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JOHANNESBURG, SEX LOVE AND MONEY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF PHONES AND FEELINGS

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Social Anthropology

March 2019

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of MA Social Anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.

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(Lebohang Masango)

_____day of_____ 2019

Abstract

Compensated relationships between younger women and older, moneyed men have been established as the cause of new HIV infections in South African women aged 15 – 24 years old. A great portion of the literature on young love in South Africa reproduces the connection between compensated relationships and illness. In this dissertation, I establish how young women in Johannesburg define and practice love and intimacy in their compensated relationships in the era of social media and the #blessed lifestyle. It highlights the spaces and relationships that inform their romantic choices. The research setting is Johannesburg and social media. The methods that are used this study are face-to-face and WhatsApp interviews as well as participant observation on Twitter.

I argue that social media use is reconfiguring the meanings of love and intimacy for young women in Johannesburg. The physical context affects their views and actions around their relationships. Through increasing engagements in virtual spaces, young women recognise their individual choices to date with compensation as a response to the wider social vulnerability collectively experienced by women in private and public spaces all over South Africa. In response to that danger, young women use their individual romantic relationships to supplement their lifestyles monetarily in the case of personal endangerment as well as for pleasure.

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Introduction

"Hey! One time for the gold diggers/ One time for the blessers/ One time for the old niggas/ Spending bank roll when you need a little extra/ Spare a thought for my broke niggas/ They be feeling that pressure/ It's going down in the VIP right now/ This shit is kinda lit right now", croons AKA in an auto-tuned voice over a synth-heavy beat. The rapper's hit song "One Time" is an apt choice of music for the scene unfolding in a young woman's apartment.

The camera sweeps over Amanda Cele's collections of Louis Vuitton watches and sunglasses, a shelf packed full with red-soled Louboutin shoes, a bed with numerous black MAC lipstick tubes and Gucci bags on her floor as she flips her long weave away from her eyes to apply her make up in the mirror. While making final touches to her outfit – "You always need to match: black bag, black outfit, red-sole, I got this", she advises the audience – the 'Checkpoint' narrator reveals that Amanda is "unemployed but…has a fancy apartment in Sandton, the latest weaves and drives a Mercedes. She says it's all thanks to her blesser".

This particular episode of the investigative current affairs programme focuses on rich men known as "blessers" who provide young women known as "blessees" with gifts and money for sexual relationships. The episode features 27-year-old Amanda (a blessee) and Serge Cabonge (a blesser) providing insight into their relationships. It also features Kenny Kunene, well known for objectifying women as serving tables for sushi, who has recently become a vocal critic of these relationships.

The terms blesser and blessee originate from #blessed. During the festive season of 2015, this was the hashtag[1] of choice for young women's captions of their luxury lifestyle posts on

[1] "Hashtags' [are] keywords explicitly marked with the symbol # used by [Twitter users] to categorise the content of their own messages." (Sudulich & Wall et al., 2014: 10)

social media[2] such as Twitter[3] and Instagram[4]. As more photographs were shared, people gradually questioned how the women could afford such access and excess, considering that many were students or early-career employees. In other words, who was "blessing" them? In the absence of answers, and the additional mystery of who was behind the camera, many concluded that #blessed is code for being in a "transactional relationship" with wealthy, older and married men. The phrase has since gone viral and has led to debates about love and "transactional relationships."

In an interview scene, Amanda is shown seated on her couch once more as she switches between isiZulu and English to speak candidly of why she chose the #blessed lifestyle instead of love. "Am I going to eat love? And when my weave is worn out? And when my make-up has melted?" she punctuates this series of rhetorical questions with small shoulder shrugs and a tone full of sarcasm. "Okay fine", she opens her hands to appeal to the interviewer, as if relenting. However, she continues in the same vein: "What am I gonna wear? Clothes come in and out of style. So, when they are out of style and bling bling is no longer in fashion," she nods towards her bustier top, "must I wear old things because of love?" she asks incredulously with her index finger in the air. "Love must fall, sweety. It doesn't work that way," she laughs deeply and shakes her head. "Love must wait", she says and sweeps her long weave out of her face with her hand adorned in a gold, diamante watch and a matching ring on her finger. "Call me when you have money".

The statements and lifestyles of the blessee and the blesser illuminate the interesting entanglement of sex, love and money in Johannesburg in what I will refer to as *compensated*

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[2] "Social media" refers to "a group of Internet applications…that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 61)

[3] Twitter is a social network service (SNS) for sharing 140-character limited messages (tweets) and media such as photos and videos. Users must 'follow' each other to receive tweets.

[4] "Instagram is an online, mobile phone photo-sharing, video-sharing, and social network service…that enables its users to take pictures and videos, and then share them…" (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016: 89)

relationships. This phrase is derived from "compensated dating", a similar phenomenon in Eastern Europe and Asia where adolescent women are given money for companionship and intimacy (see: Swader & Vorobeva, 2015; Li, 2015). Popularly known by the terms "sugar daddies", "sponsors", "slay queens" the public discourse around such relationships, with their explicit money and gift-giving, resurfaces periodically. The hashtag #blessed is simply the latest iteration of this recurring phenomenon however, the centrality of the mobile phone in these relationships is new and provides a provocation to return to the subject and reconsider it in new ways. From facilitating the communication that initiates the relationship, to the phone camera capturing moments of being #blessed, to uploading these images onto a mobile phone application such as Instagram in order to receive "likes", commentary and reposts from "followers"; an audience of people who are also logged in from their respective devices – the phone maintains a constant presence throughout the #blessed phenomenon.

Smart phones and computers have been the main platforms for the public conversation about blessers. People use their devices to interact with the classifieds-style matchmaking requests that have been posted on the, since inactive, "Blesserfind" Twitter <https://twitter.com/Blesserfinder> and Facebook accounts <https://www.facebook.com/Blesserfind>. Both social media accounts post partner requests and supposedly humorous content using, #MoralsMustFall, a contentious hashtag that will be elaborated upon later. The everyday talk that jokingly refers to a financially generous romantic partner as a "blesser" shows how easily the word has anchored itself in people's vocabulary. The #blessed discourse is also constituted by journalism that covers the subject from the perspectives of government and citizens.

In an *Eye Witness News* article titled, "Health Minister Unveils Anti-Sugar Daddy Campaign" (2016), it is reported that Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has launched a multi-billion Rand

campaign – She Conquers – to reduce teenage pregnancy and HIV infections among young women and girls and also to fight the scourge of blessers through focusing on education, health and economic opportunities for girls and women. The aim is to reduce their chances of becoming dependent on older, moneyed men. The government has identified blesser relationships as a social ill laden with unequal power dynamics, rendering young women susceptible to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) contraction.

The She Conquers campaign follows from the "Zazi: Know Your Strength" campaign (2013 – 2015) established by government, namely the Departments of Health and Social Development. I had the honour to be the Zazi ambassador, travelling around the country's campuses and presenting lunchtime infotainment sessions that educated students about the double contraceptive method and the importance of making positive sexual health choices. Both programmes recognise that young women may engage in compensated relationships as a strategy to deal with socio-economic circumstances, emphasise the negative presence of sugar daddies or blessers, respectively, and strongly advise against them (HEAIDS, 2013; She Conquers SA, 2018).

As a high-profile example of the tabloid exposés that populate the Sunday papers as a result of the #blessers controversy, there is a *Sunday Sun* article titled, "Minister Acts All Dodgy'…" (2017). Complete with screen captures of WhatsApp message correspondence, a young woman named Tshwaledi has exposed the Minister of Justice and Correctional Services as a deceptive blesser. It is reported that Minister Michael Masutha provided her with expensive alcohol, a VIP nightclub experience and also led her to believe that he would furnish her with money in exchange for sexual relations.

Months ago, news such as “Sugar Daddy Row: Zuma’s New Wife Forced to Quit Job” (The Sun Nigeria, 2018), “She Conquers Asks Zuma’s Fiancée to Resign” (The Citizen, 2018) and “Jacob Zuma's Fiancée Lives a Blessed Life - and Will Now Have His Baby” (News24, 2018) made headlines. Not only was it discovered that former President Jacob Zuma was due to take a seventh wife and that she was pregnant; this young woman was also a 24-year-old woman who worked in the She Conquers campaign. This led people to speculate that theirs was a compensated relationship and she was compelled to resign from her job because the publicity was antithetical to the anti-blessers stance of the She Conquers campaign. In the aforementioned instances, official government communication categorises compensated relationships negatively yet those values are not consistent in the personal lives of government individuals. This phenomenon is a small indication of how it is that compensated relationships are still a valid subject of academic inquiry: regardless of public morality against the act and the publicity of its contribution to the HIV crisis, human beings continue to choose and gain pleasure from such relationships.

The *Checkpoint* episode that is described at the beginning of the dissertation introduces the South African public to the #blesser culture while granting narrative authority to its most notable agents. Although brief, it is significant that Serge and Amanda are accorded the opportunity of self-representation: to give their own meanings to love, intimacy and money in their #blessed relationships in the face of public scrutiny. Among the previous observations regarding the ways in which the conversation has been contributed to by social media, print media and government – the fact that #blesser culture even warrants an episode on the investigative television programme further reiterates the existence of the great public concern that is roused by the phenomenon.

All of the aforementioned discussions provide the discursive background for this study by illuminating the more vocal participants within blesser culture whose lives are available for scrutiny. Interestingly, Serge Cabonge has been able to capitalise on the sudden infamy by partnering with Moloko nightclub in Pretoria for monthly "Blesser Night" parties while Google searches for Amanda Cele reveal tabloid speculation about the nature of her association with a government minister and fake news pages about her dying. I suggest that the reason why Serge has been able to build business networks and benefit monetarily from television notoriety while Amanda seems to only have accumulated cruel gossip is gendered; an example of how women are demonised for their participation while men are celebrated.

In connection to the subsequent disparity between Serge and Amanda's reputations – while they are both undoubtedly two larger than life characters – my curiosity has been provoked by all of the countless, unnamed young women in South Africa who also engage in such relationships. In recalling the *Checkpoint* narrator stating that Serge's female entourage requested anonymity, this dissertation is about the lives of blessees who are willing to provide insight into their lives yet would rather not be publicly known. I am interested in the dynamics of power and gender, on one hand, and the technology that enables their lives, on the other. What are the circumstances of women who become blessees? What kinds of lives are they constructing for themselves, in the absence of the guaranteed social capital that is spawned by a television audience of millions? Do their stories reflect those of Amanda's; where being a woman means experiencing disadvantages that are not shared by the male counterpart? How do their choices in relation to the moral panic around their romantic decisions? What distinguishes this current moment of "blessers" and what role does the mobile phone play in the resurgence of the public's interest in compensated relationships?

The aim of this dissertation is to establish how young women in Johannesburg define and practice love and intimacy in their romantic relationships in the era of social media and the #blessed lifestyle. It highlights the spaces and relationships that inform young women's romantic choices. The dissertation will address the question: How are young women in Johannesburg using their mobile phones to reconfigure the meanings of love and intimacy within their romantic relationships?

A note on diction

Firstly, "transactional sex" (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Shefer & Clowes, et al., 2012) indicates the fundamental nature of a monetary "exchange" in older man and younger woman sexual relationships. However, the phrase does not relate to the professional realm of sex work.

Secondly and similarly, "gift relationships" denotes pairings where men give presents and pay for experiences[5] to initiate and maintain intimate relationships with women. It differs only slightly from the first because of the absence of a physical cash exchange between persons, thus distancing this kind of engagement from the stigma of prostitution which disproportionally shames young women (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013).

Thirdly, "age-disparate relationships" which has developed from "intergenerational sex" highlights the gendered asymmetries of power that occur within romantic pairings between younger women, often of high school or early university-going age, and their older, employed male partners. These phrases indicate that the men being older in age often means greater financial stability and thus, the money and social power they wield may have coercive effects on younger women. Leclerc-Madlala (2008b) asserts that the former phrase is a more accurate representation because these relationships often begin with five-year age differences, which is not necessarily inter-generational.

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[5] "…flowers, chocolates, jewellery, clothes, lingerie, CDs, drugs, meals in a restaurant, drinks at a club, tickets to concerts, and entrance fees to clubs…" (Kaufman, 2004: 383)

Lastly, “sugar daddies” and “sugar babies” (although, “sugar babies” is lesser used in South Africa) and more recently, “blessers” and “blessees” can both be found in academic and colloquial discourse (sugar daddies: Hunter, 2002; Gbalajobi, 2010) (blessers: Mngomezulu 2016, Shisana & Zungu, et al., 2016; Varjavandi, 2017) and relate to older men’s ability to materially “spoil” and “bless” younger women, respectively while emphasising the integral nature of consumption.

All of the aforementioned phrases have been used interchangeably over the years, to varying degrees, to communicate the interplay between money and the gendered power dynamics inherent within age disparate, heteronormative intimate relationships. However, what distinguishes “blessers”, “blessees”, “sugar daddies” and “sugar babies” – as embodiments of the current iteration of the phenomenon – is the unique involvement of mobile phones and social media cultures which are central to this project. The phrase *compensated relationship* is used here to capture this current moment by emphasising the centrality of consumption within the initiation and maintenance of relationships while also ensuring that the agency of the research participants is not misrepresented.

Sugar Feminism

From the data that I have collected for this study, I have chosen to use the concept of *sugar feminism* to frame my dissertation. Throughout the duration of my work, the participants have consistently connected their individual romantic choices to larger conversations about the status of women in South African society and the world at large. From 2014, “feminism” has increasingly become a buzzword in the realm of popular culture, with world leaders and celebrities claiming the label. The participants’ own reflections on feminism are broadened by such global connections as enabled by their mobile phones.

"Sugar" captures the consumption of money and sexuality while signalling to the existing and emerging discourses of "sugar daddies" and "sugar dating", respectively. *Sugar feminism* emerges as another layer of the tradition of feminisms that develop as a response to the personal struggles for justice among diverse groups of women and femmes. In a country with high levels of intimate partner violence and socio-economic disparity, the young women embody a feminism that aims to help them navigate the pleasures and dangers that are endemic to their gendered realities. What informs their decisions to be compensated for dating is their insistence to lead autonomous lives of choice, pleasure and comfort, regardless of the taboo.

Importantly, this insistence is accompanied and guided by their rational grasp of the socio-political dynamics of being a woman. Therefore, this concept is a recognition of our capitalist and patriarchal present; the current inevitability of its continuation and the ingenuity of women's attempts to survive in this world by manipulating both capitalism and patriarchy to derive as much material security, and thus peace of mind, as possible. At the same time, this kind of feminism is a continuation of neoliberal individualism that does little for the question of women's *collective* liberation (see: Gill, 2007; Budgeon, 2015).

Dissertation Outline

The central idea in this dissertation is *sugar feminism* and it is used to illuminate the gendered, personal and interpersonal dynamics that the young women are navigating with their mobile phones.

Chapter One provides an overview of the current literature regarding compensated relationships in South Africa and a selection of countries in the global north. It also reviews the literature on mobile phones and their usage in relationships. It positions this research project within the academic discourse pertaining to young women, specifically. It presents the

methods that have been used to access the research participants' narratives, ethical considerations and my positionality as a researcher in relation to the topic and the participants.

Chapter Two is an exploration of space as it pertains to the romantic lives of the participants. Using the data, it begins by introducing the young women and their experiences of their physical space, Johannesburg. It then considers their virtual space in how the cyberspace 'online' and real-time 'offline' dichotomy is animated by their mobile phones and the significance of their online communities.

Chapter Three is an exploration of the young women's social relationships. It highlights their romantic relationships in relation to the ideological relationships that they have to other women. Therein, the role of mobile phones is highlighted as the internet creates the possibility for individual concerns to become greater political movements.

Chapter Four presents the conclusion to this body of research.

Chapter One

Literature Review

This chapter discusses a selection of significant research from the fields of social sciences and public health. I begin with a discussion of the literature on heterosexual, compensated relationships between younger women and their older male partners, mainly from South Africa and other parts of the continent. Then I discuss the phenomenon of "sugaring" in the United States, in which young, college-educated women engage in compensated relationships, mostly through digital platforms. I end with a discussion on the research concerning mobile phone usage among young people in romantic relationships in South Africa and elsewhere.

Compensated relationships

In South Africa, research on compensated relationships is rooted in the response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. These relationships are implicated in new infections rates among young women, in the age group of 15 – 24 years old. Poverty, as contributed to by the high youth unemployment rate, is popularly understood as being the motivation for young women to engage in such relationships (HEAIDS, 2013; Zembe, 2013; Shisana & Rehle et al., 2014; She Conquers SA, 2016). Racialised socio-economic disparities in South Africa have created the conditions that necessitate African women to use their sexuality strategically in order to access necessary resources and gifts (Hunter, 2002; Selikow & Zulu et. al., 2002).

There has been scholarship that is focused on demographic data (see: Shisana & Rehle et al., 2014, Statistics SA, 2018a), the epidemiology of the virus (see: Gouws & Williams, 2016) and its social geography (see: Hunter, 2010). In order to understand the lives of young people who originate from different backgrounds and are living in different contexts, there are studies dedicated to compensated relationships with teenage participants (see Kaufman &

Stavrou, 2004; Bhana & Pattman, 2011) and also university-going students (see: Gbalajobi, 2010; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013).

There are over 9 million people categorised as "youth", specifically in the 15 – 24-year-old age group. In this group, 84.4% are classified as "Black African" while 5.5% of the youth population are living with HIV (Statistics SA, 2018a: 7). Although the total number of people living with HIV in South Africa has increased gradually over the years, there has been a 1.2% decline among youth, from 2002 to 2018 (Statistics SA, 2018a: 7).

Compensated relationships are characterised by disparities in age, gender and socio-economic resources. Having older male partners, usually of five years and above, has been identified as one of the leading causes of HIV infections in young women (Shisana & Rehle et al., 2014; Gouws & Williams, 2016; Kilburn & Ranganathan et al., 2018). While young women are highly susceptible to new infections, older men are also reported as having infection rates that are higher than their younger, male counterparts (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008b; Maughan-Brown et al., 2014). Studies assert that these asymmetries of power, usually characterised by the man being the one who is the provider, results in young women experiencing reduced agency in negotiating safe sexual health practices like condom use (Selikow & Zulu et. al., 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a; Bhana, 2015).

Multiple concurrent partnerships are generally associated with compensated relationships. For instance, it is common for married men to engage in relationships with younger, unmarried women and for younger, unmarried women to have multiple partners from whom they gain a variety of material and emotional resources (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Hunter, 2010; Selepe et al., 2017). Scholars show that young women engage in multiple concurrent partnerships as an articulation of modernity, gender equality based on having constitutional rights and,

extracting resources to manage day-to-day living (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Gbalajobi, 2010; Hunter, 2010). For men, a demonstration of ideal masculinity includes multiple concurrent partnerships and conspicuous consumption (Selikow & Zulu et. al. 2002; Hunter, 2002; Hunter, 2010). Money is a way for men to demonstrate their love and care (Clark, 2014).

Using the concept of *provider love/ masculinity,* Hunter connects the findings of scholars such as Selikow and Zulu et al., (2002) to constructions of masculinity from twentieth century South Africa. He states that the practice of having multiple intimate partners can be traced back to the emergence of *isoka*[6], customary bride-wealth practices of *ilobolo* and polygamy (Hunter, 2010). Mojola (2014: 110) demonstrates that in Kenya, the "logic of relationships" influence young women to choose the most high-risk intimate partners (older men), which means that young men can only afford to engage in relationships with "low risk" young women, similar to findings in the South African study by Bhana and Pattman (2011). These findings give an idea of the historical, cultural and social motivations for the continuation of compensated relationships despite the health risks that are associated with them.

Issues of HIV and AIDS, multiple concurrent partners and poverty are implicated in negative stereotyping about Africans. Tamale (2011: 22) states that colonial legacies of knowledge production have served to limit the ways that African people's lives have been written about and that there has been minimal funding for research that does not focus on "disease, reproduction and violence". Love between African people has not been a popular research topic for scholars due to the prioritisation of sexuality and medical research pertaining to HIV and AIDS and the substantiation of dehumanising policies (Cole & Thomas, 2009; Tamale, 2011). Moreover, a popular perspective in the research of compensated relationships has been highlighting the "transactional" nature of the relationship – which has been central to theses

[6] "…isoka, a symbolic figure justifying men's sole entitlement to multiple intimate partners (a kind of "sexual double standard"), was partly produced in the early part of the twentieth century" (Hunter, 2010: 37).

about sexual behaviour and HIV infections – while not giving enough attention to the emotional attachments that continue to sustain the existence of such relationships (Shefer & Clowes et al., 2012). According to Shefer and Clowes et al., (2012: 444) "the body of work foregrounding the materiality of sexual relationships in African countries in particular may inadvertently be another form of racialised 'othering' of African sexualities". There are scholars who have sought to work against such stereotypes and other assumptions about young women in compensated relationships and they will be discussed in the following section.

The complexities of studying compensated relationships

Firstly, the "victim versus vixen" binary, which is invoked in the discourse about compensated relationships, alludes to the structure versus agency dichotomy, which is an inadequate model for theorising about the young women who engage in such relationships. Rather, the interactions between socio-economic realities, the women's agency and the addition of gendered power dynamics result in women experiencing a continuum of interchanging empowerment and disempowerment in their relationships (Gbalajobi, 2010; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013). Kaufman and Stavrou (2004) have identified gifts as wielding coercive ability over the initiation and development of sexual relationships, especially where younger women are concerned. Among the intersecting inequalities of gender and socio-economic class, the commodification of sexuality means that it is often the one resource that young women have access to and can utilise in order to access their middle-class aspirations (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Bhana & Pattman, 2011).

Secondly, studies have found that compensated relationships are not merely transactional and that both the woman and man gain from the emotional and material benefits that they both circulate (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a; Shefer & Clowes et al., 2012). Money has been recognised

as a form of care and a tangible expression of love (Mojola, 2014). *Provider love* is a concept that emphasises "[t]he materiality of everyday sex" and pertains to "boyfriend-girlfriend 'gift' relationships that involve material benefits for unmarried women but also feelings of love and a wide range of moral and reciprocal obligations" (Hunter, 2010: 6). The phrase "everyday" is significant because it highlights that materiality is a normative feature of all romantic and sexual relationships, even those that do not warrant academic and media attention. Indeed, all relationships comprise of the emotional and material participation of both parties and compensated relationships in particular ought to be distinguished from sex work (Hunter, 2002; Gbalajobi, 2010; Masvawure, 2010). Scholars such as Hunter (2010), Gbalajobi (2010) and Selikow and Mbulaheni (2013) highlight that the material aspects arise from a consensual and emotional mutuality.

Furthermore, romantic love has always been present among African people with forms of exchange such as *ilobolo* being used to solidify newly formed kinship relations. A useful contemplation of love is one that appropriately situates it within the complex entanglement of: money, gendered power relations and agency – social forces that impact emotional paths, life decisions and experiences (see: Bhana, 2015). African people have used their individual desires to distinguish themselves as modern subjects (Cole & Thomas, 2009; Hunter, 2010). In compensated relationships, love and desire are able to flourish in couplings where the young woman is able to exercise agency and her partner does not exploit the gendered power dynamics to exert control over her (Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013).

Lastly, young women engaging in compensated relationships do not all originate from impoverished backgrounds. Studies have shown that money and gifts are central for the practices of consumption that enable young women of otherwise low-income backgrounds to access symbols of middle-class life (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008a; Hunter, 2010; Bhana &

Pattman, 2011; Bhana, 2015). However, Leclerc-Madlala (2003) argues for the recognition of a deviation from the trend, marked by the distinction between subsistence money and consumptive money. Young women from urban, middle-class backgrounds are increasingly engaging in compensated relationships to supplement their lifestyles of consumption (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Masvawure, 2010). Their involvement in compensated relationships are motivated by desire: the desire for mutuality, love perhaps, and conspicuous consumption. In fact, Dosekun (2015) would recognise such women as having postfeminist sensibilities. She asserts that the privileged class positions of women in the postcolonial societies of the global south are an important factor for their inclusion in the current theorising about postfeminist subjects, whereas Gill (2007) – who originated the concept – has portrayed postfeminist sensibilities as the exclusive domain of women in the global north. Dosekun insists that African women are not beyond the reach of popular culture and its consequent neoliberal intrusions into collectivist feminist thinking.

Sugar babies in the global north

The scholarship around "sugar babies", as emerging figures of internet culture in Africa, is still relatively little. In countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, being in a compensated relationship or "sugaring" has popularly become the terrain of college-educated young women and wealthy men seeking companionship. Seeking Arrangement (www.seekingarrangement.com) is a matchmaking website that pairs such couples together to form an "arrangement" that is mutually beneficial, with the man giving a regular "allowance" in the form of money or gifts to the woman. Women are encouraged to register on the site through their university email addresses while men can disclose their net worth – both as forms of identity screening to ensure that users of the site are authentic and that matches are optimally beneficial.

Sugaring emphasises both the emotional connection and the monetary foundation of the arrangement. Studies show that as much as sugaring is a demonstration of agency, it also reproduces patriarchal dynamics with men being the financial benefactors and women performing sexual and emotional labour. Importantly, sugaring exacerbates the stigma against sex work because the ambiguity of being a sugar baby versus a sex worker means enjoying safety from harmful stereotypes, anti-sex work policies and physical violence that the latter group of women are usually vulnerable to (Zimmerman, 2015; Nayar, 2016; Daly, 2017). Moreover, there are also more conservative views that reduce sugaring to illegality and "Internet prostitution" (see: Miller, 2011).

Mobile phones

The following statistical data pertains to mobile phone usage in South Africa. Out of the total population of 57 million South Africans, 32% are active social media users with 28% of South Africans primarily engaging through their mobile phones. Since January 2017, there has been an increase of three million users in each aspect. From those who are adults, classified as being over 16 years old, 95% use mobile phones while 65% use smart phones, specifically. WhatsApp is the is the most popular social media platform with 49% adult usage, followed by Facebook with 46%, Instagram, which is ranked fifth, at 27% and Twitter, ranked ninth, with 22% usage. Facebook and Instagram have more than 50% female users with the highest usage being within the 18 – 34-year-old age group (We Are Social, 2018).

The scholarship on mobile phones has followed the device's development throughout the years as an important cultural object. Phones are highly visible, useful and now ordinary objects of urban life. Mobile phones have become the main occupation while waiting and they are objects on which a great amount of time is inadvertently invested. The mobile phone is an extension of people's everyday lives that allows for rapid communication and the

transcendence of spatial and temporal barriers (Fortunati, 2002; Horst & Miller, 2006; Goggin, 2008).

Notifications direct users' attentions seamlessly between the offline and online spheres of their social lives and the mobile phone's role as an intermediary of communication has deepened beyond its traditional functions of calling and messaging. Through using phones, people are in "perpetual contact" (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) with each other and the world, as the devices provide tools and applications (apps) for audio, text, photographic and video communication, organisation, education, banking and more.

Studies show that each social media platform constitutes a particular culture and imposes social values with options such as "following", "sharing" and "liking". The ability to create accessible or semi-accessible profiles, connect with other users and allow their connections to be visible to others also influences how people socialise on the platforms (Ellison, 2007; van Dijck, 2013). Rapidly changing technology and invisible Wi-Fi connections have enabled phone manufacturers to deliver upgrades to software remotely. People possess communication and functional devices that are not only constantly changing to suit our needs but are also introducing us to technological innovations that may not be understood initially, but gradually become staple features of our lives.

Mobile phones are integral tools that aid in the initiation and maintenance of relationships. There are also gendered dimensions to the meanings that people attach to them. Scholarship on mobile phones and youth in South Africa has focused on how young people express their identities (Bosch, 2008) and explore their sexuality (Schloms-Madlener, 2013). The mobile phone has been instrumental in helping users to create and understand their own sexuality, while also being a tool of negotiation and a symbol of prestige that can be acquired through

compensated relationships (Batson-Savage, 2008; Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Bosch, 2011; Sooryamoorthy, 2015).

Many of the apps' photo and video-sharing functions have created a "visual culture…one in which a premium is placed on beauty and glamour" (Chalfen, 2009; Schloms-Madlener, 2013: 11). For young women, generating the desired social capital through displays of beauty and glamour on social media is closely tied to their ability perform an ideal femininity reflected through posting photographs of themselves in "sexually provocative poses" (Bosch, 2011: 78), for instance.

Men often use their devices to maintain multiple concurrent romantic relationships while women do the same, with the additional purpose of securing financial support (Batson-Savage, 2008; Archambault, 2017). Young women are more comfortable with text communication because it allows them to be bolder than they would ordinarily be in person or through voice calling. "Sexts", sexually suggestive text messages, may include self-photographed nude images that are shared between potential or actual sexual partners to initiate and maintain sexual interactions (Batson-Savage, 2008; Schloms-Madlener, 2013; Gardener & Davis, 2014). In African societies where patriarchy is the dominant culture, digital media has disrupted the ways in which gender and sexuality are debated, with young women's subjectivities being more visible (Ligaga, 2016). Social media provides an additional outlet for young women to be heard, especially on matters pertaining to their sexuality.

The mobile phone has also been studied with regards to its role in the ending of relationships. It is an "instrument of duplicity" (Horst & Miller, 2006: 98 – 99), concealing the true location and actions of the user by allowing for communication without physical presence. In addition,

partners are able to discover infidelity (Batson-Savage, 2008) by viewing calling logs, text messages and suggestive images from other people.

Overall, the majority of the academic scholarship on young people's love lives in South Africa especially has been used by the public health sector to produce particular objectives in their public messaging about the HIV pandemic. As mentioned earlier, "Zazi: Know Your Strength" (2013) and "She Conquers SA" (2016) are two important examples that illustrate the efforts by government, public health, academia and the media to engender behavioural changes among 15 – 24-year-old girls and women. Noticeably, the perception of compensated relationships as simply being transactional has gradually changed over time. Publications such as *Love in Africa* (Cole & Thomas, 2009) and *Love in the Time of AIDS* (Hunter, 2010) exemplify scholars paying greater attention to the genuine feelings of love, desire and agency that are present in these relationships.

In addition, the scholarship on mobile phones and relationships have shown phones to be objects that are intimately embedded in people's social and romantic lives. Studies have considered cyberspace and its changing technologies, including social media (Jordan, 2002), the role of mobile phones in the lives of young people (Howard & Davis, 2013) and the gendered ways in which people use them to facilitate their intimate relationships (Turkle, 2017). Publications like *Mobile Phone Cultures* (Goggin, 2008) and *Mobile Secrets: Youth, Intimacy and the Politics of Pretence in Mozambique* (Archambault, 2017) capture the importance and meaning of mobile phones to low income communities in particular where they are used to facilitate communication, socialisation and access to financial opportunities.
The consideration of the significance of emotions in compensated relationships allows for a fuller and more dignified analysis of people's lives. However, what has not been investigated enough are compensated relationships as partnerships of choice among the variety of women

in society who are not classified as vulnerable to HIV infection. Studies that do not prioritise HIV are needed to understand the ways in which a partner's financial status is a determining factor for women entering into relationships. The literature on mobile phones begins to hint at the viability of this route by illuminating the ways that mobile phone use can be gendered, with women often using theirs to secure financial resources within romantic partnerships. This is why the literature on sugar babies in the global north is helpful; it provides examples of how both the centrality of money and emotional motivations can be acknowledged without centralising the themes of promiscuity or illness.

My aim is to is to begin to interrogate how young women are conceptualising love and romance in relation to their involvement in online communities and conversations. Presently, so much of what is newsworthy is generated from social media and millennials are also known to spend large amounts of time on their phones. As a person who enjoys some visibility on social media, I have observed how online popularity has been pivotal in personal branding, media features and accessing financial opportunities. I am interested in how this sustained use of phones and social networks influences how young women see themselves as romantic subjects, how they see their relationships in relation to the broader politics of womanhood and society at large. It is important to reflect on these aforementioned aspects because regardless of how negatively compensated relationships are portrayed, young women – who are on the receiving end of the public shaming – still continue to engage in them.

Similar to Gbalajobi (2010), Masvawure (2010) and Selikow and Mbulaheni (2013), I aim to amplify the experiences of university students; young women who are commonly positioned as having both the economic standing and future opportunities to preclude them from such relationships. In South Africa, young women have invoked their constitutional rights to legitimise their use of their sexualities for material gain (Hunter, 2010; Posel, 2004; Posel,

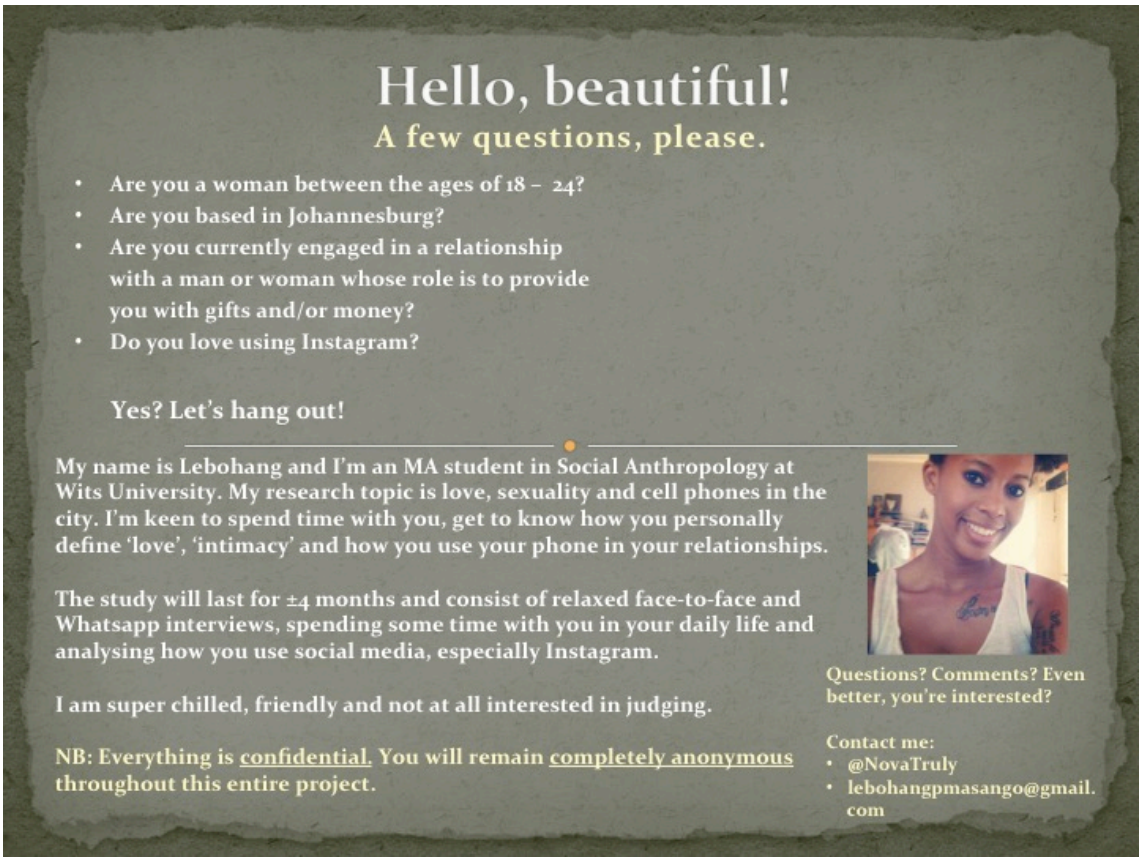
2011). In general, women invoking freedom of choice also extends to using their sexualities for generating popularity on Instagram (Ferrara & Interdonato, et al., 2014; Ligaga, 2016). Considering the above, compensated relationships are an interesting research arena for understanding the interactions of youth, love, consumption and internet culture in a neo-liberal society.

Methods

My interest in exploring blessees and compensated relationships arises from spending too much of my time on social media. During the festive season of 2015, I was house-sitting for a friend in Westdene when I noticed a surge in young black women posting Instagram photos of themselves on luxury vacations in Dubai and Bali. These women looked picture perfect as they posed in their beautiful makeup, stylish clothes and wigs while carrying designer shopping bags or flutes of champagne, often with the expensive bottle strategically placed in-shot. It has been an enduring norm on Instagram for people to post their material possessions and milestones of success while referencing God or rags-to-riches in their captions: #blessed and #highlyfavoured as humility and divine exceptionalism to balance the obscenity of conspicuous consumption on display.

During this time, people who had also noticed this surge would take screenshots from Instagram and post them on Twitter while expressing their confusion. It gradually became a topic of conversation and then speculation as people wondered how these young women who were known to be unemployed, students or junior employees could possibly afford such excess. By January and February of 2016, the hashtag #blessed humble-brag had paved the way for the accusatory “blesser” and “blessee” to denote a scandalous pairing of a likely married, rich man and his younger mistress.

As a feminist, I have curated my Twitter timeline to reflect pro-social justice views. From my phone screen, I watched as compensated relationships became a contentious topic of discussion among the people of my timeline. Many of the resulting conversations there, some of which had blessees and sugar babies also contributing their opinions, were progressive in highlighting the importance of women's agency, even in such controversial partnerships that seemingly challenged the very notions of independence that feminism is built upon. Consequently, using social media as the main recruitment site for research participants was an obvious choice.



I designed a call for participants in the form of a digital poster, specifying the required ages, location, romantic situation and social media usage of the ideal participants in question form. The most important considerations in creating the call was to avoid using language such as "blessees" and "sugar babies" so that women would use the criteria to determine their interest without possibly being repelled by the negative connotations of the phrases.

The poster was circulated from my Twitter account (±12 900 followers), my Instagram account (±5 700 followers) and Facebook account (±280 friends) with people sharing the poster on their own social media and possibly discussing it with people through word-of-mouth. For the purposes of the study, I changed my DMs (direct messages) on Twitter from "private" to "public" to make it as convenient as possible for anyone to reach me. Throughout my call for participants, I was apprehensive that the controversy regarding #blessees would discourage young women from volunteering. I intended for the tone of the poster and the inclusion of my smiling image to be inviting, with the hope that my own public profile as a (non-judgemental) feminist would also be encouraging.

Nonetheless, participant recruitment was challenging and deeply frustrating. In one incident, two young women contacted me enthusiastically through Instagram DMs with the intention to volunteer after their cousin, who follows me on the app, recruited them. I followed up with emails reiterating the objectives of the study for the purposes of establishing consent. In both cases, the young women's replies to my correspondence strongly expressed that they had misinterpreted the requirements as seeking women in normative and more socially acceptable relationships and were no longer willing to be involved. The same incident repeated itself with a Facebook friend.

In another incident, an additional four young women who contacted me through Twitter and Instagram did not reply to my correspondence after they had initially expressed an interest in participating. There was also an instance in which a young woman, whom I imagined to be a blessee, contacted me but only for the purpose of questioning my intended portrayal of the young women in my research. Although I did not tell her that I would have loved for her to volunteer for my research, I still assured her of my commitment to representing my participants and the overall subject with dignity.

The public controversy of blessers, blessees and perhaps even my own social media presence made it incredibly difficult to recruit participants. People had agreed that they met the criteria and were willing to discuss their romantic relationships with me until they realised that I would indeed be discussing the centrality of money. I believe that the apprehension was largely a consequence of the shaming that women in such relationships face, making them unlikely to step into the "public" with a researcher and subject themselves to invoking violent scrutiny from society. In total, I managed to recruit three participants – two of whom I already had some rapport with as members of my online community. The advantage of having few participants, the advantage is that it has allowed me to build up trust and a good rapport with my interlocuters over time. I have adhered to the ethics guidelines of the university. I have attained written consent from my participants, they are represented confidentially with their names being changed and have not been paid for their input, however, I ensured that I paid for their refreshments whenever we met at a restaurant.

The research methods herein are a combination of online and offline techniques (Hine, 2005). The majority of the research is comprised of interview studies. I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with each of the participants while recording the audio on my mobile phone and I also kept field notes. In instances where meeting was not possible, I conducted the interviews online through WhatsApp text conversations in which I gave the participants the option to respond using voice notes, which are effective because one is able to speak freely without the additional task of having to type and organise their thoughts for reading.

The fieldwork portion of my research was mainly undertaken on social media, observing the participants' Twitter and Instagram accounts as additional insights into their online personas. I initially planned to use tweets as verbatim quotes with the handle obscured. This method

only works for one of my participants who has set her Twitter account to auto-delete her tweets every two weeks. However, the ethical challenge where the remaining participants are concerned is the risk of exposing their identity because tweets can easily be searched on Twitter or Google. Therefore, I have had to be selective with the data from social media. The ethnographic research was conducted from August 2016 until April 2018 in Braamfontein, Pretoria, Midrand and on WhatsApp.

Life histories

Bohlale was born in Kroonstad, Free State in 1996. She lived there with her mother and her brother until she was 13 years old; when her family moved to Bloemfontein and began living with her stepfather. He worked at the legislature and their move allowed for her mother to retire from education and pursue her business aspirations. Her parents sent her to boarding school at that time. She describes these high school years as having been suffocating, because of the largely conservative Afrikaans and Christian environment that she suddenly found herself in. Her feelings about her surroundings led her to become an atheist and through the school's debating cub, she discovered her passion for social justice. Her desire to "see the world", as she says, contributed to her decision to use her prestigious scholarship to move to Johannesburg and study Engineering at Wits University.

In terms of her relationship history, she began dating in Grade 8 and would break up with boys if she found them boring. In Matric, she had her phase of liking older guys because she felt that she was too mature for boys her age. However, she never really dated anybody seriously because she describes herself as not really being a social person. She joined Tinder, the online dating app, during her last year of living in Bloemfontein and began engaging seriously with it as a way to become more social and also to discover more of Johannesburg. Bohlale is continuing with her undergraduate studies at Wits University.

Sonto was born in Rockville, Johannesburg in 1994. She has enjoyed a comfortable, family-oriented upbringing with mandatory church attendance every Sunday. Her parents have been together for over 37 years. She states that in her family, there are certain topics that are taboo, such as questioning gender roles. However, when she was in high school, she began to challenge that status quo through her involvement in anti-violence activist work. In 2010, she became involved in a campaign called V-Girls, a by-product from renowned activist Eve Ensler's V-Day campaign against gender-based violence. Their most significant was planning a march against the sexual assaults perpetrated by men against young women wearing revealing clothing at taxi ranks. However, through explaining her activities, she found that her father was surprisingly supportive and this allowed for the entire family to gradually have more progressive conversations about women's empowerment and gender relations in South Africa.

Her relationship history includes dating casually in high school. She recalls that in Grade 11, one of her female friends declared that she liked her and she stated that she felt the same yet she did not fully understand what that meant. Then a few years later, while in college, she started to use Twitter and began following lesbian women in order to get a sense of how they live their lives. Through engaging with one woman, messaging her privately and establishing a relationship with her, she began to identify as bisexual. Sonto studied marketing management at AAA School of Advertising while working part-time at a retail store in the west of Johannesburg and she is currently unemployed.

Olivia was born in Limpopo in 1992. Her father, a doctor, had first moved to South Africa from the Congo a year earlier with her mother joining him in early 1992. He was first deployed at the rural hospitals when they moved to the country. The state had provided a house for the family and they enjoyed a good life. Her family eventually moved to Centurion where has spent the majority of her life before moving to Midrand. She was an only child for

nine years, before her little sister was born, and feels that she had an indulgent upbringing, with her father spoiling her with affection and material things. When she began high school, her father moved to Klerksdorp to become the head of the maternity department at one of the hospitals there and her parents' marriage began to fail. The marriage ended eight years ago yet her parents have not officially divorced and the reason for this, according to Olivia, is that her father does not want her mother to endure such a public humiliation.

Her relationship history only begins in university. She did not date in high school because she felt unattractive as a girl who was both "skinny" and dark-skinned but she also does no recall wanting to have a boyfriend. Her life was sheltered, so even her socialising was limited. However, in the first year of university, her father bought her a car because she agreed to enrol at an institution that is closer to home, for her safety. That institution is the University of Pretoria, where she studied and completed her law degree and now works as a candidate attorney. At the time, her newly acquired mobility allowed her to establish a better social life and romantic life. She had romantic feelings for a young man who had grown up as a friend of the family yet their relationship could never become official due his feelings of insecurity that she had access and money while he did not. He later on agreed to become her boyfriend but he was emotionally unavailable, frequently made misogynistic comments and allowed her to finance the relationship and drive him around while he did not contribute materially. She developed depression and their relationship contributed negatively to her mental health but she remained with him out of the obligation of love. It was only when she suspected that he was cheating that she ended their relationship, eventually recovered from depression and began dating casually.

Chapter Two

Social spaces: the physical and the virtual

Olivia sits across from me in an Italian restaurant, sips her cappuccino and shares her insights on romance in the city:

> The spotlight is on Johannesburg in this regard. I don't see a lot of conversation about all of this in Durban or in Cape Town – not that there aren't women who are in transactional relationships over there. I think the spotlight is on Joburg because… I remember years ago on Twitter, Mapule, the girl from Botswana? Yes, I remember we were talking about this blessee-blesser thing. I think there was an episode of *Checkpoint* and they were taking about that. I remember she tweeted, and she said something *so* interesting. She was like: "I haven't lived in Joburg but from what I hear, it's not the best place to be poor" – which is so true! She was explaining why she sort of understood why young women would want to date older men for money – *because it's not nice to be poor in Joburg.* And to live in Joburg means to live like a Joburger. (Olivia: 2018)

I nod along in agreement, recalling Mapule's tweets on Johannesburg and then I ask her: "What does it mean to live like a Joburger?"

> I think there's this sense of, 'you're either in or out' in Joburg. So, you either have the phone, or you don't. You either go on the holidays, or you don't. You either wear the clothes, or you don't. You either go to the clubs and pop bottles or you don't – and you *want* to. It's not nice to not live a nice life in Joburg. I think that's perhaps *why* there's a spotlight on Joburg because, you know, Joburg has this reputation and in a lot of ways I think it's true. You don't want to be poor in Joburg. It's not nice to be on the outside looking in, in Joburg. (Olivia: 2018)

Later in our conversation, I ask Olivia about social media and what role she believes it plays in the dating culture of Johannesburg:

> I think social media plays a big part in all of that because social media is the way you let everyone else know that you have money, or that you're getting money, or you're trying to get money. So, Instagram for example, Twitter or whatever, you know? If it isn't on there, if it isn't documented on there, then it's like: "Did it happen? Did you really go on that holiday? Did your man really buy you that bag? Do you really have that hair?" And perhaps people just want to post where they went on holiday or that they got a cute handbag but I think sometimes social media is like that: it's almost like assurance to everyone that this *is* how I'm living. And perhaps it brings people some sort of validation that other people know that they're living like this. I don't think that it's unique to Joburg but I think that in a place like Joburg, it probably would be important to have an Instagram and to be on Instagram and to participate in that way as far as social media is concerned. I think the same can be said for Twitter, you probably want to let your followers know that you're about to get on a plane and go to Paris or whatever. (Olivia: 2018)

I begin with this response from Olivia because it illustrates the connection between spatial location and romantic relationships. It also indicates the significance of people's interactions in cyberspace with consumption being documented on social media and mobile phones being regarded as symbols of prestige. She lives in the city yet her engagement with Mapule, a young woman in another country, as enabled by social media, assists her to articulate her own views. Her lived experiences and social media observations correspond with Mapule's suggestion that Johannesburg is characterised by consumerism – a sentiment that is shared by all of the participants in this study. In so doing, they identify this reputation as the reason for media content and thus the public conversation about compensated relationships being largely concentrated in Johannesburg. Urban *habitus* suggests that:

> the proliferating fantasmic and mythical qualities of cities and urban spaces are effective realities that shape the behaviour, cosmologies and desires of people in cities, or of those who visit them, imagine them, or describe them in narrative or imagery (Hansen & Verkaaik, 2009:5).

The intangible qualities of an environment do indeed have a bearing on the people who live, work and play there and even extends to those who aspire to. The chapter highlights the social spaces, mainly the physical and virtual, that young women occupy as romantic subjects. The experiences and observations of life in the city coupled with cyberspace interactions on their phones wield great influence over their interpersonal relations, including the kinds of relationships that they engage in. It is understandable that young women's shifting presence in both their physical and virtual spaces is accompanied by fluctuating degrees of agency. I will illuminate the relationship between both spaces. Firstly, I argue that young women's decisions to engage in compensated relationships are not extraordinary and are, in fact, a matter of establishing navigating a neoliberal society. Secondly, I argue that mobile phones make young women's virtual spaces readily accessible, online communities provide support and enable them to exercise unrestricted agency therein. Consequently, the agency in virtual space increases their scope of power in physical spaces.

Olivia's is a 26-year-old candidate attorney who resides in Midrand, works in Pretoria and enjoys socialising in the heart of Joburg. For the past three years, from when she was a law student at university, she has been involved in an exclusive relationship with Siyabonga, a man who is 16 years older than her. When they first became exclusive, he encouraged her to ask him for money whenever she requires it. "I did say to him that if I came from a different background, I probably wouldn't have to ask for money", she shared with me during our first interview. She believes that he would have simply given her money regularly, without expecting her to ask, if she was poor. Indeed, her current profession and her background as the middle-class, private school-educated, daughter of a doctor demonstrate that she is privileged enough to not have to need such a relationship for subsistence. However, her reflections about the city show that she is keenly aware that people are invested in maintaining the spectacle of making money and excessive consumption. To a lesser degree, people partake in such actions for documentation on social media. Olivia has admitted to participating in such spectacle both in real life and on social media.

Johannesburg is known as the economic capital of South Africa while there are great socio-economic disparities including a high youth unemployment rate among its residents. The observations that she makes in her responses show that one of the ways that people are choosing to cope with such a reality is to become even more ostentatious. Importantly, it shows the essence of this chapter; how one's larger, physical spatial context has an impact on oneself and one's virtual space and how, in turn, the virtual space impacts people's physical space. In the following section, I will situate the participants through a discussion of the perceptions and realities of Johannesburg.

Johannesburg

Johannesburg is filled with young people. Braam, as Braamfontein is colloquially known, is located in the inner city and it is also where a majority of this research occurs. It is home to the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) among other smaller tertiary institutions with a residential population that is comprised of many students including those attending the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in the neighbouring Auckland Park. In addition to apartments and learning institutions, the area is also full of offices, shops, restaurants, fashion outlets and small nightclubs. It is constantly humming with activity and the thumping sounds of bass-heavy music most weekends as a trendy hub for students, creative people, tourists and low-income residents. Johannesburg is also home to many like 22-year-old Bohlale, who leave their smaller hometowns to pursue higher education while experiencing a new city:

> Joburg's okay. I like the fact that there's a place for everyone here. Whatever you're into, you can find your people here. In Bloemfonten, it isn't that diverse and you have a lot of outcasted people. In Joburg, people have their own little social hubs. I like the diversity. (Bohlale: 2017)

One of the most notable characteristics of the city is the diversity of the population. Bohlale is studying for her undergraduate degree at Wits University. As a residential student, she spends a lot of time in Braam and upmarket Rosebank, which is conveniently accessible through the university bus. Her existence in both physical and virtual spaces has widened the scope of how she experiences other people in the city:

> Joburg is something else. I think if there's any city that can show you what dating is like in the modern world then Johannesburg would be it because, particularly through online dating and sugaring I've seen how, first of all, you are exposed to not just people who are different to you in culture, or language, or anything like that but literally people come from different parts of the world and have polar opposite world views. (Bohlale: 2018)

The multi-cultural reality of Johannesburg's population is comparable to other major cities in the world. Olivia has Congolese heritage and her well-travelled parents moved to South Africa before she was born. When she is not at work, she spends some weekends with her

friends socialising in Braam and Sandton. Just like Bohlale, she is not a Johannesburg native. From this position, she has observed that the city has a unique hustle about it:

> I think that the fact that people will move here from other parts of the country for better opportunities, for work, for whatever – I think that's sort of where it started. That, you know, this is a place you come to when you want to do better in life. You want to make more money, you want to be exposed to more opportunities... I know my parents always say that when they got here, Joburg was *that* place. *It just was*. It reminded them of New York, it reminded them of like London – very fast-paced, very expensive. (Olivia: 2018)

Olivia's response shows Johannesburg's pace as being positive and having a global flair; drawing in South Africans and immigrants alike with opportunities to improve their qualities of life. Sonto has had a different experience. She regularly socialises all over the city and as someone who has lived all of her life here, she expresses a particular fatigue about the pace of the city:

> It's a super-fast place, man… It's just a very draining space. I think if you don't have a place to recharge, you might just burn out in this space. Honestly. It's very, very demanding. (Sonto: 2018)

The young women's backgrounds affect their perceptions of Johannesburg differently. For those who originate from elsewhere, the city's fast-paced nature holds a positive allure that attracts them to settle and seek out opportunities. Notably, Bohlale credits both her online dating experiences, as well as being situated in the city, as having opened up her worldview. That is what this chapter seeks to explore; the symbiotic relationship that exists between physical and virtual spaces.

Descriptions of Johannesburg in relation to its pace, diversity and opportunities reflect the popularity of Gauteng as a migration destination. Out of all of the provinces, it receives the highest in-migrations with numbers projected at 1 596 896 for the years 2016 – 2021 (Statistics SA, 2018a: 15). In the same vein, the City of Johannesburg markets itself as "a world class African city", which has been the subject of controversy due to the city's declining economy and urban rejuvenation aiming to re-assimilate it "into the civilized white

world of corporate respectability." (Bremner, 2000: 191). These words aim to challenge any notion of the country's largest city, and South Africa as a whole, being regarded as "third world". Further north, Sandton has been nicknamed the "richest square mile in Africa" with its behemoth grey concrete and glass structures competing for the skyline (James, 2018). From officials and citizens alike, the city is envisioned as accommodating a diverse population and as a lucrative commercial centre that can compete globally while remaining authentically African enough to attract foreign investment and tourism.

In some indigenous languages, the descriptors "Gauteng" and "Egoli" (place of gold) as well as "Maboneng" (place of lights) originated not only to mark the discovery of gold and early urban electrification – these names also speak to the enduring public imagination of Johannesburg as a faraway place of riches and modern indulgence. All these monikers reflect the sheer aspiration and "unrepentant commercialism" (Mbembe, 2004: 373) that drive the literal construction and consequent perceptions of the city.

Magubane (1979) argues that there exists a systemic relationship between the underdevelopment and poverty of rural areas and the development and wealth of the urban areas in South Africa. His work suggests that the mining economy established by Apartheid thrived on the destruction of African families, violence, alcoholism and disease as necessitated by the brutality of the forced migrant labour system. In the present day, a variety of inequalities continue to contribute to the precarity of urban life. Out of the country's total population, 41,8% of those classified as "Black/ African" are unemployed and there is an overall 29,2% unemployment rate among the working-age population of the City of Johannesburg (Statistics SA, 2018b).

As an aspirational city, Johannesburg carries the hopes and ambitions of many young people and their families, who rely on their education to secure employment that will improve all of their lives. The landmark Fees Must Fall (FMF) student protests of 2015 and 2016 were inspired by the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Cape Town (UCT). FMF engulfed the Braamfontein area in weeks of chanting, picketing and standoffs with the police force, including notable marches to Parliament, Luthuli House and the Union Buildings to demand free higher education. The main grievances were high university fees that exclude the poor, African majority and the need to decolonise the curriculum and culture of South African universities. Government and universities are yet to establish permanent solutions. These protests drew the world's attention to the reality that regardless of Johannesburg and Cape Town's perceived success, a great number of people are unemployed, poor and may be condemned to remain that way without access to affordable education and employment.

Thus far, I have presented two seemingly opposing realities about Johannesburg. On one hand, it is a worldly city and commercial centre that attracts many people from in and outside South Africa with aspirations of excess and access to opportunities. On the other hand, it is marred with great inequalities that include unemployment and a high cost of living. What is commonly identified as "fast-paced" is actually the tension between these two structural realities and its citizens responding by producing the logic that obvious scarcity ought to be triumphed over on an individual basis, by any means necessary. Such means usually connote consumerism. Therefore, it is my aim in this dissertation to show how romantic relationships are not insulated from being co-opted into these repertoires of individual triumph over structural precarity in the city.

When I first met Bohlale, she was a self-proclaimed sugar baby who mainly used Tinder. Her time on the online dating app began negatively in Bloemfontein but she later found it useful in

curbing her boredom in Johannesburg. It exposed her to men of all ethnicities and tax brackets who were willing to monetarily compensate her for spending time on a date or on the phone with her. In this response, she reveals her belief in the individual's triumph over collective perceptions of desirability:

> Johannesburg forces you. In the same way people know that professionally; it's really competitive, there are a lot of opportunities but its cut-throat. It's the same with dating. There are a lot of people, a lot of opportunities but it's cut-throat, you can't be passive… It kinda shows you a perspective of what it's like to have options, what it's like to pick from the batch you really want. This gets to a lot of people but it shows you how you measure up against the rest because a lot of girls will say: "Well, the girls are so pretty in Johannesburg and there's so many beautiful girls and I feel like I'm gonna have trouble dating here because I'm not as pretty", so it shows you how you measure up against the rest. But you can't let it lead to you developing a low self-esteem or whatever. You need to step your pussy game up, you need to become a more confident person, you need to put yourself out there in Johannesburg. (Bohlale: 2018)

The fast pace and logic of competition that prevails in the city extends to dating and to personal aesthetics, especially since women vie for male attention (Weitz, 2001). True to this spirit, Bohlale emphasises the importance of not being a passive romantic subject with her call to "step your pussy game up" – an African American Vernacular English (AAVE) phrase that also signals the trans-global connections that are fostered by South African youth's increasing access to popular culture and social media. When I met Sonto, she was a polyamorous dater with a more stable commitment to the "Mozambican Guy", as we call him. They are now in an exclusive relationship, in which he gives her money and takes her on holidays. Sonto expresses the differences between her time spent in Mozambique as opposed to Johannesburg. Contrary to Bohlale, she expresses and exasperation with existing as a sexually attractive young woman in the city:

> You can literally take me to the beach, and I will have the best time of my life but Joburg doesn't have a beach. So, if you're in Joburg, you need to spend money. If you want to have a good time, you need to buy clothes, you need to put on makeup, you need to do your hair. In Mozambique, I don't do any of those things… In Joburg, it's much more of a numbers game. You know, a guy approaches a girl and the girl is like: "No". He'd be like: "Okay, cool. Next!" And it's like: "If I buy you a drink now, you're gonna go to my place later – no matter what you say. You're gonna get into my car, we're gonna go together, me and you." It's a very demanding space in terms of guys wanting sex, girls not wanting sex and girls wanting

> money and guys not wanting to give that money. And guys wanting to give away that money so that they can have sex. It's a very, very demanding space. It's actually draining. (Sonto: 2018)

While her observations about Mozambique are influenced by the transience of being a tourist, her remarks about Johannesburg are a reiteration of the other participants' sentiments. Here, I will also include Olivia's remarks about Johannesburg from the introduction of the chapter. Sonto's notion of a "numbers game" where men and women have their choice of an assortment of suitors corroborates Bohlale's statement about people having "many options" in the city and Olivia's response about how one is "either in or out in Joburg".

Firstly, these responses immediately portray the city as a place of such density like any other city, where it is necessary to stand out in order to be desirable. Secondly, they indicate that consumption plays a key role in the attainment and competition of desirability. Bohlale's mention of beauty, Sonto elaborating with the labour and the cost involved and Olivia's mention of possessing the objects associated with desirability (trendy clothes, phones and places of leisure) can all be condensed into acts of consumption and, people must have disposable income in order to participate. Thirdly, each participants' response, including Bohlale's "step your pussy game up" comment, acknowledges that the competition for desirability forges a connection between money and sex. In summary, young women spend money to beautify themselves in order to attract suitors and those men spend money on romantic gestures in order to present themselves as worthy suitors. This results in one-night-stands as shown in Sonto's response or more longer-term relationships as shown by the lives of the participants, which will be the subject of the following chapter. Furthermore, Olivia's observations below show how the phenomenon of competitiveness extends to relationships:

> I think Joburg is just so much busier, there's a lot more to do and there are a lot more places to go to. I don't know, it could be a good or a bad thing for a relationship. I just find that people who date in Joburg have a lot more going on. There's a lot more that could get in the way of their relationship because there's all these cool places to go to and so you're meeting all these different people. Suddenly the person you're with is not as cool 'cause you just met someone

> cooler. I feel like in Pretoria, it's just really slow. I think Pretoria also gives you like this false sense of privacy. I feel like in Joburg, everything is out there and you're out there, and you have to be out there. If your relationship isn't on social media, then are you even with this person? Are they even with you? I feel like when you're from Pretoria, you can just get away with being boring and no one will question why your relationship is the way it is. I think in Joburg, there are just so many expectations and you just have to be this really cool couple. (Olivia: 2018)

Olivia's contrast of dating in Pretoria and Johannesburg illustrate that social media creates additional pressure for people to perform the ideal relationship, regardless of their location. The fact that Pretoria is the capital city of the country yet Johannesburg is regarded as the "financial capital", according to the official City of Johannesburg fact page[7], is an illustration of what Olivia means in her comparisons of the two cities. She portrays Johannesburg as a bustling space of economic activity and consumption while she does not regard Pretoria as encapsulating a similar spirit although the cities are merely 70 kilometres apart.

Furthermore, "oblique consumption" as termed by Illouz (1997) refers to consumption and its current inextricability from romance. It involves aspirational imagery of couples who are well-dressed, attractive and consuming leisure activities and objects. Illouz further details the link between romance and a middle-class social position. Moreover, people's real-life social networks are reproduced on social media, to a wider audience of spectators, which means that there are dual realms in which people have to meet the expectations of the larger social group. In this instance, people practice social acceptability by being desirable themselves and then portraying their relationships as desirable. Consumerism makes aesthetically desirable relationships possible because, firstly, they require mobile phones and social media to make them visible and, secondly, practicing romance requires money. The competition of desirability is constantly present for relationships and is evident of the need to appear as individuals who have triumphed over the uncertainty of the city. The interlocutors all show

[7] https://www.joburg.org.za/about_/Pages/About%20the%20City/About%20Joburg/Facts-about-Joburg.aspx

that young women strive to succeed and their main anxiety is failing to "make it", leading to an emotional precarity borne out of their romantic choices.

Online community

Alongside the realities of maintaining their daily lives in the city, young people also navigate the worlds that are contained within their phones and computer screens. Social media, which is easily accessed through smart phones apps, allows people to express themselves and their personalities beyond their immediate, real-life social circles into a greater virtual world of people who are constantly doing the same. While cyberspace is not a tangible thing, it is a space that has bearing on the people who operate within its confines. According to Delaney (2011: 63), "…cyberspace… profoundly transforms our experience of physical space and its limitations". Indeed, the very intangible nature of cyberspace allows for possibilities that cannot be actualised in physical space. I am interested in the meanings of such possibilities. In the section above, I have established Johannesburg as the physical space in question and the greater social context in which the participants live. In this section, I will situate the women in cyberspace and discuss the impact that this has on their physical spaces and real lives.

Mobile phones are equipped with up-to-date technology that make them the ideal tools for navigating everyday life. One aspect of that technology is provided by app developers, who are constantly creating free and priced products that are complimentary to the needs and wants of people's occupations and lifestyles. As with most millennials, the young women in this study are inseparable from their phones and use various apps throughout their days. While virtual space is intangible, people exist in spaces such as social networks and physical space simultaneously:

> I wake up in the morning, and the first thing that I check is my phone. So bad! So, I'll check Twitter. I'll check Instagram. I'll check if I got any SMSs or messages or whatever… And then throughout the day, in-between my work, I'm on my phone. If I'm not in the office, I'm

> at court, then I'll check my phone even more because then work emails are coming through… I think the last thing I do at night is check my phone. (Olivia: 2018)
>
> In the morning, it's the first thing that I do. Before I even brush my teeth, I check all of my texts before I actually leave the bed. I normally go to WhatsApp, check all of my texts and Instagram, I'll go there as well to see if there's any notification… If I'm in a very intense conversation with somebody…I'll literally switch off everything, lock the house and still be on the phone, and fall asleep on the phone. (Sonto: 2018)
>
> This sounds so unhealthy. I usually will wake up in the morning and check my phone. I'll check WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube – which I'm really obsessed with now… I think I have a problem with silence so I am always listening to podcasts and watching videos. I tweet *a lot*… At night, I have a big problem letting my phone go. (Bohlale: 2018)

The fact that the women share the habit of reaching for their phones immediately after they wake up and putting them down right before they sleep each night indicates the importance of their devices. Their app usage is tailored to their lifestyles, with Olivia's work as a candidate attorney necessitating an email app and Bohlale using video and podcast apps to fill the silences while she studies. All of them have messaging and social networking apps to stay connected to people. Phones contain our "social memory" by storing contact details, important dates and alarms (Horst & Miller, 2006). This "culture of connectivity", according to van Dijck (2013), is responsible for changing cultural norms and values in society, especially with regards to sociality. Indeed, messaging and social networking apps facilitate our personal lives, social relationships and have been normalised as a substitute for in-person interactions. Considering the great amounts of time spent on our phones and online, it follows logically that our devices have an influence on how we conduct our lives.

People exist simultaneously in "phygital" spaces: in both physical and digital spaces and are intentional about how they conduct themselves in those spaces with some choosing to adjust parts of their online identities for a myriad of reasons. All of the women in this study use aliases across their social networks. Although Sonto easily posts photographs showing her face and provocatively highlighting her breasts and thighs, she avoids using her real name

because she does not want future employers to connect her to her social media activity. Sonto reflects on her online presence:

> I'm just quiet and chilled. Even on Instagram, I've had people who say: "You never even smile in your pictures and that's what you're doing right now – a resting bitch face." So, I think there are similarities. I have less than 5 pictures of my family. The rest are just me and my friends. I'm not letting people into my private life. I've actually never posted a picture of my boyfriend on WhatsApp or Instagram like: "Oh, love of my life!" I'll just take a picture like: "I'm on a date" but you won't see the person, you know? I'm very quiet. (Sonto: 2018)

Olivia ensures her privacy by being largely anonymous. Only the people who know her in real-life know that it is her while others interact with an account that does not show her real name or photographs. Olivia mentions curation, a by-product of being able to "friend" and "follow" certain people and engage in networks that reflect one's interests:

> The views that I share online are, for the most part, the views that I hold barring, for example, if I retweet something: it's not always an indication of how I feel. Sometimes it's just to put it out there. I also don't do that very often. I'm particular about who I follow and the content that I get onto my timeline. I would say for the most part, I'm the same person. (Olivia: 2018)

Effective curation and regular engagement with people lead to inclusion in online communities. As a sugar baby, Bohlale's interactions with other sugar babies led to her involvement in the community across social networks:

> It's very interesting but my online personality and my offline personality are the same. I think the medium changes but who I am and my personality doesn't change. I tried to develop a sugar baby persona by learning not to say certain things. Someone said, "look it's a job" but it's hard to interact with someone in an intimate and personal way and not express any of your views and not disagree with them. (Bohlale: 2018)

All of the women believe that they are the same person both online and offline, with some adjustments to their online presences to reflect their offline priorities. This matter is important because it shows that they engage in their virtual spaces as their authentic selves; through their real personalities and political beliefs. Their social media presences are also indicative of their involvement in online communities, an inevitable outcome of social network use. As aforementioned, Bohlale is involved in such online communities:

> There's a sugar baby Tumblr. It's the best thing ever. Chiedza [a sugar baby friend of hers] and I talk about it a lot. It's messy but it's also a community where you don't really feel

> judged. It's a really safe space. There's a lot of advice like: "If you're a student and you want to hustle, this is what you do and this is how you do it safely." I would also say I belong to the South African Black feminist community… Then there's the sex work community, it's been where my feminist thinking grew the most. It started out on Tumblr then it was also on Peach. It's more like, pro sex-work feminists and trans-feminists. I have learned a lot about the radical feminism movement in America… I'm interacting with Australian sex workers where it's legal and there's less social stigma. So, it's been interesting to envision what it would be like if I was in the same situation in SA. (Bohlale: 2016)

By relaying that her fellow sugar babies advise each other about how to "hustle", which is another AAVE phrase, Bohlale shows that young people in both local and global contexts are compelled to respond to the precarity of neoliberal society in extraordinary ways. Her involvement in online sugaring communities has been beneficial for her involvement in compensated relationships. Considering their taboo nature, having multiple networks of other sugar babies to communicate with virtually across platforms has been valuable both intellectually and practically, by informing her political views as well as her actions around safety. Olivia is part of an online feminist community as well:

> 'Badass Black Girls'. We're definitely a group of women who are supportive, smart, informed and caring. We care about each other and the world we live in. That's the community that I feel like I belong to on social media… I would say I appreciate and I credit Twitter for a lot of the reading I've done on power dynamics in heterosexual relationships, particularly when the guy is older and you're a younger woman… I didn't feel like there's anything wrong with me because I'm dating someone who is relatively older than me, who has a lot more money than me, and who spends it on me – and I require it, perhaps even demand it out of him. I never thought there was anything wrong with what I was doing, but it was nice to see that I wasn't completely alone. I just felt validated on Twitter. (Olivia: 2018)

Similar to Bohlale, Olivia considers herself to be part of a community of Black feminists and she credits her virtual connections with some of her intellectual growth. She enjoys the connections that she has established with like-minded women and feels affirmed to know that there are people who share her beliefs about romantic relationships. By stating that she no longer feels "alone", it further demonstrates that compensated relationships are frowned upon in society and open, affirming discussions about them are rare, necessitating alternative spaces. Another taboo in society is same sex relationships, which led Sonto to curate an

alternative space in her younger years to learn more about herself. Her journey of self-making benefits greatly from the curation of her online community:

> In tertiary, that's when I really started to explore the possibilities of me being bisexual. On Twitter, I started following lesbians so I can understand how they speak and how they are. I followed a few and there was this one girl from Pretoria. Her and I spoke for about a year before we met. I spoke to her on DM, went on BBM [BlackBerry Messenger] then after that we eventually met. She was the first girl that I had feelings for that I could acknowledge and fully process. On Twitter, I had seen how they interact with each other and seen how they talk to each other and in that, I found myself and I found some sort of comfort. (Sonto: 2016)

Through their experiences, the women in this study have established that they are attached to their mobile phones, they are the same people both online and offline, and that they rely on their trans-global online community for education and affirmation of their deepest convictions. I bring these three points together to show that they spend a lot of time in their virtual spaces, engaging authentically with lessons, observations and conversations among likeminded people that embolden them towards particular decisions in their own lives.

Social networks such as Twitter and Tumblr are "networked publics" which exist because of technology and as a substitute for young people's public meeting places (boyd, 2014: 9). According to Clark (2015: 12), "[d]igital feminists utilize social media to engage with a broader public, share information, foster a sense of community, mobilize constituents, and claim public space for feminist praxis". Virtual space is indeed a legitimate space of sociality and political discourse. The benefits of sharing posts on social media include allowing access to anyone with an internet connection, even those who simply want to observe without engaging, regardless of where they are situated, allowing for messages to spread far and wide. Daly (2017) states that sugar dating is stigmatised and women are unable to rely on friends and family for support within their relationships. Indeed, this is the case for compensated relationships which are highly controversial in South Africa. Virtual space provides a solution by being a sanctuary of feminist ideas that people can choose to use to challenge patriarchy in

their own personal contexts. My interlocutors, young women engaged in compensated relationships, are affirmed and enlightened by their online communities, regardless of the discouraging social taboos that exist, allowing them to feel inspired and empowered to exercise greater agency in their decision-making around their sexuality and romantic preferences.

Freedom online = agency offline

Virtual space makes it possible for people to do what they may not be able to in physical space. Regardless of how people present their identities online, they are still able to engage and benefit fully from the discussions held there. So far, I have shown how people's life decisions are influenced by their online activity. In this section, I will discuss how one's online presence plays a protective function and also results in the greater possibility for the exertion of agency offline. Sonto's experiences are an instance of this phenomena:

> I followed BlesserFinder on Twitter. After that, I inboxed them like: "I'm interested in a blesser. I'm 22 years old etc" … Then they ask you for your requirements. My first interaction was with this guy, he's a risk analyst and sent me links of work he's done including the Oscar Pistorius case. I said great and asked him: "Do you have a baby? Are you married?" He said no. So, he sends me a picture and it looks like he cropped a woman's belly from the picture. I told him: "I don't understand why you sent me a picture of you lying on someone's stomach when you blatantly said you're not married, you don't have a baby." So, I was like: no. We stopped talking. I actually never met him. The second guy that they sent me had three kids and he was married. So, I stopped completely. I don't really feel like it's something I want to be doing if it entails that I need to be part of someone's marriage and kids. So, I stopped completely with the whole BlesserFinder, Twitter thing. (Sonto: 2016)

> I just asked randomly, "Dude, can you just be honest with me and tell me what you want from me?" He said, you first. I told him: "I want to have someone who will take care of me, someone who can spoil me, someone that, if I call them and say: 'Hey, I'd like to buy this pair of shoes or do this type of activity with you – that you can be in a space to make it happen. I'd like someone I can connect with". (Sonto: 2016)

The interactions with BlesserFinder being online provides a buffer for Sonto to scrutinise potential partners from a safe distance. Her willingness to try out the match-making account and her frank discussion with a potential partner over text, both show her determination to be in the kind of relationship that she desires; with an unmarried man who willingly spends

money on her romantically. In both instances, conducting initial communication over text allows her to be honest about her expectations while sparing her from experiencing any negative reactions in person.

Olivia has mentioned that she feels validated by her online community because her fellow "badass black girls" reflect her views, such as this one:

> If we accept that men have more access to this economy and money is made available to them easier than it is to us, then he should pay for lunch, at least. You should pay for dinner and you should pay for my trip there. You can throw in a bottle of wine afterwards as well. I would love for us to be equal in the sense that we're both making the same amount of money and I'm making just as much as he's making but that's not the reality because I'm also a student. Even if I did start working, I wouldn't be making the same amount that he's making. So, if you make more money then you probably should be taking care of the other person. (Olivia: 2016)

Olivia's beliefs being affirmed by the people that she engages with online have led her to a point in which she is not only strongly expressing her views but also embodies her beliefs in the decisions that she makes for her romantic life. Olivia references gender income equality, a topical feminist issue, and equates monetary expenditure with care. In her perceptions of Johannesburg, consumption is a key element of the city's social life – something that she is able to do easily as an individual – and it is evident that she intends for her relationships to be able to meet that standard as well. As part of the online community that is 'sugar baby Tumblr' where people share anecdotes and advice, Bohlale is more explicit about the monetary expectations of her relationships:

> As blunt as I am on Twitter, that's just me. I'm like, "Look, I could be getting R2 500 per meet and you're out here trying to text me all night? No. I could be spending that time studying". That's the thing that I always make clear. The fact that I'm a student plays a major role in this whole dating thing because, if you're a guy and I'm going out with you, I'm sleeping over at your place instead of doing homework and studying, I'm texting you all night – all that time, you're literally stealing little bits of my future. You need to invest back into that and the only way you really can do that is monetarily. I make it really clear. I was actually quite surprised because most of the time, people who understand that whole investing monetarily into a relationship as a guy or investing when you want a woman's time and attention, it's usually older guys. (Bohlale: 2016)

Similar to how Olivia connects her belief in compensated relationships to a greater political issue, Bohlale phrases it as compensation – indicating that as being the primary way in which men can contribute to relationships. She identifies the time and effort spent in relationships as generating a loss with regards to the monetary value of her studies. Instead of simply engaging in relationships that are solely based on emotional feeling, she chooses to also be critical and active about having that value replaced.

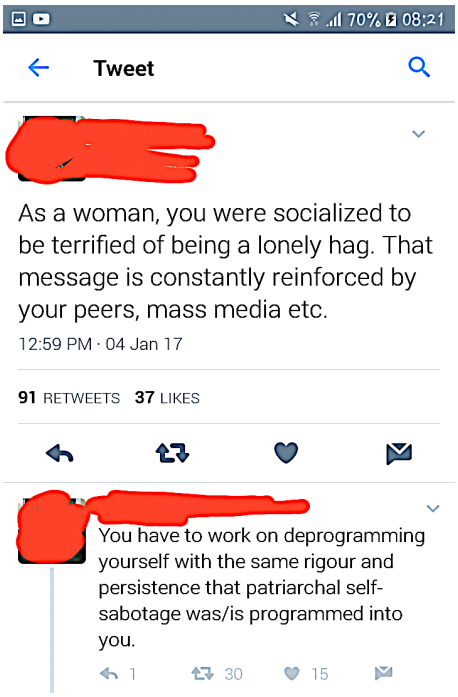
boyd (2014: 98) states that "[s]ocial media has become an outlet for many youth, an opportunity to reclaim some sense of agency and have some semblance of social power". Young women's involvement in online communities can be credited with emboldening them to demonstrate their agency through their deviant romantic choices, in a country where compensated relationships are highly stigmatised. Agency is contentious. According to Budgeon (2015), such relationships are a demonstration of "choice feminism", which allows women to exercise highly individualistic and neoliberal so-called freedoms to the detriment of the larger project of women's collective freedom. It is indeed crucial to acknowledge that decisions to date in overtly compensated ways are made within the context of socio-economic structures that constrain and even compel people to develop such strategies in order to navigate their realities. While their agency is limited, it is still noteworthy that they have been able to foster supportive, affirming communities online in lieu of being able to achieve that in their real lives. It is also still notable that being online offers a protective distance between people that is helpful in allowing young women to truly make decisions that are beneficial for themselves.

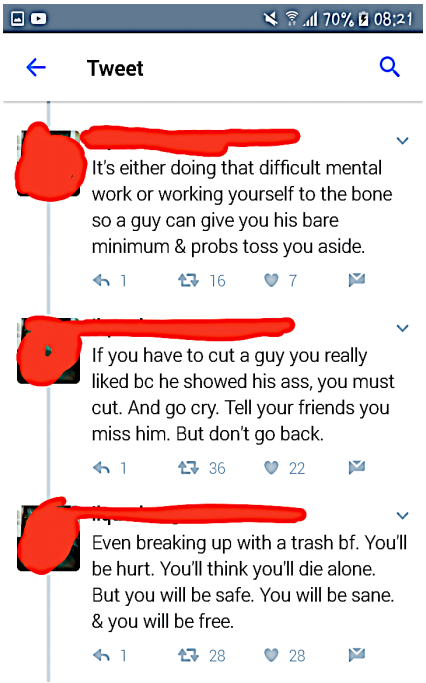
Chapter Three

Relationships

As with each night before bed, I set my phone alarm for the next morning and then tap onto Twitter for one last look at tweets about people's lives, current affairs and celebrity gossip. While my eyelids are slowly being overcome by sleep, I come across a thread by Bohlale:







(Bohlale: 2016)

I nod and “mm hm” while I read it, feeling a deep resonance with her tweets which fall under some of my favourite Twitter topics; when women give their advice on radical self-care in their relationships. I am exhausted but I make a mental note to return to it with fresher eyes the next day. By the time I do and decide to screenshot it for posterity, the amount of retweets and likes it has received lets me know that it has resonated with many more people too.

Bohlale’s thread is an accurate display of her strong views regarding romantic relationships, expressed with equal fervour in real life as she does online. It is evident that she has considered the gender dynamics of relationships for young women like herself and that her choice to be a sugar baby is reflected here as the rejection of occupying the disadvantaged position that she believes women are relegated to – often resulting in dependency, mental health issues and physical abuse. Her thread is an example of the workings of an online community: through reading and sharing her tweets, we have the opportunity to engage and critically reflect on ourselves as romantic subjects and perhaps eventually “deprogramme” ourselves, as she suggests. Notably, the insertion of screenshots into the text is made possible by these words no longer being searchable on Twitter due to the automated deletion service that Bohlale uses to maintain her anonymity.

I begin with this observation from Bohlale’s timeline because it illuminates the possibility for a young woman’s choice to date with compensation as a challenge to the normative, gendered power dynamics of romantic relationships. In short, it can be read as a feminist action. It also shows the role of the online community in enabling social media to be a space of sharing feminist ideas for the benefit of the wider network.

Sugar feminism is about the emancipation of young women as romantic subjects within neoliberal societies. It is an acknowledgement of gendered socio-economic power relations

and is in direct conversation with *provider love* and *provider masculinity* (Hunter 2010), which have asserted that the practice of love, in the South African context, has always involved the provision of material security and resources. Similar to the views articulated by "choice feminism" (Budgeon, 2015), I propose that the parallel of *provider masculinity* is not only a femininity where women have the options to provide for themselves and to also perform the normative gender roles of being provided for. What shifts it from mere femininity to sugar feminism, is the aim for women to be compensated materially for their subjugation – which has been identified by Marxist feminism as a significant way of addressing gender disparities and social reproduction (Daly, 2017). Concepts such as postfeminism (Gill, 2007) and neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014) do well by existing as a critique of the hyper-individualism of an idea such as sugar feminism. However, through the internet's networked publics and online communities as sources of information and support, *sugar feminism* – which the #GiveYourMoneyToWomen[8] movement is an example of – has the potential to be transformed from a personal politics, to a collective movement across spatial and temporal boundaries where women demand and receive compensation for their emotional, sexual, cognitive and social reproductive labour.

In the previous chapter, I establish that young women being emboldened online results in the deployment of some agency offline. I also establish that, in Johannesburg, compensated relationships are merely a continuation of people's strategies to navigate socio-economic inequalities and the pressures of consumerism in the city. This chapter expands on relationships: the young women as romantic subjects, the vulnerabilities that are endemic to compensated dating, the significance of money and their ideological relationship towards their fellow women. I argue that while millennial women's perception of money and their individual demands for it within their relationships benefit them individually, there is also the

[8] https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/giveyourmoneytowomen-the-end-game-of-capitalism

potential for their views to be transformed into a greater collective, social justice movement through online communities.

Romantic relationships

From speaking to the participants, it is evident that their experiences of their relationships have challenged their own initial assumptions, undoubtedly informed by society's negative framing of compensated dating. The first perception is that money is the highest priority, to the detriment of all other considerations. However, genuine feelings are also important to these young women:

> If you're irritating me, I can't pretend. That's the thing about being an SB, a lot of girls can pretend. They'll be like: "I hate this person, he makes me so angry, he's a Republican but he's rich so I have to put up with him.' And, I just can't. (Bohlale: 2016)

> That's also one thing you need to know about sugaring where you can't allow yourself to be low-balled, or low-ball yourself where you can see something is a bad deal but you're like: I really want the money let me just do it. I knew how to leave a deal and say look I can see this isn't gonna work out for me, it's gonna make me unhappy if I hold on to it so I'm willing to let go". (Bohlale: 2018)

> Even though I am someone who loves giving love, I do want some sort of depth, I do want some sort of connection and I cannot have anything that is based on nothing. Even though I could have three sexual partners, I would still want to have a connection with each one of them that is dynamic, deep. (Sonto: 2016)

> We definitely like each other and we care for each other. He is sometimes there for me emotionally, to the extent that a patriarchal man can be there for you. (Olivia: 2016)

The participants ensure that their feelings, well-being and genuine emotional connections are paramount in their relationships, whether they date one or multiple people at a time. For Bohlale, that remains true even though money is explicitly important to sugar babies. Her mention of a "Republican" further indicates her online community with North American sugar babies who provide a space for her to reflect on her decisions. Olivia's quip about men's lack of emotional labour reflects her gendered beliefs about men and women's contributions to relationships.

The second perception is that such relationships consist of men unilaterally spending their money, women actually do also spend on their partners:

> I bought him breakfast on his birthday. I buy him things. I've gotten him sneakers, gotten him books. So, I'll do that just because I would do that in any of my relationships. If I'm being honest, if someone were to ask: 'What do you do when the bill comes?" I don't do anything. I mean, just take care of it. You wanted to see me. You have the money anyway. I can't always do Kream in the middle of the month. When I can, I will but I don't always want to. I think if you've got the money then you should probably do all of that anyway. Our relationship should be a reflection of where we're at in life. (Olivia: 2016)

> There are times when I randomly do things for him. I surprised him with a picnic because his birthday had recently passed. We had champagne and he'd been saying that he wanted strawberries so we had that in the champagne. (Sonto: 2016)

> I mean, this guy, there was a point where there was a backlog in his accounts. He was supposed to work with SAA but they postponed it to a month later. So, I was like: "Dude what do you need?" He said he needs petrol money and other things. Immediately when my money from work came in, I sent him money. That's something people don't understand, that this girl can actually still send this guy money. She can still have an actual job at H&M. She can be studying for her degree in marketing management. This can be an actual well-rounded human being but because of this one, particular thing – you feel that it should take away from all of that. (Sonto: 2016)

Both Olivia and Sonto engage reciprocally in their respective relationships, although Olivia maintains her belief that her partner's social position means that he should be the sole financial benefactor. The third perception about money is that the women are spontaneously indulged while the participants in this study show that, just like with any expectation in a relationship, receiving money requires communication:

> I was saying to him [Siyabonga] that people assume that when you're with an older guy, he's just throwing money at you and all the things he's getting you, is all voluntary and you don't have to ask for it and you kind of wake up one morning and there's money in your bank account or he's like: "Let's go off to Cape Town." It's not all like that; I have to ask him for money if I want it. (Olivia: 2016)

> You have to go on dates and speak. You have to, literally. It's a very awkward conversation to have with someone about allowances, at the beginning and learning how to demand certain things, like: "This is how I'm working, I have school so you can't expect me to be seeing you in the middle of the week and this is how much I want and this is what I expect. I'm not doing this or that". (Bohlale: 2016)

> It's not just a conversation of: send me money. He also has some sort of discipline. He also tells me: "Dude, you can't tell me that you want money now and you want a grand. No, that

> won't work." It's not just a thing of: I'm with this pretty girl therefore she can just dictate my life. No, it's nothing like that. There is some sort of respect and consensus and understanding that goes into it. (Sonto: 2016)

The participants are engaged in different kinds of compensated relationships. For Bohlale, allowances are fixed amounts that are agreed upon before the commencement of the relationship whereas Sonto and Olivia may request varying amounts of money throughout the duration of their relationships. The final perception that people have is that money is a means of control over the woman, as shown by Bohlale and Olivia's reflections:

> Are you fun at 40? I don't know, but he is. He's a lot of fun and interesting and very charming. He's not at all controlling or a dictator. That's another thing that I thought about these relationships. I also thought, because men are just fucked up anyway, that he could be somewhat controlling and maybe even a little abusive? Someone who will tell you what to wear and where to go and where he would want you to go, like you can't go here unless I'm with you or why you wearing that. (Olivia: 2016)

> I'm really strict on the consent thing and this is why I think I lose out on a lot of guys – because people think that the "exchange" takes away the consent. "So if I give you R3 000, I can do whatever I want to you for the weekend?" No, that's not the deal. So, I'm really clear about that. If it seems like the person isn't grasping what I'm saying or I sense the entitlement then I'm like: "You know what? I appreciate that we've gotten this far in our conversation but I don't think you're the guy for me and it's not gonna work". (Bohlale: 2016)

It is a commonly held view that as women consent to compensated relationships, they also consent to being treated poorly because the relationship being regarded as "transactional" objectifies the woman and diminishes her agency. Both women are cognisant that they are especially susceptible to violence and it is an important consideration that I elaborate upon later in the dissertation.

Dating, as the initial stage of establishing a romantic relationship, is facilitated by four main factors: a means of communication, people who can exercise autonomy, money and, a society that fosters the visibility of heterosexual couples in public places (Delaney, 2011: 157). Additionally, "…everything is…expensive, and essentials, like rent, are unaffordable without a full-time salary. With so little time to…explore relationships, people now turn to the many dating services…on the internet" (Delaney, 2011: 159). On one hand, Delaney importantly emphasises the essentiality of money in fostering functional romantic relationships of any

kind. On the other hand, the participants' realities in relation to their assumptions show how money is at the root of the misperceptions about compensated relationships. I bring these two points together to show that the expectation for the expenditure of money in a relationship is not extraordinary and that closer looks at compensated relationships reveal more nuance than what is readily accepted by society. Furthermore, at first glance, Delaney states that people resort to digital matchmaking due to being so consumed with making a living. However, this point also gestures towards the larger argument that I make in this dissertation; women who choose to date with compensation are strategically incorporating their relationships into their methods of navigating neoliberal life.

Vulnerabilities

The prevalence of femicide, gender-based and intimate partner violence in South Africa indicates that women live with the constant possibility of violence in public and private spheres. Of the sexual assault cases that are reported, 68, 5% of the victims are women (Statistics SA, 2018c) and every four hours, a woman is murdered by her intimate partner; defined as "current or ex-husband or boyfriend, same-sex partner or a rejected would-be lover" (Africa Check, 2017). As shown by Sandile Mantsoe's murder of Karabo Mokoena[9] and Oscar Pistorius' murder of Reeva Steenkamp[10], it is clear that romantic relationships can be a dangerous space for South African women. I choose to omit the vulnerability to STIs because it is addressed within the discussion of violence and agency that follows.

At the end of the previous section, Olivia remarks that she was initially surprised to realise that her partner is not abusive because he is older and gives her money. Money can indeed be used as a mechanism of control and a manner of objectification. Related to the issue of

[9] https://ewn.co.za/2018/05/03/sandile-mantsoe-sentenced-to-32-years-for-karabo-mokoena-s-murder
[10] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42107701

agency, I am also interested in the vulnerabilities that are undeniably present in compensated relationships, where the power disparities leave women susceptible to overt exploitation. While the participants have not experienced any physical violence as a result of their specific relationship choices, they are keenly aware of the dangers that surround them:

> I'm not doubting that these kinds of relationships can be unhealthy or abusive. I think any time you're with a heterosexual man, you need to be prepared and you can expect shit to go left. I even say to my boyfriend all the time: "If you started hitting me one day, I wouldn't be surprised. Although I think you're great and we have great conversations and we like each other, if you just turned on me one day, I wouldn't be surprised". (Olivia: 2016)

> I've never been involved in a really scary situation but at the beginning of the year, a guy that I met, he stayed at like something-spoort Dam [Hartbeespoort Dam] in Pretoria and it's really isolated. He made a joke that I was furious with him about and I wanted him to take me home. He made a joke like: "You know I could kill you and no one would know?" and I was like: what the fuck?! And we didn't see each other after that. He was a very suspect character to me to begin with because…he had never married and he's in his 40's, which usually makes you a sociopath, but this time I didn't take the warning. (Bohlale: 2018)

> Him [another short-term partner] and I got into a fight because his friends were sleeping over and I wanted to spend time with him. He took out his gun that he had in his apartment and I was like: "You know what? I'm gonna leave". But he didn't actually get physical with me, but I feel like someone taking out a gun on you is like enough for you. You need to *leave*. (Sonto: 2018)

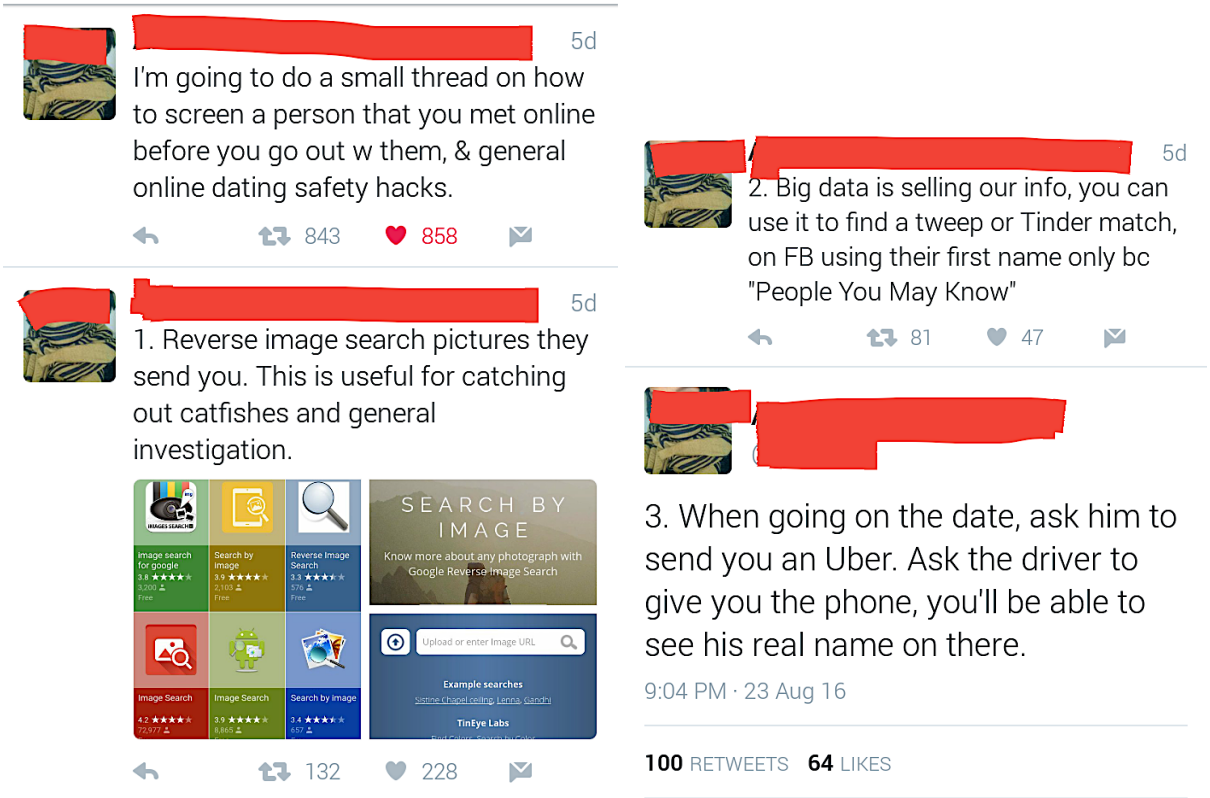
Bohlale's comment about sociopathy reveals her suspicion about older, heterosexual men who do not have families as indicative of a problematic inability to form lasting social connections. Her and Sonto having their respective safety threatened verbally and symbolically, and even both Bohlale and Olivia's resignation to the inevitability of male violence demonstrate the participants' reactions to living through South Africa's gender-based violence crisis. For each woman, there exists a fear and an anxiety that any moment of conflict with a man could end fatally. Therefore, it is common for mobile phones to double as tools of communication and safety. For her first date with Siyabonga, Olivia ensured that she alerted her friends:

> When we eventually went out for lunch…he picked me up on campus. I was a little nervous so I let everyone know where I was going. I was texting as he was driving and I let them know where we were going. (Olivia: 2016)

Similar to Olivia, Sonto also texts critical information to her loved ones, especially because she dates multiple people. She reveals that she was frightened after the gun incident and has since modified her practices in the following ways:

> Sending registration numbers, getting the person's last name before we actually meet but making it something that's very casual, like: "Oh, you have such a cool name. What's your surname?" If they had their profile picture then I'd also send their picture…and maybe even possibly the current location that I'm in, like where the Uber is going to drop me and send the pin each time. If we're at a restaurant and maybe we land up at his place, then that as well. I always try – wherever I'm going – and have some money for an Uber, just in case I feel very uncomfortable. I'm like: "No, I'm just gonna go to the bathroom" and then just open the door and bounce. (Sonto, 2018)

In addition to both Olivia and Sonto showing that mobile phones are valuable assets, Sonto also mentions the importance of money as a safety measure, which will be elaborated upon later in this dissertation. Bohlale's experiences as a sugar baby have led to some significant differences in how she uses her phone, as shown by her viral Twitter thread:





(Bohlale: 2016)

This great engagement that this thread has garnered from her online community, as shown by the retweets and likes, is evidence that there is a great demand for information about safely dating online and that women strongly yearn to be able to protect themselves from male violence in general. Her suggestions are exceptional because these are experiential lessons

from being a sugar baby, with her going beyond the commonly known tactic of vetting strangers through Google and social media. Her knowledge is valuable because it is not readily accessible anywhere.

The *female fear factory* is a useful way to think about the symbolic and actual violence that women encounter individually and collectively, especially when opting to engage in unconventional sexual and relationship forms:

> …its exaggerated performance in front of an audience in terms that are immediately understood. It is spectacular in its reliance on visible, audible and other recognisable cues to transmit fear and control. Performed regularly in public spaces and mediated forms, it is both mythologised, sometimes through a language of respectability and other times through shame…. Under capitalism work is codified as respectability… Those who seek to take the factory apart, want to determine compensation or want to own their labour are demonised… The threat of rape is an effective way to remind women that they are not safe and that their bodies are not entirely theirs. (Gqola, 2015: 78 - 79)

I suggest that while the press coverage and discourse dedicated to South Africa's violence is necessary, it also contributes to the *female fear factory* and the constant knowledge that women are surrounded by danger in public and in private. In the second part of the statement, Gqola gestures towards practices such as sex work and compensated relationships in which women reject respectability in the pursuit of gaining direct compensation or forming romantic partnerships in explicitly strategic ways.

The *female fear factory* is shown at work, firstly, in the experiences that the participants share where threats of violence are wielded to subdue and control them, and, secondly, in the events and experiences that fuel the public perceptions about these relationships. It has become a norm for women to contemplate the worst outcomes for their interactions with men and to establish strategies to alleviate their fears of becoming statistics of grave violence themselves. While women who engage in compensated relationships are exercising their agency, it is important to highlight the structural context of femicide and male violence that frames their

daily realities. Mobile phones are a significant intervention, with many women imagining them as "weapons of self-defence" (Cumiskey & Brewster, 2012). Indeed, women have thoroughly incorporated their phones as tools of safety in their lives. Considering that compensated relationships are not positively encouraged in society, it is clear that the online communities have the potential to foster a greater sense of safety and strategy-sharing among women involved therein, as also shown in the previous chapter.

Money

Compensated relationships both conform and differ significantly from outsider's perceptions about them, to the extent of even challenging the assumptions of the people who engage in them. One thing that remains constant, however, is the explicit expectation and act of receiving money as the central characteristic of the relationship. In the previous section, it is revealed how both structural and individual circumstances shape the vulnerabilities that women encounter – with money symbolising power disparities that could potentially endanger them further. However, the *meaning* of money in their lives as citizens of Johannesburg is why they persist in dating in the ways that they do.

> There's nothing wrong with making calculated decisions in your dating life. The same way I would decide, well, I'm going to Wits because it's a prestigious university and being in Joburg will give me access to certain opportunities. There's nothing wrong with dating strategically and deciding: I feel like because I'm a student and I'm broke it wouldn't make sense for me to date another broke student. (Bohlale: 2018)

> I never want to meet someone with no money. I don't like that. I really love exploring places and at the same time, I don't overdo anything and I know my limits. With this Mozambican guy, I know past a certain point, he cannot give me money because he has businesses to think of. I can't just be there like: "I want ten grand". Who can give me ten grand? I always try make it clear to whoever I meet, whether it's a Tinder guy or even my friends – I tell them, guys, this is how much I have for the night, I can't afford an Uber home. Then, if they are able to, they'll make a plan. If not, then just stay home. (Sonto: 2016)

> The standard for men is so low. The things that we as women think are a big deal are just so ridiculous. Let's say I really needed money, and I asked the person I'm in a relationship with – regardless of the fact that I'm sleeping with him – this is the person that claims to care for me

> and I claim to care for as well. It shouldn't impress me if they send me the money. We're in a relationship, like, why would you not send me the money? (Olivia: 2016)

Although all of the women regard money differently with Bohlale wanting a partner to provide what she does not have, Sonto making it a non-negotiable for both her and her partners and Olivia's significant highlighting of it as a means of care – money is a practical necessity in people's day-to-day lives.

The centrality of money leads people to conflate compensated relationships with sex work. Bohlale makes a salient point regarding how people reduce sex work and, in that vein, their relationships to acts of desperation. Olivia reflects on her observation that some women will proclaim to be models or engaged in compensated relationships in order to hide their actual sex work:

> This is the one argument that I really despise. They say that women are driven into sex work because they don't have money but everyone is driven into every kind of work because they don't have money, especially in South Africa. If you're going to whine about sex workers then you need to complain about the farmers because there is so much exploitation in agriculture and you eat that food every day, you use those services but you don't blink about it. I mean, mining in this country? (Bohlale: 2016)

> I think that it's a direct response to how we treat sex workers. Social media has made some of these things more accessible to us, but not necessarily acceptable. So I don't think that people are okay with young women saying "Listen, this is what I do. I sleep with men for money, particularly for money". But I think that it's just a consequence of the world we live in. As long as it's consensual, of course, and they're doing what they want to be doing, then it's fine. (Olivia 2018)

Bohlale's personal politics are in solidarity with sex-workers, although she does draw a distinction between sex work and sugaring. Her recognition of how everyone in society is compelled to participate in the economy using their body is critical because it reveals that the vilifying of sex work and, by extension, compensated relationships is rooted in the gendered idea of a pure, sacrificial and ever-nurturing archetype of femininity. The figure of the sex worker, sugar baby or girlfriend who explicitly expects to be compensated for intimate labour

disrupts that convention and it is for this reason, as Olivia shows, that women also choose to conceal their identities online and their romantic decisions from other people.

It is necessary to reiterate Hunter's argument that *provider love* is an everyday and mundane occurrence. From marriages to compensated relationships, all romantic relationships that exist in a neoliberal society involve materiality (Hunter, 2010). With Johannesburg being a space that is driven by conspicuous consumption while the majority struggle to access employment, education and basic state services, it is clear how compensated relationships become an attractive lifestyle choice for young women who want to live pleasurably and maintain a good standard of living in the bustling metropolis.

Other women

Compensated relationships have not been portrayed positively within academic scholarship or media. Which is to say that although some women are compelled into them by extenuating circumstances, the discourse has largely been discouraging of the practice. However, it is evident that women still choose to centre money in their romantic relationships, regardless of public perceptions and the associated dangers. In this study, each interlocutor has identified herself as a feminist. They all share the fundamental belief that women own their bodies and their right to self-determine must be protected, along with their right to live freely from oppression. Considering the daily violence that South African women navigate and the potential endangerment that accompanies compensated dating – I am interested in how the interlocutors regard women who also date with compensation, outside of their own individual pleasures and choices.

Earlier, the interlocutors reflect about how experiencing their individual relationships have challenged the assumptions that they once held about compensated dating. One of the reasons

for the kinds of assumptions that exist, is due to the media and academia constantly producing an essential subject, as noted by Olivia and Sonto:

> I was recently having dinner with friends from high school and they were like: "What is this blesser/ blessee thing?" And when I started to explain it, some of them were honest and they were like: "Well, that kinda just sounds like my mom and dad's marriage". But because they're white...it's acceptable because I guess white women are held to a higher standard. So, when a white woman says she wants a man who's got money, who's established – it's not as controversial as when a black girl is like: "Well, I want the same thing. (Olivia: 2016)

> When you go out on a date and you say it out in public that the guy paid, now you seem like you're some kind of a hoe. Only now when you guys highlight it, you highlight a specific girl. The girl who probably dropped out of school, wears Brazilians [wigs] January to December, isn't really in touch with herself and has a lack of self-esteem therefore she uses the money she gets from guys to validate herself. I just feel like it's one type of girl that they keep highlighting. I'm like: "No, that's not me". (Sonto: 2016)

According to the reflections of Olivia's white female friends, they have been socialised to regard strategic dating as a normal part of choosing suitable partners with whom to build families. Olivia even disclosed to me that this conversation became one of her initial affirmations in her decision to date a moneyed man. Sonto provides a contrast to the wealthy white women portrayed in Olivia's account. She details the essential subject as a young, black woman with low career prospects, a zeal for men's money and conspicuous consumption. She has also repeatedly shared with me that her offense with this portrayal motivated her to work with me; to contribute to the complexities of how young women who prioritise money in their relationships are represented. Both observations reveal a racialised discrepancy in the absence of similar investigations into the romantic lives of young, white women in society amidst the vast interest in the sex lives of black women. Notably, scholars who have written about sugar dating in the global north among young, mainly white women do not include *any* mention of condoms while also rarely mentioning sexually transmitted infections and diseases (see: Zimmerman, 2015; Nayar, 2016; Daly, 2017).

While the interlocutors engage in compensated relationships for their own individual reasons, they are also able to reflect on the greater implications for women as a whole. Through

interrogating essentialist media representations of compensated dating and engaging in their informative online communities, the interlocutors are constantly interrogating their own socialisations around romance and ensuring that they benefit maximally from their relationships:

> I think more radical feminists have been the ones to push it and say look: "Men are in relationships for their own interests and you need to start doing the same", especially as a black woman because usually we are conditioned to love other people for their own sake but I've realised…you can still love people but have the relationship boundaries you want, have the sexual boundaries that you want and just do things on your own terms. (Bohlale: 2018)

> I remember a time when I thought…if you were raised in a particular way in a particular community, then naturally you will attract someone who will continue that. It was sort of classist and ridiculous. I think social media has changed my views. When it comes to money and class – I don't think that only a certain class of women deserve to be with men who have lots of money and want to spend it on them. I think all women should have that. (Olivia: 2018)

Olivia's statement that her past stance on people dating within their own socio-economic counterparts was classist relates to Bohlale's observation that black women – who are usually the poor women of society – are socialised to simply love the men in their lives, without question. Both accounts reveal that black women are ordinarily expected to be satisfied with their circumstances, therefore, it is subversive for this particular group to set explicit expectations around money in relationships. Olivia even states that all women *deserve* to be provided for by their partners while Bohlale also refers to feminist thought that encourages the recognition that men are calculating in whom they decide to pursue romantically and that women should also have their own standards. Notably, Bohlale and Sonto express their own aims as ideals that would contribute positively to the lives of other women:

> I strongly believe in Fuck You Money, I want to have at least enough income to sustain me for a few months…If I have Fuck You Money, it gives me independence; it gives me the ability to leave you whenever I want to. I think that's one thing that girls are getting woke to now – that money is power and money is independence. (Bohlale: 2016)

> Ideally, I would like them [women in compensated relationships] to be self-sufficient. It's great to have a partner who can provide for you. I think self-sufficiency is the best thing ever because you can't rely on another human being. If you've actually worked for your money and it comes from your partner or whatever, you put it into things that make sense. And even if he

> leaves, you're like: "It's cool. I used all of those allowances that you gave me. I bought a car. I got an apartment and even paid for it". (Sonto: 2018)

Bohlale and Sonto demonstrate the value of money beyond conspicuous consumption. Bohlale's phrase refers to the amount of money that one would need to have saved in the sudden case of a break up from their partner. Sonto elaborates by detailing that money creates security for women, allowing them to continue to live in the manner to which they had become accustomed with their former partners. The sentiment is that compensated relationships ought to be leveraged well so that the woman's material gains may continue to benefit her even if the partnership ends. In instances of intimate partner violence, women can readily access emergency transport, accommodation and healthcare, making it useful to have such money stored away.

It is necessary to consider how women who date with compensation locate themselves and their choices as members of society because women's involvement in a range of intimate relations with men including compensated relationships, sugar dating and sex work all have implications for greater political questions around women's liberation. Compensated relationships are often conflated with sex work by people who collapse the distinction between the former as engaged in the materiality of neoliberal romance and the latter as a means of employment. This is for a range of reasons, including the phenomenon of racialised and class disparities regarding which kinds of women's relationships are offered the dignity of being normalised and which women constantly have their romantic and sexual lives subjected to scrutiny.

Sugar feminism is the recognition that romantic relationships do not *only* have to exist for the formation of genuine emotional connections. It recognises that compensated relationships play the role of being a site of pleasure for young women and that through online communities, there is a potential for more women to learn about compensated relationships

directly from the women that are within them, and apply their strategies in their own lives. In the same way that mobile phone use can expose young women to dangerous predators, these devices can also be used as tools of safety. Similarly, *sugar feminism* acknowledges that compensated relationships can be a space of danger for women but they can also be used as a means for generating funds for purposes beyond leisure in order to adequately respond to situations of hardship, violence and displacement in the city. Beloso (2012: 66), in her work about sex work and feminism, argues that there exists "the fantasy of an imaginary outside to capitalism—the fantasy that some of us living under capitalism have ingeniously managed to finagle a way of not selling out". Neoliberal society necessitates that people cannot survive without finding whatever ways possible to extract the resources that are essential to life.

News headlines such as "Unemployment Lower, but Black Women, the Youth Remain the Most Vulnerable" (Mail & Guardian, 2018) and "Poverty and Politics ahead of the 2019 General Elections" (SABC News, 2019) reveal that young people and black women are the demographics that are disproportionately burdened by poverty. Therefore, *sugar feminism* demonstrates that compensated relationships, just like employment and education become resourceful ways to participate in city life both at the levels of conspicuous consumption and genuine survival. With more people engaging on the internet, South Africa's stagnant economy, and the femicide crisis continuing to influence people's lives, *sugar feminism* has the potential to become a thriving digital movement where young women are mobilised to challenge respectable femininity and, affirm each other's decisions to establish strategic ways of romantic engagement with men.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

The rising use of mobile phones and social media among young people presents opportunities for their romantic relationships to be more digitally-mediated and conducted in virtual spaces that impact their lives in ways that have recently begun to be studies. As public health officials grapple with the complexities of HIV and AIDS in society, the #blessed lifestyle has been identified as a new iteration in the phenomenon of younger women engaging in sexual relationships with older, moneyed men – a causal factor for new infections among that key population. By focusing on the lives of three young women in Johannesburg, this study is an attempt to contribute to the scholarship on romantic relationships in South Africa. This chapter will give an overview of the arguments and findings of previous chapters in relation to the significance of space and relationships in the compensated relationships of young women. The chapter concludes the dissertation.

Tamale (2011) notes that colonial representations of African people's sexualities have constructed a legacy in which knowledge production revolves around themes of illness, population growth and violence. The imperatives of medical research have necessitated a trajectory of scholarship which is focused on African people's sex lives in relation to HIV and AIDS, with little focus on love relationships. Even the scholarship on compensated relationships exists in response to public health interests. Conversely, these relationships are referred to as "sugar dating" in the global north and the studies on the subject focus on issues such as the young women's agency and the economy while omitting disease.

Four major perspectives have emerged in the studies of compensated relationships in South Africa. Firstly, scholars have nuanced young women's agency by the challenging the "vixen" or "victim" binary. Secondly, the relationships are not purely transactional because there is a

material and emotional mutuality in the relationships. Thirdly, *provider love* (Hunter, 2010) has been identified as the way that South African love has developed over the decades as first necessitated by the migrant labour system. Lastly, not all young women engaged in compensated relationships do so for the purposes of subsistence; some young women are in pursuit of conspicuous consumption. Overall, studies have gradually begun to venture into the meanings of current technologies for the intimate lives of young women who are navigating the socio-economic quagmire of city life on the African continent. My work contributes to that literature by focusing on the ways in which the mobile phone is instrumental in the experiences that shape young women's choices to prioritise compensation in their romantic relationships.

Spaces provide the contexts that shape young women's romantic choices. The structural underpinnings of the city and the virtual nature of social media are spaces that young women exist in simultaneously. Each one constantly affects the other and, in turn, affects how people react to the matters in their lives. Although women above consenting age have autonomy and are decisive in their intimate lives, their agency is also regulated by their spatial context and its associated systemic issues of race, gender and class. However, regardless of systemic factors, social media as a user-curated space provides opportunities for people to learn, share and engage in reflection that may not be possible in real life and thus, emboldens individuals to action. In the case of online communities where individuals form solidarities on the basis of controversial topics such as compensated relationships, individuals in the virtual space provide critical forms of support that are immediately inaccessible from family and friends.

As the most populated city in the country and the centre of commerce, Johannesburg is both burdened by great socio-economic inequality yet electrified by a palpable sense of individualism, competition and consumerism. Conspicuous consumption marks an individual

as successful and gives them access to a range of beautifying and fashionable objects. People use their mobile phones to document their lifestyles of consumption to share with wider audiences. In so doing desirable people, their relationships and their lifestyles create a point of reference for people who want to live similarly and contributes to the city being an aspirational space. In this way, virtual space and physical space influence one another: the matter of #blessers became a national talking point because of social media discussions of blessees' excessive consumption of luxury holidays, fashion brands and expensive wigs. For young, varsity-educated, middle-class, black women, compensated relationships are one of the range of ways in which they navigate neoliberal living in the city. Social media is replete with aesthetics that young women aspire to replicate and being in compensated relationships provides an opportunity to achieve that.

Virtual space has become an essential layer to the lives of young women engaging in compensated relationships. These relationships are not well received in society, making it challenging to seek counsel from people in real life. Online communities allow young women to conceal their identities and engage with like-minded people in the public-private domain that is social media in pursuit of information about the issues they encounter within their compensated relationships. Young women are a vulnerable population in South Africa and although their ability to exercise agency is constrained by capitalism, youth unemployment and a femicidal society – they are able to commune online and gain the tools to reflect on their lives and make decisions that are beneficial to themselves, regardless of their relationships being a taboo topic in public spaces.

Relationships are important in understanding young women's romantic choices around money and the associated vulnerabilities. Relationships are crucial because humans are social beings and romantic relationships are associations that are founded on attraction and mutual benefit

that people establish outside of familial and friendship bonds. However, it is important to note that it is the romantic pairing between younger, black women and older, moneyed men that has been isolated and classified as problematic by academia and media for reasons ranging from public health concerns to sensationalism, respectively.

The controversy about such relationships arises from young women's emphasis on the importance of receiving money from their partners. This continually leads to stigma and comparisons to sex work, regardless of the concept of *provider love* (Hunter, 2010) having chronicled such expectations as not being extraordinary in the South African context. Each of the interlocutors are from middle-class backgrounds and are engaged in different expressions of such relationships with Sonto dating multiple people, Olivia dating a single person and Bohlale being a sugar baby and dating multiple people. Their choices to be in compensated relationships are a result of wanting to engage in aspirational lifestyles and choosing to absorb their romantic lives into their repertoires of surviving and thriving in Johannesburg.

Relationships are also important for understanding young women in their societal context. From the very beginning of our interactions, the interlocutors have all recognised that their romantic choices are inextricably connected to the greater context of gender relations in the country. Moreover, the young women have identified these relationships as being instrumental not only for pleasure but as a way of generating the resources that would be necessary if ever they were in a financial predicament or if their partners became violent. Currently, it is evident that social relations with men are risky for all women in South Africa due to gender-based and intimate partner violence. In compensated relationships, that risk is exacerbated by money being an object of exchange and the false perception that men giving women money diminishes women's agency.

The *female fear factory* (Gqola, 2015) refers to the public conversation and portrayal of gender-based violence. Gqola asserts that danger is amplified for women who deviate from the norms of feminine respectability and seek compensation for their labour in relationships. In this way, compensated relationships produce imagined and actual threats to women's safety. Considering the taboos around the admission that individuals are engaged in these relationships, mobile phones and online communities play a significant role in strategy-sharing around safety – showing the significance of space and relationships. This creates the potential for a digital movement in which young women share strategies and information for navigating compensated relationships as a way to benefit maximally from their precarious social position. This digital movement is *sugar feminism,* as expressed at the level of the individual and the collective.

This dissertation asserts that social media use is reconfiguring the meanings of love and intimacy for young women in Johannesburg. The physical space that they inhabit affects their views and actions around their relationships. Through increasing engagements in virtual spaces, young women are recognising their individual choices to date with compensation as a response to the wider social vulnerability collectively experienced by women in private and public spaces all over the country. In their pursuit of relationships, the virtual space provides safer ways to commence their initial interactions with men although the dangers of individual physical encounters still remain. In response to that danger, young women use their individual romantic relationships to supplement their lifestyles monetarily in the case of personal endangerment as well as for pleasure.

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