

The Rise and Normalisation of Blessee/Blesser Relationships in South Africa: A Post-Colonial Feminist Analysis

Ruvimbo Zawu ^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

Since 2015, young urban black women in South Africa have been posting images of luxury items on social media platforms such as Instagram. These women claim that their luxury items are gifts from their 'blessers'/wealthy men in exchange for sex and companionship. This has led to the rise of the 'blesser culture' on social media and the prevalence of transactional sex for upward mobility and status. This article provides a post-colonial feminist evaluation of 10 young black women from northern Johannesburg. It examines their motivations for engaging in these relationships. It draws from Stoebenau *et al.*'s (2016) theoretical framework that describes the three paradigms of transactional sex, 'sex for basic needs,' 'sex for upward mobility and status' and 'sex and material expressions of love' as a continuum of deprivation, agency, and instrumentality. This analysis challenges research frameworks that limit transactional sex to matters of HIV/AIDS transmission, and the framing of women as powerless victims of men. The article reveals these women seek blessers based on relative deprivation, to access a more high-status lifestyle and upward social mobility and from a position of agency. They view blesser relationships as a mutually beneficial exchange that allows them to give sex to access the commodities of modernity.

Keywords: sex work, transactional sex, post-colonial feminism, blessee, blesser

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, marriage in various societies in Africa was regarded as a marker for adulthood. This understanding of marriage is now shifting, a shift in which women are agents. Today, modern women in African societies¹ in their quest for self-fulfilment and economic independence tend to choose well-established married men, also called 'sugar daddies', 'business' or 'donor' for material benefits while maintaining their social independence. This differs from Western norms where romantic love and sexual desire are viewed as the 'proper' motive for engaging in sex, while deliberate material-orientated uses of sex and sexuality are viewed as taboo (Helle-Valle, 2004).

In South Africa, women are increasingly opting not to marry, and function instead rather in the independent role of an extra-marital girlfriend (Arnfred, 2004; Helle-Valle, 2004). This decline in marriage can be traced back to South Africa's 19th-century mineral revolution which dismantled traditional patriarchal systems whereby the head of the homestead sustained the institution of marriage by assigning livestock for their son's bride's wealth expenses (Hunter, 2010: 107). Consequently, new sexual norms which normalised sexual relations outside of marriage emerged in both rural and urban areas. By the start of the 20th century, the rural economy had weakened, and the market economy overtook the homestead patriarch as the custodian of masculinity through marriage (Hunter, 2010: 107). In addition, South Africa's entrance into the world economy and the culture and processes of globalisation normalised sexual relations outside of marriage governed by the exchange of gifts to demonstrate love and commitment (Molokomme, 1991 and Jochelson, 2001: 55).

For young women, neoliberal globalisation created jobs and educational opportunities and provided them the means to decide whether to marry or postpone marriage plans indefinitely while still benefiting from material gifts

¹ The use of terms such as 'African women/woman', 'Black women/woman' and 'women/woman' in this study is not a universal representation of all women. Therefore, the argument outlined in this article about black women and women in general must be read within the boundaries of data generated for this research.

from men (Hunter, 2010: 107). Today, these casual sexual relationships comprising the exchange of economically valuable commodities from men to women are known as ‘blessee/blesser’ relationships. These transactional relationships occur between young, educated women who already have necessities such as accommodation and food and older married men who are financing the lifestyle of multiple young women at the same time. This type of sexual exchange has led to the rise of the ‘blesser culture’ on social media and highlights the prevalence of transactional sex for upward mobility and status amongst young urban black women in South Africa and reveals different reasons for young black women’s involvement in transactional sexual exchanges beyond the longstanding transactional ‘sex for survival’ discourses (Checkpoint Blessed Part 1, 2016).

This article focuses on blessee/blesser relationships in northern Johannesburg, South Africa. It argues that blessee/blesser relationships are not always motivated by absolute deprivation or sought out by impoverished young women at risk of sexual mistreatment by their older male counterparts. Transactional relationships can also be pursued to acquire a high-status lifestyle, gain some upward social mobility as well as for fun and entertainment. Arguably, young women fashion themselves as blessees to satisfy their wants rather than needs. They seek luxury items such as designer clothes, expensive cars, and overseas trips which they regard as “needs” because they are central to their construction of a sophisticated lifestyle, status, and success associated with northern Johannesburg.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study combined Stoebenau *et al.*’s (2016) conceptual framework with post-colonial feminism to present the nature and intricacies of transactional sex and the drivers for its practice (Ranganathan *et al.*, 2017: 2). They argue that the three paradigms of transactional sex: sex for basic needs, sex for upward mobility and status, and sex and material expressions of love were seen instead as a continuum of agency, deprivation (absolute or relative), and instrumentality, and not as three discrete paradigms. Firstly, the continuum of deprivation depicts the level to which transactional sex is shaped by poverty (absolute deprivation) in comparison to economic disparity (relative deprivation). This continuum brings focus to the idea that transactional sex occurs throughout a variety of social and economic statuses while recognising that women in rural areas are not secluded from modern-day materiality (Wamoyi *et al.*, 2010). In the agency² continuum, the degree of power a woman has determines her role as either ‘victim’ or ‘agent’ in transactional sex. Therefore, a woman’s agency changes and mutates in different scenarios and between relationships, from excesses of powerful agent to powerless victim. In addition, a woman’s agency might fall anywhere along the continuum between these two poles at any given time. Consequently, even in the context of absolute deprivation women can still possess ‘thin agency’ in areas such as ‘partner selection’, ‘first timing of sex’ and ‘termination of relationship’ (Stoebenau *et al.*, 2016: 192).

The instrumentality continuum addresses the degree to which a relationship is driven by money or love. The level on which a relationship is determined by instrumentality may change because it is independent of a woman’s agency or the economic environment in which the relationship occurs. In this continuum, transactional sex occurs in the middle space of the continuum of instrumentality, such that the relationship varies from being driven by either monetary gain or love. However, the extent of both instrumentality and emotionality can differ from one relationship to another and over time. This theoretical outline of transactional sex captures their various motivations to seek transactional sex as well as the interplay and complexity of exchange relationships.

DEFINING TRANSACTIONAL SEX

Transactional sexual relationships are complex, ambiguous, and highly contested (Ranganathan *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, there is a tendency within social science to portray the categories of prostitution, sex work and transactional sex as having self-evident meanings (Ranganathan *et al.*, 2017: 2). This oversight has resulted in the conflation of transactional sexual relationships with sex work or prostitution and has led to conflicting meanings of the term ‘transactional sex.’ Strictly speaking, prostitution and sex work are not the same concepts. Prostitution is regarded as the gendered nature of the female condition under patriarchy, where male dominance is exerted through the medium of sexuality (Kesler, 2002: 19). This position stems from scholarly work by radical feminists such as Millet (1975), Barry (1995, 1979), Pateman (1988), MacKinnon (1987, 1990), and Dworkin (1987) who regard prostitution as violence against women, violence not only in the act of prostituting but also in the idea of ‘buying sex’ which is related to the system of heterosexuality and male power and signifies ‘the absolute embodiment of patriarchal male privilege’ (Kesler, 2002: 19). Therefore, prostitution is viewed as the ultimate

² For the purposes of this study ‘agency’ is viewed as a person’s capacity to enact deliberate choices to reach a specific end. However, while agency is enacted by the individual, it is also structured by the person’s socially shaped internality and is limited in the expression by economic and social conditions (Ranganathan *et al.*, 2017:3).

reduction of women to sexual objects that can be sold and bought, thus creating the basis of female subjugation (Jeffries, 1997: 2).

On the other hand, sex work results from agency and therefore permits women's decision-making power within capitalist systems (CGE, 2013). This liberal feminist view of sex work considers choice, women's power, the contradictions, and complexities present in analysing sex work, and the structuring roles of class, race, money, and culture (Scouler, 2004: 354). It critiques radical feminism's approach to sex work as entrenching images of sex workers as sexual subordinates, while sustaining views in the sex industry of dominant men and submissive women, instead of altering these views (Shrage, 1994: 134). Therefore, liberal feminists argue that, although sexuality and gender play a crucial role in determining roles in sex work, sex work should not be constrained to either sexuality or gender because doing so reduces women's characters to a single trait while ignoring the intersectional roles of class, race, money, and culture (Zatz, 1997: 279).

Contemporary scholars such as Kapur (2001) have also challenged radical feminists' understanding of sex work by rejecting the monolithic, victimised, and linear framing of third world women as 'repressed subjects' or 'injured bodies.' Post-colonial feminists such as Mohanty (1984) seek to dismantle the framing of black women as always financially and politically reliant on men, and the regressive stereotype of prostitution being the logical form of work for black women. For these scholars, rejecting the universalising of black women introduces new ways of understanding sex work which emphasise that sex work is not always forced, harmful, lacking consent from the sex worker, and does not gratify the sex worker (Overall, 1992: 717). Based on this distinction, this study defines transactional sex as a sexual relationship or act(s), outside of marriage or sex work, structured by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material benefit or status. While driven primarily by instrumental intentions, transactional relationships may also include emotional intimacy (Stoebenau *et al.*, 2016). This definition offers a more nuanced description of non-marital, non-commercial³ exchange relationships in Africa.

SOUTH AFRICA AND TRANSACTIONAL SEX

In South Africa, the practice of transactional sex and its association with high-risk behaviour has undergone various transformations that have been shaped by political and historical processes such as colonisation, apartheid, and globalisation in the post-apartheid era (Zembe *et al.*, 2013: 2). In the apartheid era, the migrant labour system changed the nature of sexual relationships by limiting black women's migration to urban areas and resulted in men being separated from their partners for longer durations (Hunter, 2003). This created an opportunity for the emergence of commercial sex in urban areas, destabilised marital ties and increased the presence of multiple concurrent sexual relationships and created gender inequalities linked to transactional sex (Jochelson, 2001: 55). However, during this period, premarital sexual relationships were not key drivers of sexual behaviour. Instead, girlfriends and boyfriends exchanged gifts and men understood male accomplishment as their capacity to save finances for the bride price (Zembe *et al.*, 2013: 2).

Nevertheless, apartheid laws gradually side-lined black Africans from significant economic contribution by racially and geographically establishing wealth inequalities and high rates of unemployment which reduced men's ability to afford the bride price/*lobola*⁴ (Hunter, 2003). In the post-apartheid era, the adoption of the neo-liberal Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) policies propelled South Africa into the world economy and the culture and processes of globalisation (Zembe *et al.*, 2013: 3). This resulted in an influx of foreign products and increased the consumption rates of South Africans. Furthermore, the transformation processes of globalisation moved black South Africans from socio-economic isolation and exposed them to commodities and a global lifestyle.

This increase in commodity/consumption culture occurred against the backdrop of the country's unique history of economic restrictions on black Africans because commodities were now afforded greater importance amongst black people (Zembe *et al.*, 2013: 3). However, in the post-apartheid era, historically established wealth inequalities and high rates of unemployment continue to limit black South African's access to global lifestyles. Therefore, men have resorted to other ways of showcasing masculine success through transactional sex.

³ Although exchange relationships have several similarities with sex work, young women who engage in transactional sex are not regarded as sex workers because neither party involved view the exchange as sex work. On the contrary, participants in these relationships view their partners as 'boyfriends' and 'girlfriends' as opposed to sex workers who identify their partners as 'clients' (Hunter, 2010).

⁴ The bridewealth system in Southern Africa is varied and cannot be read as identical. However, in many African communities *lobola* (the provision of livestock or money to the parents of a bride) also holds symbolic value in the way it is viewed as the transition into adulthood by both the bride and groom while sealing the exchange of a woman from one lineage to another (Ansel, 2001).

Recent studies on the characteristics of transactional sex in South Africa challenge notions that transactional sexual exchanges are primarily based on 'poverty-induced economic survival strategies' (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003: 216). According to a study by Chatterji *et al.* (2005), poverty is not the principal cause prompting young women to reciprocate money or gifts with sex. Most women who seek transactional sexual relationships do not consider themselves as victims, instead, they seek out these relationships to gain control and access material gifts in a manner that confronts and reproduces patriarchal systems (Hunter, 2003). Furthermore, studies conducted in urban and semi-urban areas identified 'sex for upward mobility and status' linked to modernity and aspirational lifestyles as the dominant reason young urban women seek transactional sex.

According to Hunter (2010) and Leclerc-Madlala (2008), the drop in formal marriage and an increase in temporary partnerships expressed by financial gifts has led to young women seeking and maintaining a relationship with one or multiple older men. This shift in transactional sexual relationships is influenced by global images of modernity reflected in how women now actively 'choose men' and maintain transactional relationships for consumption purposes (Hunter, 2003). Moreover, in urban areas young urban women seeking consumption-based relationships identify themselves as active decision-makers (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008: 28). For these women, attracting and maintaining sexual relations for consumption is an act of cleverness and assertiveness, and contributes to their self-perceptions of expressing their sexual freedoms.

In the peri-urban and urban South African location, media images of luxury and affluent lifestyles have become a vital influence in moulding young urban women's dreams, and goals. Consequently, young urban women form relationships with older men to attain globalised images of glamour by actively navigating their sexuality to acquire products that reflect high-social positions and lifestyles and to satisfy 'wants' as perhaps opposed to meeting 'needs.' For these women, being seen exiting from luxury vehicles or dressed in luxury clothing as well as owning a valued commodity is a status-boosting activity. Beyond the social benefits, young women claim that these relationships boost their self-esteem and self-confidence and assist them in the attainment of long-term ambitions and goals of social success.

Leclerc-Madlala (2003) argues further that, by engaging in transactional sex for material gain young urban women seek to attain 'new needs'- the commodities of modernity - to present themselves as being successful, sophisticated, and sexually appealing. These young urban women view the pressure to acquire luxury goods that reflect a modern lifestyle, normally understood as 'wants', as being similar to seeking basic needs such as shelter and food (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003: 224). This conceptualisation of 'needs' and 'wants' creates a continuum, whereby sexual exchange for subsistence, identified as 'needs', and sexual exchange for consumption, known as 'wants', are both expressed as 'needs.' Leclerc-Madlala (2003) describes this continuum using the concept of 'urban survival' whereby women seeking luxury items use the vocabulary of survival sex and locate their attempts to attain luxury goods in the context of exchanging sex based on survival.

Selikow and Mbulaheni (2013: 89) caution that, in this 'wants-needs' dichotomy, a 'need-want slippage' may occur when young women require an actual need which can diminish their agency. Lastly, in South Africa, men who can assist with the social mobility of young urban black women have acquired colloquial terms such as 'ministers', 'investors' (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008: 22), and most recently 'blessers.' It is also crucial to note that, in sexual exchanges for material gain, love and affection can be motivating factors for transactional sex. However, few studies have explored this paradigm in transactional sex.

POST-COLONIAL FEMINISM

The core aim of post-colonial feminism is to make visible the various socio-economic, political, and cultural experiences of postcolonial subjects (Young, 2001: 1-11). It examines how women are represented in colonial and postcolonial contexts while challenging long-standing assumptions about Third World women in both literature and society. It seeks to contribute to the production of knowledge within feminism, that is inclusive, representative, and accommodates voices of Third World subjects (Tickner, 2011: 607-628). Post-colonial feminism critiques Western feminism(s)⁵ depiction of African women as one-dimensional, homogeneously powerless, poor, and vulnerable. Regarding gender and sexuality, post-colonial feminism critiques Western feminism's dominance in feminist theory.⁶ According to post-colonial feminists, Western feminism fails to adequately represent the

⁵ Western Feminism(s) broadly divides into categories such as Liberal, Radical, Marxist and Socialist feminism (Friedman *et al.*, 1987: 3). It is not monolithic but speaks to the political and methodologies used. Therefore, a woman from the geographical Third World can be a Western feminist in orientation, in the same way, a European feminist can use a Third World feminist analytical lens (Mohanty, 2003: 502).

⁶ It is important to note that since the early 1990s most feminist theory has embraced Black and Queer feminist theory and perspectives via intersectional analysis.

experiences of black women because its arguments on women's oppressions focus primarily on the private sphere and heterosexuality.

Based on this understanding, Western feminists challenge patriarchy's regulation of women's sexualities, the constitution of sexual difference, and women's limited power over their bodies in matters of procreation and sexual pleasure (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Rubin, 1975; MacKinnon, 1987; Fraser and Bartky 1992). This analysis of sexualities limits gender disparities to women's sexualities and biology and how they have been legitimated by patriarchy. In doing so, it disregards the experiences of black women and leads to a representation of all women's bodies as objects of men's pleasure and whose drive has been subdued or sanctioned (Nfah-Abbenyi, 2005: 265).

For Mohanty (1984: 337) this assumption that all women face the same oppression constructs a view of African women as being repressed based on their gender. Therefore, Western feminism's assessment of gender and sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa results in a portrayal of African women as sexual victims of African men who are framed as inherently savage and violent. Post-colonial feminist scholars such as Mohanty (1984), Arnfred (2004), Helle-Valle (2004), Oyewùmí (2005) and Nfah-Abbenyi (2005) challenge this representation of women by advocating the systematic transcribing of black women's collective and individual histories to remove African women from the shadows of discussions about their own lives and sexuality (Nfah-Abbenyi, 2005: 268). For post-colonial feminists, this can be achieved by exploring the different contexts of women's subjective lives influenced by social, economic, cultural, and political circumstances while acknowledging the intersectionalities of class, race, as well as gender (Mohanty, 1984). Consequently, this study will utilise the work of these post-colonial feminists to analyse the rise and normalisation of the blessee/blesser phenomenon amongst young urban black women in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This qualitative study used non-random sampling, snowballing, and semi-structured in-depth interviews to gather the perceptions of 10 young urban black women who identify as blessees. Non-random sampling was used due to its emphasis on homogeneity and high level of detail consistent with the use of a smaller sample size (Padgett, 2008: 14) which allows the researcher to accurately explore characteristics of a population from a representative sample (Bless and Higson-Smith, 2000: 166). This study also relied on snowball sampling that is used to compare and contrast a phenomenon of interest within a homogenous sample while accommodating re-sampling to draw an appropriate sample until saturation occurs (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 88).

Most importantly, snowball sampling was used because it is a valuable approach for producing a sample of a populace or a group that is usually difficult to reach (Burnham *et al.*, 2008: 108), such as blessees. Therefore, through sampling young urban black women recommended other young urban black women in similar circumstances. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to seek 'deep' information about an individual's lived experiences, ideologies, decisions, cultural knowledge, and perspectives (Johnson, 2011: 2). This allowed for the retrieval of focused information on specific issues from the respondent and the flexibility of semi-structured in-depth interviews permitted the researcher to elicit opinions of young urban black women's subjective world and pursue new ideas and issues that emerged during the interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2011: 4).

The women interviewed in this research were between the ages of 20-30 years old from northern Johannesburg (Sandton), a demarcated suburb in South Africa. Out of all the 10 participants in this research, two of the young women admitted to having primary partners outside of their blesser relationships. All participants displayed adequate levels of education, as all participants had a tertiary education or were in the process of completing their university studies. Most of these young women were also employed either part-time or full-time, and those who were not employed were either completing their tertiary studies or job-seeking graduates.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in one seating and in a location and time chosen by the participant. The researcher alone administered the interviews, using a research guide to navigate the direction of the interview. All interview questions were prepared beforehand and were asked in an open-ended manner. The researcher accordingly went with the feel of the participants such that some of the questions were not posed chronologically and were restated when necessary. The interviewer also jotted down notes throughout the interview sessions and, after finalising all interviews, the semi-structured in-depth interviews were digitally recorded to ensure the reliability of the data generated.

Thereafter, a record of the interviews was finalised through transcripts and the transcribing of interviews occurred in a private location to protect the identity of participants.

The data generated from this study was analysed as a continuum of deprivation, agency, and instrumentality, according to Stoebenau *et al.*'s (2016) conceptual framework which argues that motivations for engaging in transactional sex should be analysed as a continuum rather than as three discrete paradigms.

Limitations

The data generated in this research and its findings are class-specific and limited to the perceptions and accounts provided by the 10 young urban black women in this study. Therefore, generalisations and conclusions cannot be provided on a macro scale because black women are not a monolithic group with shared lived experiences.

FINDINGS SYNTHESISING BLESSEE/BLESSER RELATIONSHIPS: A CONTINUUM OF DEPRIVATION, AGENCY AND INSTRUMENTALITY

A post-colonial feminist analysis of blessee/blesser relationships amongst 10 young urban black women in northern Johannesburg using Stoebenau *et al.*'s (2016) conceptual framework was synthesised and categorised into a continuum of deprivation, agency, and instrumentality to illustrate the nuance and complexities of blessee/blesser relationships in South Africa. This analysis revealed that transactional relationships are not always motivated by absolute deprivation or sought out by impoverished young women at risk of sexual mistreatment by their older male counterparts. On the contrary, young women engaging in blesser relationships seek out blessers due to relative deprivation. A 23-year-old blessee expressed that:

Let's be very clear, most blessers will approach you and not the other way around. My blesser approached me and offered me a job. I am self-employed, I do ok for myself, so I rejected his offer. He then pursued a [romantic] relationship with me for about six months but it was only after I went on a date with him, I realised he is rich, and I decided to go for it.

These women pursue blessers to acquire a high-status lifestyle, upward social mobility as well as for fun and entertainment. This was demonstrated through young women's ability to meet their basic needs such as shelter and food. Consequently, young women fashion themselves as blessees to satisfy their wants rather than needs. They seek luxury items such as designer clothes, expensive cars, and overseas trips which they regard as 'needs' because they are central to their construction of a sophisticated lifestyle, status, and success associated with northern Johannesburg. A 26-year-old blessee stated:

[before the relationship] I was only able to take care of my basic 'needs'. OMG! my life was basic, I couldn't buy designer clothes, or nice things you know. I could just do the basic things, make my car payments, and buy groceries. But since I started dating this man, now I can have the finer things in life, Brazilian weaves and good quality clothes.

Young women view blesser relationships as a mutually beneficial exchange that allows them to give sex and access commodities of modernity in a gendered and racialised South Africa. They argued that seeking out blessers is motivated by societal pressures to acquire luxury consumer goods and the 'need' to attain markers of modernity. This is because the desire to acquire symbols of success driven by the increased visibility of consumer goods occurs in an environment of growing economic inequalities in South Africa that marginalises black women. Therefore, young women seek out blessers for material gain and exchange sex for financial gifts because they regard it as the 'easiest' way for them to gain luxury items and achieve their desired social status. This was expressed by young women who stated that:

All blessers want someone young, fun and entertaining, so that they can live out their 'Trophy fantasy' [as one blessee puts it]. They have reality at home, so they want women who meet their fantasies. Such women want luxury items, they want to be taken on overseas trips. These women are fun and outgoing and keep these men young. Blessers don't want women who remind them of their wives or ordinary women. Blessers want to give you a luxury lifestyle and in exchange you must give them something in return, and sex is the easiest thing to give.

Furthermore, these women also seek blesser relationships to enhance their status, to maintain lifestyles otherwise unaffordable to them, and to differentiate themselves from their 'poorer' peers. This increase in commodity/consumption culture can be linked back to the processes of neoliberal globalisation in the post-apartheid era which resulted in an influx of foreign products and increased the consumption rates of Black South Africans (Zembe *et al.*, 2013: 2). For young women, this transformation led to the development of new needs, wants, and desires that reflect modernity, sexual equality, and relationships that reflect global images of luxury amongst their peers (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003: 216). However, although commodities are now afforded greater importance amongst black people, young black women remain relatively economically disadvantaged. This was expressed by a young woman who stated:

Listen here, money makes the world go around, we all need money to survive. It's even worse for us black women, nobody cares about us [in what ways?]- you know what I mean, we are excluded from real money, not these peanuts we get from our jobs. So, in a sense it makes you use what you must get what you want, and for us women the gold mine between our legs is what can give us the life we want and deserve. On my own, I could never live in the apartment I am staying in or drive the car I am driving, but thanks to my boyfriend, I can live a good life.

As a result, South African women are now actively using their sexuality to acquire commodities that reflect a high-status lifestyle, while satisfying their wants rather than their needs (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003: 216). Simply put, neoliberal globalisation has led to young women developing new needs and desires for modernity and aspirational lifestyles and this has resulted in a rise in blessee/blesser relationships for material gain because young women view these relationships as the easiest way to achieve social upward mobility in a society that economically marginalises black women.

Regarding agency, these young women perceive themselves as powerful agents who engage in blesser relationships by choice by arguing that their relationships with blesser are from deliberate action, emphasised through their ability to 'choose' a blesser. From this standpoint, these young women distinguish themselves from sex workers whom they portray as having no choice, and whom exchange sex for money motivated by absolute deprivation. A young woman expressed that:

Blessees are not the same as sex workers, because blessees have a choice, whereas sex work is a hustle [hustle?]- yes, sex work starts from hustling, motivated by a need to survive, to eat. So, blessees are different to sex workers because blessees do not sell their bodies, their basic needs are taken care of. They are mostly motivated by choice, enjoyment and wanting nice things. Sex work on the other hand is a job and not for entertainment. You do not become a sex worker because you want to upgrade your car to a fancy car [as one participant puts it].

This sentiment was acknowledged by all respondents in this study who emphasised their choice by describing the temporary nature of blesser relationships. They focus attention on their educated status as guaranteeing them future opportunities for upward mobility and economic independence from their blesser. Therefore, they regard blesser relationships as a temporary lifestyle choice motivated by a 'need' for a high-status lifestyle which they state is different from sex work, a 'hustle' for survival. This was further explained by one 22-year-old:

You know for me, I am realistic, I know what we have is not love. So, my end goal is to just to get as much money and experiences from him until I am ok [ok?]- yes, until I reach a certain status as a successful and independent woman. You cannot live this type of lifestyle forever, you get in, get what is yours and get out. So, I try very hard to avoid romantic or love things. I am focused on getting a good life for myself and that's that.

Young women also express agency by utilising their sexuality to attract wealthy blesser and access socio-economic power in return. These women see their ability to sustain relationships with blesser while simultaneously choosing the initial timing of their sexual encounters as an act of cleverness that contributes to their self-perception as sexually liberated women. They showcase their agency through their ability to avoid or delay sex in the initiation stage of the relationship to see what the blesser can provide financially. This ability to navigate their sexuality leads them to self-identify as active decision-makers and empowered modern-day women who reciprocate sex after receiving financial and material gifts from wealthy men. A 24-year-old blessee revealed that:

I met him at a club with my friends, he invited us to the VIP section and spent a lot of money on us. I knew he really liked me, so I was in control of whatever was happening between us. He was chasing me [pursuing a relationship], not the other way around. So, he had to spoil me and do a lot of things to show his seriousness and commitment, before I agreed to date him.

However, despite having high levels of agency in blesser relationships, their accounts of blesser relationships also revealed that the young women's agency fluctuates within a given relationship and over time. Therefore, their agency was evident in the initiation stage of the relationship, diminished in the maintenance phase, and resurfaced in the termination of the blesser relationship. Young women expressed that most blesser approached them in the initiation stage of the relationship. Forming a relationship with a blesser happened at their own pace which allowed them to feel in control. This control and agency diminished in the duration phase of the relationship as 'compromising' becomes vital to the sustenance of the relationship. According to young women, receiving material gifts and money from their blesser diminishes their power in the area of sexual decision-making. Due to their blesser's ability to manipulate their 'need' for money by exerting sexual dominance within the relationship, the

respondents provided reasons such as 'fear of being replaced by their blessers', 'trust', 'love' and 'substantial material gifts if sex is unprotected' as factors that further limit their agency. A 24-year-old explained that:

The condom thing is a big issue he doesn't like them. Honestly, it doesn't sit well with me, but I think because we have built trust, and he does give me everything I want, I just let it go because giving him what he wants, means I get everything I need.

Their agency was also undermined when their wants converted into actual needs and created a 'need-want' slippage. In this scenario, young women were prone to giving in to their blesser's requests for unprotected sex. However, their narratives of engaging in unprotected sex with blessers mostly revolved around the transactional nature of their relationships that is rooted in their internalised self-pressure to give sex after receiving material gifts. For example, a 25-year-old expressed that:

If I am honest, the fact that he gives me money, it gives him power. I obviously need the money, so I play along sometimes he will give me an expensive gift or money and then he will want unprotected sex, I end up doing it because I have to keep him happy.

In the termination stage of the relationship, young women's agency resurfaced. According to these women, a blesser's ability to provide is central to the maintenance of the relationship. Therefore, if a blesser is unable to provide financially the blessee will end the relationship. Young women rationalised this decision using gendered cultural norms which dictate how 'a woman cannot give sex for free' and how 'it is a man's duty to provide'. Therefore, while some women expressed feelings of love for their blessers, all women emphasised that sex without compensation is a sign of low self-worth and is understood as a signifier for low levels of care and appreciation from their blessers, a notion which was extended to their primary partners. A 24-year-old revealed that:

... my last blesser went broke or whatever, I entertained it for a week, and I couldn't do it anymore. I can't just give sex for free and listen to problems. I just had to sit him down and explain that our agreement was over, but I still cared for him as a friend.

Secondly, young women revealed that they may terminate their blesser relationships if they achieved their desired social status or realised economic independence. This rationale was linked to the temporary nature of blesser relationships as well as young women's educated status which they view as guaranteeing them future opportunities for acquiring jobs and economic independence from their blessers. In addition, reasons such as 'losing interest in the relationship' and 'the need for more material gifts' were also provided as motives for terminating a blesser relationship.

Young women also demonstrated that blesser relationships are more intricate than a simple exchange of sex and materiality by illustrating how money and love are interlinked in complex ways. Their accounts of blesser relationships also revealed that there is a conflation of African tradition and Western culture in the urban areas of South Africa such that new ideas about love and relationships have emerged. Therefore, their experiences with blessers must be understood by looking at the interplay and the structuring roles of money, race, and culture. Firstly, their accounts of blesser relationships are influenced by cultural understandings of love that normalise gift-giving in African sexual exchanges. A 25-year-old explains that:

Growing up my mum always emphasised the importance of marrying someone who can provide, it would be such a disappointment if I dated a broke guy. My actual boyfriend [not blesser], takes care of me. He obviously can't do a lot because he is not as rich as my blesser. But I think it is natural for men to just provide⁷, it's not even something to discuss. And on the other side sex is something you give men to show your appreciation, for them it is how they judge if you love them.

Young women also believe that it is normal for partners to exchange gifts in sexual relationships because demonstrations of romance and love are connected to gift-giving. Consequently, these women argue that love and money are a crucial part of forming, maintaining, and sustaining a relationship. Because they view their blessers as boyfriends, they state that a loving and supportive boyfriend provides financial support. Beyond financial support, some women expressed how they expect love and emotional support from their blessers. A young woman expressed that:

⁷ This understanding of sexual exchanges reflects institutionalized heterosexual social relations maintained through African cultural scripts whereby women must demonstrate love by 'giving' sex after receiving material gifts and men feel required to allocate their financial possessions with their sexual partners to show value and gratitude for sex (Leclerc-Madla, 2009:108).

In exchange for sex, a blesser should take care of the blessee's every need, which includes emotional support. [And] a blessee receives gifts or an expensive lifestyle from an older man who promises to love her and take care of her in exchange for sex. Because generally, a man will not give you anything without sex.

However, their understanding of love and support is based on the number of material resources provided by their blessers. This intricate linking of love and money also stems from cultural understanding where the strongest indication of a committed partner is measured by a man's ability to offer gifts and material support. Therefore, to show love is to give presents, and the bigger the gifts, the more the love. Consequently, young urban women seek out blessers based on this perspective and will only provide sex if a man lives up to this expected role of the provider. Blessee/blesser relationships are influenced as well by cultural norms that require men to share their resources with women and for women to reciprocate with sex. Young urban black women view men as exploiting them if sex occurs without compensation because they view their sexuality as being worth something. A 22-year-old reveals that:

No black man will take you seriously if you just give them sex without having some form of expectation. For me, it means you don't have values and you don't care about yourself. I could never just have sex with someone, without some form of benefit, even if that person is my real boyfriend.

Simultaneously, this notion of exchange in blesser relationships reproduces men's sense of entitlement to women's bodies because, when material gifts are provided by blessers, young women are expected to give sex in return. These accounts of blesser relationships demonstrate how instrumentality is linked to emotional intimacy, as men's provision is linked to love. It is important to note that just like agency the amount of instrumentality and emotionality varies in blesser relationships and over time and for young urban women this was highlighted through experiences surrounding condom use. It was acknowledged that unprotected sex with blessers yielded more material benefits. The respondents revealed that condom use was reduced by feelings of love and trust which limited their power to negotiate sexual terms in the maintenance phase of the relationship.

According to the young women, they consent to unsafe sex because their blessers view it as a sign of faithfulness and trust. In addition, some women highlighted the dangers of falling in love with a blesser. For those women, falling in love with a blesser (if the blessee's feelings of love are not reciprocated by the blesser) not only leads to non-condom use but may result in a blesser losing interest after engaging in unprotected sex. Furthermore, if a blessee falls pregnant it might lead to the premature termination of the relationship by the blesser. This is because blessers have primary partners and engage in blesser relationships to have sex with beautiful women or 'trophies.' Consequently, falling pregnant 'ruins' the 'trophy fantasy' because it reminds blessers of the reality they have at home (wife and children) which leads to a loss of interest in the relationship or the replacement of the blessee with someone else. As a 25-year-old blessee explains:

I fell in love with my blesser, and I ended up getting pregnant...he lost interest...he asked me what kind of life was I going to live with a child...he distanced himself from me...I tried to fix things by terminating the pregnancy but he replaced with me a younger girl...I knew then it was over, and it forced me to end the relationship with him.

The accounts provided by the young urban women demonstrate that blessee/blesser relationships can be understood as being contingent, temporary, and based on fluid modernity and consumerism. From this perspective, love in blesser relationships is based on receiving emotional and financial provision from blessers in exchange for sex and entertainment. Therefore, if one party can no longer fulfil their obligations within the relationship, it may lead to either party terminating the relationship, or the relationship transitioning to another form such as a friendship.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I highlight how young women's engagement in blessee/blesser relationships demonstrates their agency and challenges one-dimensional representations of transactional relationships. I also illustrate that; these relationships are based on mutuality and the acknowledgment of sex through financial and material gifts. However, their engagement in blesser relationships also challenges and reproduces patriarchal structures in the following ways. Firstly, their beliefs that men must provide and take care of their needs, while simultaneously attempting to

achieve financial independence from their blessers, uphold their emphasised femininity⁸ in blesser relationships, and reproduces gender inequality over time. In addition, it entrenches hegemonic masculinity and reinforces the idea of men as breadwinners and that men have ‘uncontrollable’ sexual appetites which make them prone to sexual risk-taking (Leclerc-Madlala, 2009: 105). Consequently, pleasure in sex is then understood as being found outside of marital relations.

Secondly, young women’s involvement with blessers entrenches patriarchal cultural scripts that men must demonstrate commitment, love, and affection to their sexual partners through gift-giving that is equal to a man’s wealth and status. In exchange, women must demonstrate commitment, love, and affection by ‘giving’ sex after receiving material gifts because a woman cannot ‘give sex for free’. This understanding of African sexual relationships results in men feeling obligated to allocate their finances to women as a way of showing respect and appreciation for sex (Leclerc-Madlala, 2009: 108). Therefore, if men are not able to achieve these status markers of masculinity, they might compensate by over-emphasising other aspects of their masculinity to ‘prove’ their masculinity through multiple partner relationships, lack of condom use, and intimate partner violence (Walby, 1990).

Therefore, while young women engage in blesser relationships to challenge gendered economic inequalities, their relationships with blessers sustain notions that men seek out transactional sex to portray an image of success and women engage in transactional sex for economic reasons. This upholds women’s subservience to men because blesser relationships perpetuate the view that ‘men believe women seek out multiple partner relationships because they have no money’ (Maganja *et al.*, 2007: 974). It also preserves problematic stereotypes that young women seek out blesser relationships due to absolute deprivation and that African men are suspicious of women who have low interest in monetary exchange for sex as they perceive them as being ‘loose’ and possibly infected with HIV/AIDS (Nyanzi *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, by seeking out blessers for upward mobility and status, young women entrench unequal gender power relations where men use their economic power to gift women with material and financial goods in anticipation of sex. This uneven power dynamic is then sustained due to the gendered socio-economic environment found in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa that allows men to monopolise their resources and gain access to women to satisfy their sexual desires while undermining their marital relations (Luke, 2005: 6).

Consequently, there is a need to move beyond Stoebenau *et al.*’s (2016) framework for analysing transactional sex and broaden the understanding of African sexualities, the motives for engaging in transactional sex, and the multifaceted nature of transactional sexual relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, it is crucial to capture the accounts of young urban black women in different regions of South Africa. In doing so, it will reveal experiences that are unique to those contexts and will help broaden the understanding of African women’s sexualities beyond Western simplistic views of African women as one-dimensional, poor, and powerless victims. Furthermore, expanding the scope of this study might generate data for comparative analysis that will broaden the understanding of transactional sex while giving voice and agency to young urban black women engaging in blessee/blesser relationships.

Lastly, there is a need to detail blesser perspectives from a post-colonial lens. This is because post-colonial feminism acknowledges the importance of men, based on the logic that for African feminism to succeed it cannot be detached from the opposite sex, since post-colonial feminism does not reject men but encourages men to be conscious of women’s subordination which differs from the general subjugation of all Africans. At the same time, postcolonial feminism acknowledges the importance of men and women working together to combat racial and gender oppression. Its inclusion of men is a defining feature that separates it from Western feminism (Mekgwe, 2006: 16) making it appropriate for exploring men’s roles in transactional relationships. By researching the subjective narratives of men engaging in transactional sex it will allow for both intervention and scholarship to move beyond narratives of young women as purely victims of older men.

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⁸ Emphasised femininity is viewed as the subordinate ‘other’ to hegemonic masculinity (the formation of gender practice that includes the currently established answer to the issue of the legitimacy of patriarchy that safeguards the dominant position of men and results in the subjugation of women). Therefore, emphasised femininity is performed particularly to men and is focused around an internalised subservience and subjugation to dominant masculinities (Connell, 1987: 183-187).

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