started using it as a blackmail, like, ‘Well, I'll tell your family that you do this, if you don't help me with this.’ And stuff like that. And finally, a couple of years ago, I really owned myself. Actually, after I went to CamCon, the first year. I realized that there are hundreds and thousands of us. It is not just me out there… It's empowering. It's a job. I'm making more than most people I know and there's nothing wrong with it. So, I took my life back and I was like, I'm actually okay with what I do.
Like Penny, Josie had a transformative experience at a convention she attended around the time she wanted to transition to full-time cam modeling. She credits women she met at a convention with providing her the inspiration she needed to take this leap of faith:

> It was just such an awesome experience. And I talked to a lot of different girls who just were really motivating me, like I feel like I can do this. Like I will work hard for it, and I can do it. I was like, ‘What if I don't make enough money? And I can't pay rent?’ And everyone was like ‘There's 30 days in a month. You definitely can.’

Josie took their advice and has never looked back. Not only does she make enough money to pay her rent, but she also “ended up enjoying herself more” because of the friendships that involve “making content together and hanging out with each other.”

Ginger shared a similar story of attending a convention, meeting new people, and finding herself venturing into new territory in the adult entertainment industry because of these connections. At fifty-six-years-old, Ginger works in a smaller niche and only started cam modeling a couple years ago after decades working “vanilla” jobs and raising her children. Going to conventions has been an important part of her transition into the adult entertainment community. She described meeting a couple other performers, one of whom had many followers, at the last convention she attended, which spontaneously turned into creating content together that weekend. Connections she made there have catapulted her career. When we spoke she was considering an offer to do a photo shoot she had recently received from an adult magazine catering to older women fetishes. Like these cam models, many cam models talked about conventions as a great way to meet each other, network, and build friendships in the community that push them out of their comfort zones and imagine the possibilities of cam modeling together.

Showing the front and back of a flyer I received at the 2017 CamCon, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this camaraderie as well as opportunities to network, learn, and share in the creativity of being sexual entrepreneurs.
Figure 1: CamCon 2017 Flyer Front

Figure 2: 2017 CamCon Schedule
Because opportunities to meet in person are less common, sugar babies tend to find each other online, but also describe the experience of coming together as transformative. In her first year of sugar dating, Veronica attracted little attention: “Almost a year went by of just searching where I didn't really get a whole lot of hits. You know, you get a whole bunch of people looking at your profile, but nobody was messaging.” She found other women “who were like pros at it.” They offered to fix her profile, which changed her whole experience of sugar dating. She began communicating with other women who sugar date regularly: “We called it a sugar circle, where we all gave feedback to one another or encouragement.” Kacy relayed a similar experience. She found sugar dating “because it just was all over social media.” She signed up and made a profile on a sugar dating website, but also found herself floundering like Veronica. Finding a community of women like her who had experience helped her hone her intentions and approach:

I feel like when I got to Instagram, that's when I learned the real deal about sugar dating. I was kinda lost before then. I was just meeting guys just figuring out what it is that I was willing to do, what it is I wasn't going to do, and then got to Instagram and I knew how to really work it basically, I learned a lot from them.

After a year in the community, she now considers herself a sugar baby who can offer the same kind of help she received. She says her “success stories” inspire other sugar babies to keep going.

Receiving help as a newcomer is a common experience in sugar dating, an important part of the culture women create. Many sugar babies mentioned connections made with other women who taught them important lessons and skills to improve their chances in these scenes. Ava described the community as offering vital peer-to-peer training that she is accustomed to providing to new employees as a worker in the restaurant industry:

I think the community is really cool. And I think that us collectively speaking to each other and sharing experiences has helped us have better experiences moving forward. If there are women that want to get into this, they have resources. Cause like I said, it is work. And you know, before you start a job, you have to learn how to do it. Good example: my cocktail serving job. If there's a new server, I'm going to train them how to do their job the best way. So, it's really cool. Cause it's like you have this resource to have people talk to, people that are more experienced in the job that you want to pursue, the job that you are taking on. And then you can do a better job at it off the bat.
A sugar baby on Tumblr describes the sugar baby community she has found online as “amazing” and “helpful.” She highlights the sense of belonging and support sugar babies provide each other with a small disclaimer about the oft-mentioned “whorearchy,” stating:

I’ve found those like me and we all love each other and are supportive (well, a fair amount. There’s still a fair amount who aren’t intersectional at all and price shame/support the whorearchy etc blah blah) but most are.

This blogger laments the divisiveness of a pervasive “whorearchy,” but also mentions intersectionality, which could refer to the exclusion of several groups including minority women.

I personally observed a vocal group of minority women who identify as “brown sugar babies” on Tumblr and interviewed a couple who found the networking, inspiration, and advice they provide each other especially valuable and better tailored to their backgrounds and needs.

Ciara, for instance, is a Black sugar baby living in Miami. When she first started sugar dating, she did her “research,” as most women call it, and used resources created by other sugar babies that appears as an “advice column” on a major sugar dating website to figure out how to sugar date. She says peer-produced resources gave her “a blueprint for what to do.” Hearing other sugar babies’ stories—their entrance into this world, how they approached their first date, what worked for them—was “amazing” and also helped to refine her intentions:

I looked at how to present myself when it came to the first date or how to ask what allowance, um, what allowance meant. And just learning about the different terms. Made me aware of why I wanted to get into this in the first place.

She discovered a subsection of the advice column devoted to Black women, which left more of an impression:

She was telling people how she got into the world and what was her pros and what was her cons. So, by me looking at all this and I'm looking like, ‘Okay, so I could do this.’

In this vein, minority women on Tumblr offer advice and inspiration that addresses the challenges and opportunities of sugar dating as a brown or Black woman. For instance, one well-circulated Tumblr post begins by calling on Black women in the sugar dating community to come together:

The black girls that join the bowl full of hope and optimism. There is something in me that says I should be talking to you. I’ve done it before, I suppose, when I told you that I
loved your blackness but we need each other. Need to talk to each other and remind each other that things are okay and will get better.

It continues by envisioning experiences likely shared by Black women in a racist sugar dating world:

In general there is a lot of shit that comes with being a sugar baby but being a black sugar baby is so hard. We have to deal with microaggressions or flat out racist notions/comments. These men are older they are white and you are probably the first or one of few black women they have had ANY kind of romantic interactions with. You will deal with them trying to be “hip” or making flippant remarks about your skin tone/hair texture/features… There’s also the fact that you will always stick out no matter what. Not only are you going to restaurants/resorts etc where are there few black people but you’re also with an older white gentleman. I’ve had a black [sugar daddy] and despite the fact that he was one of my richest (he always picked me up in one of his ferraris) we never got stared as much as I do when I’m with my white [potential sugar daddies/sugar daddies].

This post ends by instructing Black women to develop “nerves of steel” to handle the particular strain of navigating the racial dynamics of sugar dating culture because the reward is worth it:

99% of white men will be racist and sexist given a chance, they will fetishize your features. It does get annoying sometimes but I take a deep breath, remember the money and let their comments roll off me like water on a duck.

More than a source of information and advice, the brown sugar baby Tumblr community validates minority women’s experiences in the broader social world and their desirability as sexual subjects. Promoting a book she has written on the subject, one blogger speaks to her readers as “sisters” in the Black community, referring to their shared racial history and directing them not to settle for unfulfilling relationships:

Tumblr user, directing black women not to settle: You are 24k gold. You are black girl magic. You are the best of generations of people that sacrificed so that you could live in the world you live in now. You deserve better than what’s available. You deserve the best. You deserve the relationship that changes you forever in all of the best ways.

The brown sugar baby community offers a sense of hope that despite the well-known hostility against Black women freely expressed in online dating culture (Curington, Lundquist, & Lin, 2021), including sugar dating, they too have a place in the sugar community and can benefit from dating with a purpose.
More publicly organized than sugar babies who connect through hashtags, handles, and private groups on social media, the online community of cam models provides a plethora of resources for the newcomer and the culture of helping fellow women is strong. Jessica describes the cam modeling community as “really close.” Her experience mirrors that of sugar babies who found other women to be helpful and kind, offering their expertise and friendship:

All of the women I’ve come across have been so sweet and so helpful. When I first started I would reach out and offer to pay models for a little bit of help or advice information. Some of them would give it to me for free. Everyone was really sweet. You know how it is when you're first starting, you're struggling, you have no idea what you're doing, there's no handbook and you just have to learn as you go and ask for help. And that's what I did and found that it's a great community.

A veteran cam model, Jordan describes her motivation to help others make it in the industry:

I have all this knowledge now and it's like, what do I do with it? What do I do with it if not help other girls that do choose it… Cause I do feel like a lot of these girls are going at it with no direction. Like just jumping into it, thinking that it's easy or are getting taken advantage of by these companies… it's nice to have that knowledge and to be able to apply it.

Sharing advice and resources, most of which women create themselves, helps other women and can also become a pleasurable and lucrative identity, especially for cam models who transform themselves into experts in the field. Jordan, for instance, started a YouTube channel that covers a range of topics, including cam modeling. She says women will tell her, “You got me into cam modeling. You were the first person that I heard, and you inspired me, and you motivated me, and thank you.” This feedback motivates her:

Getting those like responses has honestly kept me here… Hearing that I'm helping people and that what I'm saying and what I'm doing for this industry is actually helping people…

But so does the opportunity to build an entrepreneurial identity out of her experience and respected perspective. She continued:

Getting the recognition and speaking at seminars and being featured in the magazines for what I know and what I'm doing is very, very inspiring and motivational.

Like Jordan, several women I interviewed described their intention to help other cam models as a gateway into careers beyond sex work, which they had not planned for. A successful cam model
and former phone sex operator, Avery “had so many girls repeatedly asking [her] the same questions over and over and over again,” which inspired her to write books and offer teaching and one-on-one consulting through a personal website she created. Another cam model, Callie, now spends most of her time running a podcast and website that produces content to help sex workers. She recently hired her best friend, another cam model, to help her grow these businesses.

Cam models and sugar babies who participate in events, online discussions, and entrepreneurial endeavors are a select group of individuals that want to learn from and teach each other how to be a cam model or a sugar baby. Even women who do not participate in online or offline gatherings say doing their “research” is important step in the process to becoming a cam model or sugar baby. They too are a part of an imagined community and culture that implies adopting modes of feminine sexual subjectivity related to these practices. The following sections discuss these subject positions in detail and their possibilities.

**Cam Modeling and the Promotional Sexual Self**

For cam models, redefining the sexual self as entrepreneurial brand begins with a process of empowering the sexual self to become more visible in the digital cultural marketplace as a sex worker. Visibility is a known demand of doing promotional work and cam models reshape their sexual selves to fit the contours of this process (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Livestreaming and producing adult content, cam models do work that entails appearing naked and performing sex acts for an anonymous internet audience. Women familiar with the industry know they are at risk of being recorded, having their content pirated, doxxed, and so on. The visibility of online sex work puts women in a vulnerable position that, for a variety of reasons, takes adjusting to. Narrating this adjustment process, many cam models recall feeling empowered as a result.

For instance, many cam models refer to moments in which they realized or began to see how ownership over their own sexual agency and identity as a sex worker was “empowering.” Women who may have been on the fence about being found out or “outed” as a sex worker when they began cam modeling as a side gig shared memorable stories with me about their decisions to
go public and become more visible on cam platforms and social media as part of the work of being a cam model. Sometimes these decisions were made for them by people and conditions out of their control such as piracy of their content that made their activities more public than they had initially hoped, but in retrospect they saw this transition into being more visible with their sexual identities and entrepreneurship as a rite of passage into the world that cam modeling has to offer them. Birdie pointed out that a potential cam model should think about the inevitable risks and consequences of pursing this path beforehand:

> Everything you do on is going to be on the Internet forever. It doesn't go away. It may be forgotten, and it may never reappear, but it's there. Do you want to be a doctor? Obviously you can't be a teacher. Obviously there are some jobs that look far back in your career and will say you can't work for us because of this.

Birdie understands that becoming a cam model is a decision that could shut the door on conventional careers in her future. Still, she counts “the other potential doors that would open” as one of the things she likes most about cam modeling, doors that “potentially would never be there had I not gone this route.” She explains:

> Because it's funny, when you do this you realize, ‘well, I might not be able to have a lot of jobs.’ But once you're on the other side of that, you realize you have so many other amazing experiences that can be open to me because I decided to do this.

Birdie reframes a potentially disempowering realization—that participating in stigmatized sex work will likely limit her options and work opportunities—as an impasse that reveals hidden possibilities. She has used her start in cam modeling as a launching point for learning more about topics like blockchain technology and virtual reality and connecting with people based on these shared interests. She is inspired by women in the field who have used social media platforms and their sexual selfhood to build successful brands such as Ella Darling, who she sees as revolutionizing the way sex workers are portrayed in media and culture, and others like Lorrae Jo Bradbury, who identifies as a “women’s empowerment coach, writer, and advocate” and founded the website “Slutty Girl Problems” to empower women “to create the lives they crave, through relationship, mindset, and wellness tools to live adventurous, happy, and free.” Similarly, Jordan
dreams of using her platform as a highly visible cam model and unconventional worker as a stepping stone to help women become more comfortable with their own sexuality:

I would love to get into, not like sex therapy, but almost be like a Dr. Ruth when I'm like super old. Because I do feel like there is something very liberating [about it]. You don't have to be in porn, but just knowing that it's okay if you wanted to run out with your boobies out. That's fine! Like, no judgment! And you want it to be conservative, that's cool too. But you shouldn't be judging each other. [We should be] having that dialogue and not slut shaming. That is a wrong way of thinking. Just let people just be people. And if they feel comfortable with that, go ahead.

She also sees her background as a cam model as giving her credibility and a springboard for taking on a position of authority in the male-dominated porn industry and addressing its problems:

There's a lot of manipulation in this industry. I was told that because I'm pretty, and I have really pretty eyes, that if I did guy-girl porn, all of my scenes pretty much would end with the guy jissing on my face or only things with facials. I'm like, ‘Ew! I don't do that in my normal life. Um, no.’ And when I brought this up to other models, another girl came at me and she goes, ‘Oh my God, I got the same shit. Because I have tattoos and piercings, I was told that the only porn that I could be cast in is hardcore fetish and abuse kind of porn.’ And I'm like, that is some bullshit. Like, what is that? Like why? I don't understand that... I would love to have my own management and production company. Get a nice place where I can make videos and just get a good group of actors and models under my belt and be able to see them grow and see them prosper in the things that they WANT to do. Whatever you're comfortable with, let's dive into it. Let's figure out how we can make you big, getting into that.

Other cam models I interviewed talked about the creative potential of being a cam model, such as Callie who “always wanted to either be a writer or a teacher” and has unexpectedly fulfilled these callings by producing a podcast and website for cam models after gaining experience as a cam model in the industry. “I never really thought that becoming a cam model would end up with me being able to still do those things,” she told me. Ophelia “always liked photography” and now creates “boudoir style” photos for her fans, who recognize her talents and effort: “They’re like, ‘Hey, I like this picture. I like what you’re doing with the shadows here.’ So, it’s encouraging.”

Whether it’s dreaming up careers they never knew existed before, or realizing longstanding passions through their sexual entrepreneurship, cam models describe their decision to go public with their sex work as empowering them to set out on a less trodden path. By empowering the
sexual self, cam models envision themselves opening up new worlds previously unavailable to them, even if they might find it harder to open others again.

Cam models characterize these transitions as scary, but exciting—freeing even. For example, Kitty was less comfortable with going public with her cam modeling activities when she began: “I used to be scared [people] would look at me and judge me and feel negatively about me.” Now, she says, “I’m comfortable with it. ‘Cause it’s just a part of my story. It’s not the last thing I’m going to do in my life.” She was also uncomfortable in her own skin and describes her identity as a cam model as helping her to fully enjoy her sexual self and being on display. She shared with me that she used to feel “asexual” because she did not enjoy her sexuality. She felt awkward and self-conscious about sexual desire and only opened up when she began camming:

I got more comfortable with my body and I don’t feel asexual anymore. I feel like I have a regular libido and a regular sex drive and I want to explore with other people and stuff like that as well as cam. I think cam definitely helped that.

As Kitty’s story illustrates, the cam model is sometimes positioned by women and others as a pleasurable means of self-discovery, which is framed as beneficial to the performer and an attentive audience who witnesses this revelatory process, especially when they have been “with” a model “since the beginning,” as so many models told me their biggest fans have been. The ways in which cam models must display their sexual selves in public is antithetical to what sugar babies do and seek from these practices that are more private and discreet. Sugar babies are often opposed to publicizing and being marked by their sexual practices, but funneling the sexual self through the discursive sieve of promotional culture means valuing public sexual expression and visibility.

Once visible, the cam model should be prepared to capitalize on the sexual self, which involves turning the authentic self into capital in a sexual market. For instance, cam models emphasize being true to who they are (i.e. “be yourself”) to gain followers, fans, and traction in these crowded sexual marketplaces. They seek to fit into a niche and find their people, which involves a process of self-branding, or marketing themselves with self-awareness. Abbie, a model
in the “Big Beautiful Women” (BBW) niche, emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and avoiding false advertising when creating tags used to attract interested users that describe one’s physical appearance. A thin woman, she argued, would perform just as poorly using a “BBW” tag as she would not using it. Unearthing the potential of who we already are is a democratic promise of promotional culture that cam models, and others in self-promotional lines of work, affectively latch onto as a kind of life raft.

To locate and perform an authentic self for an imagined male audience, cam models encourage themselves and each other to engage in processes of self-discovery and, in turn, disclosure to transform the sexual self into a recognizable self-brand. Jordan describes self-branding as a “a weird self-evaluation thing” that involves asking oneself questions like, “What are your hobbies? What are the things you like to do?” Self-discovery and disclosure is not always quick or seamless, but cam models learn to develop self-awareness and expose more of themselves to a hungry audience looking to connect with “real women.” Jordan used to fit into what she called “a ‘porny’ mold” when she started because she was only eighteen and had a school-girl look about her. She felt “fetishized,” but this was the brand she felt best suited for. Twenty-three-years-old now, that brand no longer applies, she told me, so she has done some soul-searching to figure out who she is, and can be for her audience, now:

Instead of being the girl that’s just like, ‘Oh, I’m so hot,’ I’m more just like, ‘What’s up, guys?!’ That’s kinda more my thing. Unicorn masks and bunny ears and just like very silly. So I definitely put myself more like in the comedy end of it all when it comes to keeping the engagement. I do have a sexier side, but for the most part, my outward way is more silly and just kind of kiddish.

Today, Jordan’s brand centers on her most notable features: “I have blue hair, and I’m tall, and I’m brown.” She also highlights what she enjoys: “I’ve always been very silly and outgoing. I love singing. I serenade my customers with funny songs.” Turning the sexual self into a self-brand requires cam models to distinguish themselves from other cam models—not to mention the vast world of internet pornography—and draw on personal characteristics they think others appreciate about them. For the cam model, the end goal is to monetize what she already possesses.
in terms of personality (what makes her unique and, importantly, marketable), bodily and facial features (her physicality), skills, talents, and style.

The sexual entrepreneur also monetizes access to her sexual self, which is a subtle but powerful claim on the value of what she offers. In addition to livestreaming, many women offer “sexting” services and special “fan club” content for additional fees. Abbie uses two social media platforms, on which users can “pay for private sexting sessions or to pay to keep up with” her. Her fans can also pay for access to a private group where she posts “naughty” stories and “naked pictures” that are not public. Penny also sells social media access to her for fifteen dollars a month. Jessica sells her phone number for the high-price tag of one thousand dollars. As astonishing as this figure is, she persuades her fans that it is worth it:

If they want to get to know me, that's the best option. So, I sell that. Like, ‘Hey, would love to get to know you too. We should totally chat like whenever we want. If you have my number, that's best way to reach me. It's expensive once, but you have it forever.’ And then they buy it.

In addition to monetizing her texting and social media, the sexual entrepreneur also monetizes opportunities for men to view her sexual self in action. Many models create subscription-based fan clubs, where users get exclusive photos, videos, and live shows and access to a model via phone, text messages, and social media. Ophelia, for instance, commodifies all aspects of the process: posting behind-the-scenes photos and videos that lead up to an exclusive live show, offering those willing to pay more the option to watch her take a shower after a particularly “messy” show, and selling the lingerie she wore during it. Monetizing micro-moments of being naked, flirtatious, messy, and silly—aspects of the sexual self a woman might take for granted—teaches cam models to value these moments because someone is willing to pay to see them. As Jessica pointedly put it: “If you keep putting content out, the money will come in.”

**Sugar Dating and the Aspirational Sexual Self**

In April 2018, I attended the third annual Sugar Baby Summit in New York City, where hundreds of sugar babies who had traveled from across the United States gathered to improve
their performance in the sugar dating world, connect with other women interested in this lifestyle, and learn from sugar dating experts. Convening in a banquet hall at the top of a Manhattan skyscraper, we listened to lectures on how to be more assertive and confident in relationships, dress for dates, and create a captivating online profile, all of which made the professional sounding “Summit” more like a revamped dating seminar, helping women attract a monied man in a sea of duds. I was surprised only because of the amount of money and effort the host company had clearly put into marketing and promoting the event and the large turnout.

My mind wandered to an episode of Sex and the City, a once-groundbreaking show about single women in New York City, in which the main character, a sex columnist named Carrie, teaches a dating seminar called “Bright Lights, Date City” to help single women stand out in an over-competitive dating market with a seemingly dwindling pool of eligible single men. The comparison seemed apt; Sex and the City has become emblematic of what female empowerment looked like at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It was a consumer-driven, liberal feminist delight in bold sexuality, financial independence, and female autonomy, and here we were talking about sex, money, and freedom.

But at the Summit, lectures on personal branding, negotiation, and entrepreneurship emphasized the subtle skills of creating meaningful networks, talking about finances and gifts to better leverage a relationship with a sugar daddy, and securing seed money to start your own business and “be your own boss.” This advice made Carrie’s playful direction for her attendees to meet men at bars, enjoy flirting, and own being a mature independent woman seem quaint. While attendees of Carrie’s seminar were determined to land a relationship and find lasting love, these women seemed driven to land an investor and build a career. They seemed similar, but so far apart. What had changed? What connects the dots? (See Figure 3 for an illustration of the range of topics and speakers at this event.)
Sugar babies are unabashedly aspirational. In contrast to the sexual entrepreneurship of a cam model, which lends itself to capitalizing on what a social agent already has, the sugar baby is an aspirational subject who uses her sexual self to realize what she does not yet have. Future-oriented, sugar babies seek to improve their sexual selves more than empower them, as cam models do to accommodate the visibility demands of a promotional world. While I do not wish to suggest these are mutually exclusive discourses, or that they are worlds apart, I distinguish sugar babies’ impetus to improve over empower to pinpoint the self-work they do to change their sexual selves to become more legitimate social subjects, which differs from the self-work of cam models who celebrate their sexual selves to become visible as controversial social subjects (sex workers). Sugar babies are not interested in becoming known for their sexual selves, but cam models are at least open to this possibility as visible sex workers. Instead, improving the sexual self involves developing the disposition of a confident and self-aware woman to attract and date.
better men, elite men who will be useful to her and treat her better. Describing her own lack of confidence before she began sugar dating, Chloe underscores its importance:

In order to be a sugar baby, you really need to be mentally stable as well as confident and very secure in yourself. And honestly, for awhile I wasn't... if you're not very confident in yourself and how you look and your body, I don't think it's a good idea to really get into it.

Chloe, like many others, frame being confident in one’s “look” and “body” as an important starting point to attracting the right kind of men.

But sugar babies remind each other that body confidence is not inherent—it is cultivated by improving one’s appearance and state of mind. The mantra to “invest in yourself” reverberates in the Tumblr sugar baby community. Making bodily improvements is imperative to their performance in the sugar dating scene:

Invest in yourself, it’s the best money you will ever spend! Plastic surgery, laser treatments, skincare products, and a gym membership are some of the most beneficial things you could choose to splurge on. Invest in your appearance and the money will follow.

Investing in oneself is not just about improving the body and beauty, but also improving tastes and gaining skills that better their sexual selves and status in this sexual market:

Invest in yourself. Take such good care of yourself physically, mentally, spiritually that an unspoken message goes out to the men you date: I am not for the man that can’t take better care of me than I take of myself. How? Read more. Go to museums more. Meditate. Study mindfulness. Exercise. Eat healthy. Buy clothes that flatter your body and make you feel like a model. These habits will present themselves in your conversation and the way you carry yourself and the way you look. They will scare away cheap men. They will help you eliminate men that don’t deserve you.

Improving the sexual self in these ways helps a woman get what she wants from a man, many sugar babies argue, because as one sugar baby puts it, “indestructible confidence” is the “ultimate key to success in sugaring.” She also advises changing oneself or performing confidence if it does not come naturally:

If you want to be timid, indecisive and bashful, exit the bowl now. Even if that’s your personality, you need to create an alter ego for sugaring.
As these examples show, sugar babies work to fashion themselves as ideal sexual subjects in the eyes of upscale men, not showcase an authentic self like cam models do to attract audiences as promotional subjects.

While cam models extract an authentic self for sexual display through self-discovery and disclosure, sugar babies summon an ideal sexual self through a process of self-training and transformation. For sugar babies, the point of training and transforming their sexual selves to be more confident is not only to attract the right kind of men, but also to get in the mindset to ask for what you want and care less about getting a man’s approval. Emphasizing her own self-transformation, a Tumblr post makes this connection between body confidence and asking for what you want:

Insecure women do not belong here. If you hate your reflection, if you’re usually self-hating and insecure, leave now. Why? Because I was that insecure girl starting out, and let me tell you it’ll just get you in deep shit and taken advantage of… Because there will be men who harass you, who insult you. You will go to meet someone and be told you are too fat. That your face is ugly. That you’re not worth 3k. And you will have to have the strength to laugh, get up, and walk out without a care in the world.

In addition to telling each other to “invest in yourself,” sugar babies train themselves to “know your worth” and transform themselves into subjects who do if this mindset does not come easily. Like many other sugar babies, Taylor told me she would give newcomers to sugar dating two pieces of advice: “know your worth and then set boundaries.” Speaking from experience, she says men will pressure sugar babies to have sex when they do not want to and question paying them if sex is not an option. A post circulated amongst sugar babies on Tumblr provides a script for responding to men who question a sugar baby’s request for an allowance and boundaries. After offering language for a sugar baby to use if a man asks her why she thinks she’s so special and deserves the money, it reads:

I hope girls use this (or similar) to answer that question instead of sounding desperate listing how they are special and why they are special. The minute you do that you’ve already proved that you are seeking his approval and you are weak. This is how a lot of you get chewed up and spat out by the guys in the bowl – you have no ounce of confidence to set a man straight. Know your fucking worth!!
As these pieces of advice suggests, the subjectivity of a sugar baby is quite ambivalent about man’s approval. On the one hand, she should do what she can to fashion herself to meet his expectations and make more money. On the other, she should not care what he thinks because she knows her worth. Having an internal compass that directs them to ask for what they want, ignore detractors, and “keep it moving” is a new style of sexual relating they see as helping them recover from other feminine ways of being that give men an advantage over them in the sexual arena. They also help each other develop this internal compass by sharing resources that suggest they evaluate men for their worth instead of focusing on how men are evaluating them. Illustrating this reversal, Figure 4 is a picture of a questionnaire that circulated in the sugar baby Tumblr community. Sugar babies improve their sexual selves in two ways that seem to collide: they invest in themselves to gain men’s attention and also know their worth without men telling them what that is. In this ambivalence, the space between her wishes to escape patriarchal dictates and her wishes for a better future, she finds a way forward that balances these competing demands.
Being a sugar baby also involves a process of self-assessment to better their sexual selves, like cam models, but they develop self-awareness to “date with a purpose.” One Tumblr user summarizes the hope that self-knowledge and training the sexual self appropriately is a pathway to a better future:

Know what you want…. What if we knew who we were, what kind of love we were looking for, what kind of partner would make us happiest before we stepped into the dating scene. I know what would happen. We would be more confident women and we would date differently. We would date with a purpose.

As aforementioned, many sugar babies come to this dating scene not knowing what they want—from sugar dating or sometimes even from life. Often young and inexperienced, they find out what they want by doing their “research” and transforming their goals based on what they
encounter. They see other women talking about dating for mentorship, funding for businesses, and investing in their futures. Mavis, for instance, changed her perspective on sugar dating and her life through the process of becoming and being a sugar baby. When we spoke, she had come back to sugar dating after a break and told me:

When I was [young], I really I didn't know. I asked for really simple and silly stuff. Like I would ask for groceries. Or I was like, ‘I just want to be able to get liquor for this party.’ Like, stupid, novel things. Like, ‘Oh, just give me pocket cash, so I can like maybe go out with my friends to the nearby Target.’… I'm still very much in the process of figuring out my life. But now, I have like plans that I need capital for. So, I'm going back in with like a renewed vigor. I know exactly what I want. I know exactly what those numbers are. So, it's just a matter of finding an investor, whatever I can use to get what I need. Cause I'm very driven at the moment.

When I asked Mavis about her plans, she clarified that she was “jumping into the future” when she talks about having sugar daddies invest in a business she owns. She does not yet have a business, but she has an idea (which I will not give away here) and sees a modest one-thousand-dollar investment getting her started.

As Mavis illustrates, investing in a future independent self that has a thriving career is the end goal for a sugar baby. She uses her sexual self to achieve goals that have yet to come to fruition. Many talk about leaving sugar dating in the near future to begin lives they imagine it helping them create. A musician, Ava calls sugar dating “a good source of income” and can see herself sugar dating for a couple more years. She remains focused on her career goals:

I'm trying to save and invest in my own personal endeavors, as far as recording or taking classes and stuff like that to help my music skills. So, I'm kind of using [sugar dating] as I would any kind of job to invest in my career.

An artist, Skylar also sees sugar dating as an investment in her future, a job that pays the bills and not a legitimate calling she plans to make a career out of:

My future goals are to become successful as an artist. What I'm doing now to make money should help support me to get to where I want to be.

The sugar baby envisions a future for herself and improving her sexual self through a process of training and transformation in the short-term will help her get there. Merely a tool she can pick up
or put down, a better sexual self should still be kept in box. As Skylar pointedly puts it: “This shouldn't be my career goal, to take money from men and be manipulative.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Becoming a cam model or sugar baby is both a wish for a different kind of future and a process of reshaping the sexual self to manage unmet needs and desires. By adopting these subject positions, women express a desire to step out of what they know and embody a self that is masterful and has what they need to thrive. In this way, the Cam Model and Sugar Baby resemble other subject positions such as the Modern Girl, to whom women attached the promise of “bodily autonomy, freedom, and sexual desire” and communicated affinity through styles of consumption during the cultural and political economic tumult of the early twentieth century (Weinbaum et al., 2008). They are discursively constructed ways of being that women use to redefine themselves and their position in the world.

As Weinbaum et al. (2008) write about the Modern Girl, the Cam Model and Sugar Baby are at once heuristic devices, social agents with lived experiences, and representational strategies. As heuristic devices, they help women to make decisions and problem solve by providing a particular lens through which to see the world. But they are also defined by the shared backgrounds and dispositions of the women who identify with them. Finally, women use their identifications to creatively adjust how the world perceives them. These three achievements of subject positions – orienting us to what matters, providing recognition and belonging, and communicating an identity – bind women to ideological frameworks, but also provide comforting structures and communities for playing with meaning and grappling with their needs and desires. The discourses and strategies available to women who cam model versus women who sugar date are not the same, which is at least partly explained by their divergent social positions.

By reviewing women’s promotional sexual selves as cam models and aspirational sexual selves as sugar babies, I have attempted to complicate an understanding of the pleasures these subject positions provide women. Though I focus on women’s uses of logics associated with
promotional and aspirational culture to put their sexual selves to work, which could be interpreted as furthering a structuralist argument about these subject positions as disciplinary mechanisms, I have tried to remain attuned to what women do with these subject positions as opposed to what is done to them. As Berg (2021) asserts about the “creative approaches to class struggle” exhibited by porn workers, women’s interventions into the sexual self “are not always transformative—sometimes intervening means ascending hierarchies rather than dismantling them—but they do highlight the contradictions and the stakes” (p. 3). Like Berg, I try to adopt a dialectical approach that “understands contradiction as the meat of our story rather than as a wrinkle to be smoothed over” (p. 5). Instead of glossing over women’s uses of ideology to situate themselves within structures of power and constraint or making this The Story, I aim to show why promotion and aspiration are logics that make sense to women seeking alternative futures. Adopting subject positions to engage with and in the social world is not an entirely conscious or innocent process, but it is agentive and creative. It disciplines and constricts as much as it nourishes and restores. Thus, I see value in thinking about women’s aspirational and promotional sexual subjectivities as modes of relating to the self and sexuality that allow them to exercise agency if only “in the meantime” (Berg, 2021, p. 9).

While I focus on women’s participation in cam modeling and sugar dating, the instrumental sexual subjectivities that women bring to and bear out through these practices are culturally and historically situated. We see similar subject positions represented in media and popular culture. For instance, hip-hop stars Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B. have popularized “ratchetness” as a fashionable style of femininity marked by an “excessive and hypervisible” sexuality and originally associated with working-class Black womanhood (Warner, 2015, p. 130). With hit songs like “WAP” (an acronym for “wet ass pussy”) which the two singers collaborated on, Megan Thee Stallion’s “Thot Shit” (an ode to promiscuous women), and Cardi B’s “Money Bag,” these women disrupt rules of feminine respectability and sing about intersections of gender, sex, and class in ways that reclaim instrumental sexual subjectivities for the working-class
woman. In contrast, celebrities like Beyoncé, Kim Kardashian, and JLo appeal to middle-class tastes, using their sometimes risqué sexual expression as a way of communicating that they can “have it all,” as in be smart businesswomen, good girls, and sexual objects. These are all subject positions in a constellation of “up for it” femininities, of instrumentalizing sexual objectification and seeing it as a matter of choice and autonomy. Looking to which subject positions are valued, by whom, and with what implications is an important way to study how cultural taste and distinction create uneven inroads for women to avail themselves of commercial sexual tools.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Overview

This dissertation has presented an analysis divided into four chapters that cover the cultural production, labor, meanings, and cultural identities of cam models and sugar babies to shed light on the commonalities and specificities of these emerging digital markets for sexual entertainment and leisure as well as their gendered implications. By drawing on interviews, participant observation, and textual data from online forums and blogs, I have offered an ethnographic and qualitative investigation of themes and issues relevant to interdisciplinary sexuality studies and critical cultural studies, particularly the areas of feminist media studies and digital labor studies.

Guiding this project were research questions developed with these bodies of literature in mind. Curious about their cultural production in digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure, I proposed two questions: (1) What do women do and create as cam models and sugar babies? (2) How do digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure mediate desire, intimacy, and gender relations in late modern life? Interested in how these gigs, which have emerged on peer-to-peer platforms, relate to broader transitions in the economy and work women find attractive today, I asked: How does the labor of cam modeling and sugar dating illuminate contemporary working conditions associated with the digital cultural economy? What do their experiences reveal about the constraints and possibilities of this work? Finally, seeing these practices as controversial in light of dominant conversations within academic feminist writing in my field, I wondered about what women’s experiences and perspectives might offer the literature with regard to theorizing the gendered implications of highly sexualized and gendered work and leisure practices and how they might complicate scholarly assessments. My final research questions aimed to build nuance into this scholarship, but also include women’s voices in debates that potentially impact their lives. To this end, I extended the questions: What meanings and
values do women participants associate with cam modeling and sugar dating? How might their understandings expand, constrain, or complicate the meanings and identities available to them as sexual subjects in a changing cultural, political, and economic environment?

I approached these questions inspired by critical cultural studies that take a micropolitics of thriving into account and used Bourdieu’s field theory to map out important elements to the story: the rules of the games of sugar dating and cam modeling, circulating forms of capital, and the relationships between social actors and, to some extent, organizations and institutions. Especially prevalent in this analysis were discussions of women’s practices as cam models and sugar babies, their strategies and tactics, their habitus (including capacities and dispositions that form it), and their investments, stances, and subjectivities.

**Summary of Chapters**

In Chapter 3, “It’s Not All About Sex: What Cam Models and Sugar Babies Do and Create,” I draw on cultural production approaches to examine what women do and create and the mediation of desire, intimacy, and gender relations in these digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure. I specifically highlight the importance of women’s constructions of an imagined male audience—either cam platform users or sugar daddies—in shaping what they ultimately produce in these scenes, a sensibility of being with a woman I call “feminine presence.” Femininity is constituted within these commercial contexts as a desirable performance and product that can be accessed at will for a fee in order to achieve a socially rich, real, and intimate experience. Related to research on the performance of gender, being *with* “a woman” is a socially organized sensibility produced by feminized subjects who are “accountable” to gender in digital cultures for sexual entertainment and leisure (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This shift in focus moves away from analyzing gender at the individual level and toward an understanding of the basis and implications of how women do gender in commercial sex cultures as a dynamic and collective production, which reflects audiences’ socially organized desires and the situational context of producing gender for a digital platform, commercial goal, and audience.
As I demonstrated, feminine presence has aesthetic and affective qualities that women embody in ritualized ways to create a romantic and arguably middle-class sensibility for the consumption of sexual entertainment and leisure that prioritizes men’s emotional inner worlds and the individual experience and differs from a utilitarian and arguably working-class sensibility toward the consumption of sexual entertainment and leisure. Drawing on Illouz’s (1997) concept of commercialized leisure as romantic utopias, I have tied their aesthetic feminine presence to the production of these scenes as sites for fantasies of sexual escape as well as masculine power and status. By crafting themselves into aesthetic sexual objects, women produce an aura of excitement, fun, and freedom that are considered pleasurable escapes from everyday life and its constraints as well as a pleasurable foil to social rules around issues of gender, sexuality, and power.

Fantasies animated by women’s aesthetic feminine presence are enhanced by their production of an affective feminine presence, which brings a desirable sense of authenticity, personalization, and intimacy to these commercialized sexual encounters. As women believed to be “amateurs,” at least in comparison to professional sex workers in the sometimes overlapping industries of pornography and escorting, cam models and sugar babies internalize the expectation that they should perform this identity for male consumer-audiences through gendered rituals of giving and gratitude, the production of customized experiences, and displays of emotional presence. The affective performance of gender and created sensibility differentiates these scenes from more professionalized sex industries, but still remains safely and pleasurably contained within the commercialized context of these scenes.

Finally, women produce affective feminine presence guided by their mental projections of a tragic late modern male subject, who is dangerously lacking intimacy in his everyday life and requires women to attend to him in order to access his inner feelings and restore his emotional health. The combination of aesthetics and affect in women’s productions of feminine presence infuse sexual entertainment and leisure with utopian meanings of escape, self-exploration and
exaltation, and organic bonds that transcend the social order. In producing a feminine presence meant for a middle-to-upper-middle-class male subject, they create a distinctly romantic sensibility for contemporary sexual entertainment and leisure.

Chapter 4, “It’s Real Work: The Emotional Labor of Being Cam Models and Sugar Babies,” follows this thread of cultural production to unravel the emotional labor of producing romantic utopias in these sexual entertainment and leisure scenes. Identifying the performance of positivity, emotional authenticity, and embodied intimacy as specific situations that require emotional labor, I explore how women understand this work and their roles as well as the strategies they use to manage their emotions. Women sometimes adopt professionalized identities, which I identify as service-worker dispositions, and compare their work to that of therapists, actresses, and salespeople, but find they are better suited to thinking of themselves as quasi-professionals or amateurs who do this work partly for the friendships and enjoyment they get from it. For this reason, I argue that women are just as invested as their male consumer-audiences in upholding a “fantasy of leisure” that ultimately mystifies their labor. I note that women are not confused about their work status, but do question and continually (exhaustingly) manage what boundaries to draw on their time, energy, and selves because a fantasy of leisure makes it difficult to know, for once and for all, how they are supposed to be in these scenes.

Being a cam model or a sugar baby involves balancing dueling desires for women to perform a predictable positivity akin to service workers and bring more emotional authenticity to these performances than one would expect from an undisputed professional, therefore women adopt a variety of surface and deep acting strategies to manage their emotions and perform this work with varying results. Drawing on Gregg’s (2008) concept of “work bleed,” I introduce the term “service work bleed,” which I define as the unstated expectation that women will apply standards of customer service work to these casualized work spaces and relationships. While I suggest the emotional labor of balancing positivity with emotional authenticity extends to other feminized digital labor, doing embodied intimate work brings its own challenges that I see as
unique to these scenes. I introduce the term “intimacy fatigue” to describe the particular emotional and psychic toll of managing a positive and emotionally authentic performance in sexually intimate encounters. Finally, I will note here that this chapter switches vernaculars from the other chapters in that I refer to cam modeling and sugar dating as digital cultures for monetized intimacy, whereas I do not use this language elsewhere. I do so strategically to situate these gigs in a spectrum of feminized intimate work that is mostly done by women in the digital cultural economy and suggest my conclusions may be relevant to these other non-sexual positions. This move is meant to bring cam modeling and sugar dating further into the fold of digital labor studies, rather than remain sequestered under what I argue is a reductive title of online or digital sex work.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I move on from women’s roles as cultural producers and laborers to discuss why and how women become cam models and sugar babies. Chapter 5, “Taking Sexy Back: Why Women Become Cam Models and Sugar Babies,” addresses the meanings and values women associate with these practices to better understand the draw to perform socially stigmatized roles that sexually objectify them. I present two main themes explaining women’s engagement with sexual commercial culture that I argue are underrepresented in the feminist media studies literature or misleadingly labeled and analyzed as uncritical and problematic. First, cam models and sugar babies do not seem to share the same investments as feminist cultural critics. Specifically, they are invested in the idea of feminine erotic power, not denouncing or critiquing it, because in a culture that scholars acknowledge has transitioned to seeing feminized traits and skills as valuable human capital, they too see a personal benefit to embracing their feminine sexuality as a form of sexual capital. Tracing the connection of their uses of sexual capital to gain other, more lasting and material, forms of capital like economic, social, and cultural capital, I question the focus on empowerment women seek as solely sexual, and highlight their desires for economic empowerment as an alternative view. By connecting feminine erotic power to economic empowerment, I draw attention to the class biases underlying feminist
critiques of women’s independent, tactical uses of sexual capital and investment in sexual games that they see as instrumental to enacting gendered strategies for thriving.

Second, by engaging in practices of cam modeling and sugar dating, women express discontent with what they call “vanilla” culture and lifestyles—normative ways of life that they feel constrained by. While both cam models and sugar babies invoke this term, cam models do so to talk about various things, including my focus: “vanilla” work arrangements characteristic of corporate capitalism that do not suit their tastes for flexibility, independence, creativity, community, and fun. Many cam models come to these scenes having worked in other non-sexual positions that they found to be draining and undervalued. Their desires to become sexual entrepreneurs stem from a dissatisfaction with the status quo that other gig workers might also share, but is often overshadowed by critiques of what these gigs lack (rather than critiques of what other work they left or passed over—the majority of positions available—might not offer them). I suggest looking in this direction connects cam models’ interests to feminist antiwork politics.

Similarly, sugar babies express discontent with what heteronormative dating culture offers them. They critique the disempowered positions of women in contemporary dating culture and see their monetization tactics (asking for an allowance or pay-per-meet fee) as a way of getting their due for performing the emotion work of relationships and the display work of performing desirable femininity on dates. Within the context of sugar dating, women feel able to put boundaries and a price on their time and energy and communicate a little more honestly about their needs and desires because emotion and romantic love scripts do not rule the sexual entertainment and leisure domain. In this respect, I suggest sugar dating is a tactical use of gender and sexuality that echoes the more political agenda of the 1970s feminist campaign known as Wages for Housework, which drew attention to the value of “women’s work,” the feminized labor of social reproduction.
I focus on these two themes because (1) they seem to contradict each other—investment in scenarios that emphasize sexual desirability as a form of capital seem retrogressive, while instrumentalizing female sexuality in entrepreneurial and monetizing schemes is more sexually progressive; and (2) they direct attention to aspects of women’s engagement with sexual commercial culture that are underrepresented, that is their articulation to economic empowerment and opposition to normative cultures produced by capitalism and patriarchy.

Finally, in Chapter 6, “Breaking Down the ‘Whorearchy’: How Women Become Cam Models and Sugar Babies,” I highlight the value of these practices as symbolic sites for building affective communities in which women find a sense of belonging and tools to imagine better sexual selves—sexual subjectivities that they hope will make their lives better. Concluding my analysis, this chapter addresses how cam modeling and sugar dating are still socially stigmatized or at least criticized and women who participate in them are connected in some way by virtue of their same allegiances sexual commercial culture and dispositions that brought them to these scenes. They are part of what is colloquially called the “whorearchy,” a play on both patriarchy and hierarchy that describes the social stratification of sex workers that differ in their classed, raced, and sexed bodies. Seen as an internalization of societal -isms, the whorearchy is a construct that incites not only the public to see women who strip versus women who engage in street prostitution differently, but also sex workers to create symbolic divisions between professions instead of solidarity amongst them. Cam modeling and sugar dating are both integrated into the whorearchy and do not necessarily work to dismantle it, as the chapter title suggests, but see their entrance into the “whorearchy” as reason to create bonds within their respective communities. This chapter importantly illuminates how women engage in what Berlant terms “juxtapolitical intimate publics” that transform their individualized pursuits and gendered strategies for thriving into collective projects of imagining possibility. Women who are highly active in these communities produce and share resources, offer advice, and share stories that inspire and guide each other. They see their participation in sex work, or simply alternative sexual tastes in the case.
of sugar babies, as making their lives better not worse, which is important to recognize given the presumption that sex work is a “last stop” or part of a woman’s downward trajectory.

When women decide to start cam modeling and sugar dating, they often turn to resources created by other women to learn what to do and how to be. They learn how to embody the ‘cam model’ and ‘sugar baby’ as subject positions that differently orient their sexual selves, both in a presumably positive trajectory. Specifically, cam models borrow from promotional culture to redefine the sexual self as an entrepreneurial brand, while sugar babies draw from aspirational culture to refashion the sexual self as a future-oriented tool (Duffy, 2017). I map differences in how the promotional sexual subjectivity of cam models contrasts with the aspirational sexual subjectivity of sugar babies. As highly visible sexual entrepreneurs, cam models see empowering the sexual self and becoming comfortable with being a controversial social subject as a stepping stone to better horizons, while the aspirational subjectivity of sugar babies means they do not typically seek to identify as sex workers and instead improve their sexual selves to become more legitimate social subjects. In other words, cam models bring their sexuality to the forefront as a work identity, but sugar babies do not, preferring to see their sexuality as a future-oriented tool that will help them obtain careers and upper-class lifestyles. Becoming a promotional sexual subject, as cam models do, involves extracting an authentic self for sexual display through processes of self-discovery and disclosure, which differs from the aspirational sexual subject of the sugar baby who summons an ideal self through processes of self-training and transformation.

**Key Themes**

**Labor and Leisure**

One predominant theme of this dissertation is the blurring of labor and leisure associated with women’s work in the digital cultural economy. Cam modeling and sugar dating are both gendered practices in which women perform work that looks like play to men on the receiving end and the public. Issues of interest to digital labor and cultural production scholars such as the merging of value-generating and leisure activities and discourses appear throughout this analysis.
In Chapters 3 and 4, I discuss the phenomenon of women performing an amateur identity to produce a desirable sense of genuine pleasure in what they do, emotional authenticity, and intimate connection for men. Though the women I interviewed and observed seemed clear about their perspectives of these practices as work, or at least their intentions to generate income, they still felt pressure based on the cultural logics of the field, as described in Chapter 3, to perform an amateur identity that is less interested in money and more interested in making friends, having fun, and emotionally investing in worker-patron relations than a true professional, which in this case were other commercial sex professionals. Chapter 4 showed how this cultural logic results in women performing intense emotional labor to produce a sense of genuine pleasure, emotional authenticity, and embodied intimacy without losing sight of their own objectives and interests.

Often this means women accept terms of friendship and enjoyment in work that make it easier to do the work as expected, but harder to combat assumptions that what they do is “real work” and should be compensated properly. In this sense, pleasure is a double-edged sword for cam models and sugar babies as it sometimes is portrayed by other studies of feminized digital labor. They assume emotional labor strategies of deep acting genuine pleasure will help them since to perform pleasure poorly risks doing the job poorly, borrowing Hochschild’s words, but by performing pleasure too well they risk negating the production processes that go into and the value of their labor. This conundrum is not new. Women’s work, the work of social reproduction, is plagued by this mystification and the myth that the emotional labor women do in the private sphere is based in a natural inclination and properly rewarded by the personal satisfaction she gets from performing roles and responsibilities that validate her femininity. These myths have long served to perpetuate gendered divisions of labor and reify gender difference and the gender regime (Connell, 1987).

In some ways, cam models and sugar babies fall into this trap. By accepting the terms of engagement placed on amateurs and seeing themselves as naturally predisposed to being providers of emotion, intimacy, and pleasure—either as releases, escapes, containers of feeling—
they reduce recognition of the emotional and psychic toll of doing this work and play into fantasies that their enjoyment comes effortlessly, as Chapter 4 detailed. Chapter 3 discusses how women’s own constructions of a “tragic late modern man” may also jolt them to assume an emphatic (feminine) position that creates internal ambivalence familiar to care workers about focusing too much on money. As Chapter 5 delineated, this cultural logic of amateur women pleasuring in the work of social reproduction results in stratifications between women who can afford to play by these rules and those who lack resources that might allow them to exhibit patience when it comes to requesting payment or the cultural knowledge to bring a certain middle-class etiquette to moments of negotiation that calls on women to downplay their socially reproductive labor.

As digital gig workers in casualized contexts, cam models and sugar babies expect payment from time and effort they put into creating affective experiences of sexual fantasy, social pleasure, and emotional intimacy, but there are many opportunities for this expectation to not be met. Sugar babies go on dates with potential sugar daddies (“POTs”) and may not get paid since these are not overt sexual transactions, which would be considered illegal sexual transactions according to federal and most state laws. Working within the structure created by technology companies that own the digital platforms upon which they appear and sell their goods, “cam models on popular “freemium” platforms that draw large user-audiences perform unpaid labor in “free chat” for discretionary tips and see it as their responsibility to entice visitors to splurge on a pay-per-minute show. While performing shows come with the added security of an upfront associated cost, getting paid is not always guaranteed as a user can easily contest a charge and cancel payment, knowing that as sex workers, cam models are in a vulnerable position with online financial transaction companies that have strict policies regarding the sale of sexual goods and services and end up penalizing cam models when they become aware of their transactions.
Intimacy and the Market

At the same time, the blurring of labor and leisure in contexts of cam modeling and sugar dating means women integrate commercial logics into their intimate repertoires and approach casual and intimate exchanges with professional dispositions that serve them and their consumers if balanced properly with an amateur disposition. A second predominant theme of this dissertation is the unexpected outcomes of commercialized intimacies. In Chapter 3, I explain how women produce personalized commercial sexual encounters through their performance of an amateur identity, which implied the equal importance of a commercial frame to producing feminine presence as a safely contained good or service. Like the “bounded authenticity” Bernstein writes about and the “morality of the market” Prasad identifies, the personalized commercial sexual encounter provides affective pleasure without the emotional turmoil and uncertainty associated with romantic love, romanticizing the commercial sphere and consumerism as a predictable and principled haven.

For instance, this chapter discusses gendered rituals of giving and gratitude as pleasurably personalizing economic exchanges that would otherwise feel too transactional, but the exchanges are not based in social ties that extend beyond episodic instances of helping a cam model or sugar baby with an easily solvable problem. The commercial frame creates a boundary that makes women’s problems more manageable, allows a male sense of being useful and valued to emerge, and women’s gratitude more authentic because they do not expect more (or anything) from consumer-based relationships. Chapter 3 also details how women perform positivity associated with feminized interactive service work, produce sexual imagery without ambiguity about how objectification makes them feel, and create customized products, emotional presence, and emotional intimacy with the care of someone who is getting paid to do so. The commercial frame adjusts women’s behavior to keep their unfiltered emotions and complicated lives at bay and adopt a professional disposition of emotional containment and detachment that consumers also seek from them. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, they liken themselves to therapists, actresses,
and salespeople and create an affective disposition that combines the performance of positivity and emotional authenticity with emotional detachment to preserve a pleasurable commercial barrier to these intimate exchanges. However, women hold themselves personally responsible for figuring out how to appropriately display emotion associated with their professional and amateur dispositions without getting burnt out.

While the finding that consumers benefit from a commercial logic is perhaps unsurprising, I also found that cam models and sugar babies saw benefits to applying a commercial logic to their emotions and intimate choices. As Chapters 4 and 5 suggest, male consumers were not the only ones who preferred the emotional containment of commercial sexual encounters. In Chapter 4, I discuss how professionalizing narratives help women to make sense of and validate their labor, the relational boundaries they prefer, and the conditions they seek to manifest. While a competing amateur narrative makes holding this frame difficult, it is useful to women’s development of emotion management strategies. In commercial exchanges, women felt more able to walk away from bad situations and men without remorse, with a “it’s not personal, it’s business” attitude. They also felt less shame or guilt about their lack of feelings for men that paid to spend time with them because they saw themselves as professionals akin to therapists, actresses, and sales/marketing experts even if they did not always want to identify as or align themselves with sex workers. The commercial barrier adds a safe buffer around these intimate exchanges for women as well as men.

Commercial logics also served women’s interests in seeing their feminine erotic power as a form of sexual capital to use in trades with men and not feel demeaned, internalize societal shame, or exploited by these exchanges. Seeing their intentions to utilize sexual capital as entrepreneurial or aspirational, the majority of cam models and sugar babies I interviewed and observed dismissed characterizations that serve to disempower them. Reappropriating erotic power as sexual capital—as a valued form of human capital—is a tactical move that cam models and sugar babies do in mostly subtle ways so as to not disturb the gender regime too much. For
instance, Chapter 6 discusses how cam models monetize access to their sexual selves, putting a price on photos, videos, and exclusive interactions gained through club memberships that transform sexual media and culture women might produce freely for a romantic partner or for attention in other spaces of online sociality. In this chapter, I suggest their monetization tactics, which even includes charging for casual interactions via text messages, the sharing of a phone number, and products a cam model has used, is at least partially stemming from a disposition of attributing value to female sexuality, a value that is only made apparent in a commercial context. Similarly, in Chapter 5, I describe how sugar babies contest the unpaid labor of heteronormative dating culture and see sugar dating as providing the context and tools to demand payment for everything from what it costs to look good for a date (called a “maintenance fee”) to the time and energy that goes into offering the emotional and sexual satisfaction of a romantic partner. A commercial logic brings into their field of vision the exchange value of their socially reproductive labor, though as I mention in various places, they may not be able to always act on what they think they are worth because they still have to play by certain confining rules.

**Feminine Sexual Performance and Subjectivity**

A third theme of this dissertation is the discrepancy between feminine performance and subjectivity when it comes to their participation in sexual entertainment and leisure that becomes apparent when comparing Chapters 3 and 4 to Chapters 5 and 6. Women’s cultural production and emotional labor produces a socially reproductive femininity as a performance and product to be consumed, but their participation in sexual commercial culture is also articulated to potentially culturally disruptive gendered strategies for thriving under precarious conditions, affective communities that transform shamed subjectivities into ideal subjects, and productive uses of female sexual agency. The romantic sensibility women produce for men is quite different from the rational sensibility that informs their own actions and dispositions. The blurring of labor and leisure, intimacy and the market, results in women transforming what sexuality scholars call a recreational sexuality associated with sexual leisure practices and making it productive. Though I
do not wish to suggest that commercialized intimacy holds the keys to unlocking women’s interests from limiting structures, this dissertation attempts to shift the conversation within feminist media studies away from its focus on what the sexualization of culture does to women to make space for curiosity about what women do with commercial sexual culture (Swidler, 2001; Ortner, 2006; Peiss, 1998). While women do not deny the force of sexual commercial culture in their everyday lives, they also derive pleasure from their participation in scenes of cam modeling and sugar dating. Instead of interpreting their pleasure with contempt or suspicion, I provide an analysis that reveals why they find these practices pleasurable and how they work for women as gendered strategies for thriving under precarious conditions that they choose to deploy despite their limitations.

I also see the attention I have given to women’s cultural production and labor as illuminating the feminized competencies that go into producing feminine presence in the commercial sphere. Across both scenes, women I interviewed described what they do as hinging on performances of femininity that appeal to imagined male audiences, demonstrating awareness and practical use for the social construction of gender and the importance of context and audience. The ways in which women enact femininity to successfully cam model or sugar date most often do not reflect their identities or actions outside of these commodified contexts. These performances also do not reflect women’s motivations, values, or identities they associate with their participation in these scenes, which I discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Instead, women reflexively report manipulating their actions, thoughts, and feelings to better accommodate what men seem to desire in these commercially and technologically mediated contexts.

Whether referencing cam platform users or sugar daddies, women spoke at length about how certain physical appearances, demeanors, and styles of relating seemed to hold male interest and attention and, in turn, were more likely to earn them consistent money in these heterosexual exchanges. This calculus typically results in women laboring to produce recycled portrayals of femininity that are borne from and designed to appeal to male fantasies, which are themselves
mediated by culture and socially organized. The types of traits men tend to seek from cam models and sugar babies mirror those associated with a stereotypical or idealized performance of femininity. Most women do not embody idealized femininity in their everyday lives, though the performance of these feminized characteristics can seem—to men and to women themselves—to come naturally as part of women’s cultural repertoires, or “toolkits” (Swidler, 2001). In fact, if women do attempt to live up to these ideals, they often must work hard at it. The game of appealing to men’s fantasies of femininity, then, appears to support a thesis of social reproduction, for which women comply with patriarchy even as they exercise agency by pursuing their own “projects” of empowerment, freedom, and autonomy (Ortner, 2006).

While social reproduction is part of this story, patriarchal capitalism and gender performances that sustain it are not static even when they seem so (Grindstaff & West, 2006). What men desire for women may look similar to what they have desired from them for centuries, but the origins, objectives, and outcomes of these performances are ever-changing with the flux of social, cultural, and economic factors. Experience, occasional failures, and peer advice garnered from online forums and blog communities help women play the game in ways that suit men’s ever-evolving projects as well as their own. Women’s descriptions of “the game” they believe they are playing complicate an understanding of what they do and create as simply reproducing structures and subjectivities in their gender performances. For women, the game is sometimes distilled to their fundamental goal: getting as much money as possible from men who like “pretty women.”

Seeking advice on feminine performance is part of women’s cultural repertoires. Women’s media and culture, specifically in the self-help genre, have long produced what Connell (1987) describes as “folklore about how to sustain the performance”—but explicitly commercializing this performance as a product to be bought and sold in the market adds a layer to these exchanges that mediates how these gender relations unfold (p. 188). Most, if not all, women in these fields agree “winning” the game is much harder than its premise suggests. The amount of
research, ability, and technique involved in creating a preferred performance of femininity—not to mention the possibility of failure—is easy to overlook when women’s performances are taken as naturally occurring, preconceived, or entirely unconscious. Such a perspective undervalues how femininity is actively produced and negotiated in these settings, through social interaction, and with a highly defined imagined male audience in mind.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

By bringing two practices together under the umbrella of digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure I have tried to illuminate some overarching cultural and social shifts, but the resulting analysis may have sacrificed specificities related to each practice to achieve this end. There are differences between the origins, social organization, and meanings of cam modeling and sugar dating that cannot be adequately contained in a project of this scope. I am aware that my analysis paints some parts of these cultures with broad strokes that may irk researchers, activists, and participants who are invested in a particular practice or aspect of a practice that I fail to cover in a detailed way or at all. In this analysis, I have attempted to highlight important similarities and differences between these practices, but I have mostly focused on differences within their similarities. The study of cam modeling and sugar dating would benefit from future research that develops each scene in more depth and perhaps draws on this study to understand their contexts and relations.

Because of its comparative focus and research questions, this study also contained the frame of analysis to the dominant groups in each scene—cisgender females. This orientation omits other social categories of gender and sexuality that are also important to understand. Other sociological studies that have primarily focused on one practice, cam modeling, have produced much more nuanced accounts of socially marginalized communities in cam modeling, which I hope to see more of (Jones, 2020).

Finally, this study has provided a partial look at digital industries for sexual entertainment and leisure since it centers women’s experiences and perspectives. A full field analysis that
includes men who visit cam modeling platforms, sugar daddies, company spokespeople, and industry-affiliated actors would be essential to rounding out this analysis.
APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Preamble

Hi there! Before we begin, I just want to thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and formally introduce myself and my research.

My name is Kavita, and I’m getting a Ph.D. in Communication at UMass Amherst. You may have read about the study already, but just to reiterate and give you a sense of what to expect from our conversation: I’ve invited you to sit for this interview as part of my dissertation, which broadly explores various ways women use the internet to make money through potentially intimate relationships they find and/or develop online.

I’d like to take a moment now to discuss the informed consent form. In order to proceed, I want to be sure that the important points from that document are clear to you and you feel comfortable going forward, so I’ll just briefly state the key points and then we can go over any questions you might have.

First, I want to remind you that to be eligible for this study you must be 18 or older, based in the United States, a user of camming sites, and female. Second, your participation in this study is voluntary, therefore you may stop me at any point if you don’t feel comfortable continuing the interview or if you’d like me to skip any questions. As the form indicated, I will do everything in my power to keep your information confidential and identity private, so please feel free to speak candidly. Third, with your permission, I would like to audio record this conversation for better accuracy in recalling it later. The recording will be for personal use only – it will not be shared with anyone – and it will be stored securely. I’ve asked you to indicate on the informed consent form whether that would be OK – how do you respond? [let them respond.] I’ve also asked you to indicate if you’d be willing to do a follow up interview if we aren’t able to cover everything today, and your response to that was? OK. And of course, feel free to change your mind about either at any point. Finally, I will compensate you for this interview when we are
done. I’ve listed some options for transferring the money on the informed consent form, but we can discuss if any of these work for you and how you would like to receive the money after we have concluded our session.

So, with all that said, do you have any questions or concerns at this point? Have the general purposes and particulars of the study as well as possible risks and inconveniences been explained to your satisfaction? You understand you can withdraw at anytime? For the record, please state that you consent to this study having been informed of its purposes and particulars.

Ok, let’s begin!

**Interview Questions**

So, at this point you’ve taken the online survey. I wanted to thank you for taking the time to do that and follow up on your responses by starting the interview learning a little more about you and your background.

1. What are three words you or others might use to describe yourself and why?

*Follow Up:* Thanks for that. [impromptu confirmation of meaning]: “so what I’m hearing is..”

2. Great, and may I ask where you grew up, where you live now, and places you’ve lived along the way perhaps?

3. And how would you describe your upbringing?

*Follow Up:* You mention X... I find that interesting. Is there anything you want to add?

4. I’d like to think of myself as someone who knows a little more about cam modeling than the average person. But, say I’ve never heard of it before. How would you describe cam modeling to me?

5. Now this same person asks you, isn’t cam modeling just like stripping? Or phone sex but with video? Do you think that’s an accurate assessment or are there aspects of it or how it feels to you that they’re missing?

6. Great, so, let’s backtrack a bit to when you began cam modeling. Take me back to that time. How did you get into it? Did anything specifically draw you to it?
7. How easy or difficult was it for you to get started in cam modeling?

8. Did you go into cam modeling with any hopes or expectations?

*Follow Up:* Do you have a sense of where those expectations might have come from?

9. What were your first experiences on camming sites like?

*Follow Up:* How did these experiences compare to your hopes and expectations going in? And since then? Has anything changed or is it pretty much the same?

10. I’d like us now to talk a little about your everyday routine. Could you walk me through a day in your life as a cam model?

11. What do you like most and least about cam modeling?

*Follow Up:* Are there particular experiences that you’re drawing from?

12. Now, I want you to picture your ideal job [give 30 secs] What came to mind?

13. Now, picture the opposite, the worst job you could imagine. This could be a job you’ve actually had in the past (I hope not!) or just something you know you’d hate. [give 30 secs.] What did you think about?

14. So, having imagined both the best and worst possible jobs for you, how does cam modeling compare?

15. Now, let’s get into your time on cam. What do you do in a typical session? Step me through your process.

16. If you were instructing a beginner, or writing a “Cam Modeling for Dummies” book, what would you tell them is the most important things to keep in mind? What would you include in that book?

17. A lot of women deal with insecurities about their bodies or appearance and feel like what we see in the media compounds those feelings. It seems like to be a cam model you would have to have a lot of confidence in yourself and your body. Is that the case?

18. How do you feel if or when someone comments, either positively or negatively, on your body while you cam?
19. Do you have people who visit you regularly?

*Follow Up:* Tell me more about those relationships. Do they feel intimate? How so? Examples?

What about it feels, or doesn’t feel, intimate?

20. Some cam models talk about having to deal with aggressive or disruptive people while on cam. Have you or someone you know ever had to do that?

*Follow Up:* If so, tell me more about that. What was that like? How did you handle it?

21. Another practice I'm covering in this study is sugar dating, do you know anything about that? Would you or have you ever done that or considered doing that?

**Cool Down**

Okay, I think we are done, but I want to leave you with the opportunity to talk about anything we didn’t get to that you think might be important. Any lingering thoughts or questions?

Thank you so much for your time!

As I mentioned before, I may contact you for a follow up interview if you are open to it. Absolutely feel free to say no, but I like to leave the option open if either of us feels there’s more to talk about or clarify. Would that be ok?

And, now let’s discuss compensation. How would you like to proceed? There are the options I listed (Venmo, Paypal), but if you could suggest a better method, please let me know now.

Well, it was wonderful to talk to you and I truly appreciate the time and energy you took out of your day to do this. Feel free to get in touch about any questions or concerns that come up. And good luck with everything!
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: List of Interviews Conducted with Cam Models

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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Interview Method</th>
<th>Interview Length</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
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Figure 5: Age of Interviewees

Figure 6: Racial Identities of Interviewees
Figure 7: Education Levels of Interviewees

Figure 8: Length of Experience with Practice
Figure 9: Time Devoted to Practice

Figure 10: Interviewees’ General Geographical Locations
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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