"Tell me you own me, gimme them coins": postfeminist fascination with Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture on Tumblr

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“Tell me you own me, gimme them coins”: Postfeminist fascination with *Lolita*, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture on Tumblr

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Abstract

This research sought to describe the size and analyze the content of communities on Tumblr that share posts regarding *Lolita*, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. Research questions included: Why might young women on Tumblr choose to share posts relating to these things? How are they interpreting the images and texts they share? Is this a means of expressing desire, or are these individuals subverting these images and ideas as a means of critiquing gender expectations? A qualitative textual analysis was conducted on data collected by social media analytics software. Tumblr communities sharing content regarding *Lolita*, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture included hundreds of thousands of blogs. Individuals in these communities used Tumblr to express their emotions and desires. The images shared by individuals in these communities reveal the ways that young women use Tumblr as a mechanism with which to navigate postfeminist, neoliberal social conditions in which women are limited by social, economic, and political pressures, and are simultaneously led to believe that these pressures hold no influence over their individual lives or behaviors. The prevalence of posts expressing depressive, suicidal, and self-destructive ideas indicates that these individuals may experience the failures of neoliberalism and postfeminism as personal failures. By showing the connections between postfeminist media practices that center on *Lolita*, Lana Del Rey, sugar culture, and Tumblr, this research provides a link between many previously unconnected areas of research on literature, film, popular culture, sex work, and social networking sites.
“Tell me you own me, gimme them coins”: Postfeminist fascination with

*Lolita*, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture on Tumblr

In Vladimir Nabokov’s notorious novel *Lolita*, the narrator Humbert Humbert provides his eponymous under-age captive several gifts in an attempt to buy her affections prior to setting out on a road trip with her across the United States to avoid arousing the suspicions of local authorities. These gifts include comic books, candy, clothes, a portable radio, a tennis racket, and some sanitary pads. Anyone familiar with Tumblr or the singer Lana Del Rey can easily imagine these items depicted in a pastel-hued photoset on someone’s Tumblr page or incorporated into the lyrics of a Lana Del Rey song. The exchange of gifts and sex in *Lolita* in some ways resembles a “sugar arrangement,” in which an older man, known as a sugar daddy, provides money and gifts to a younger woman, known as a sugar baby, in exchange for a romantic relationship.

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Tumblr posts mention Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture, often in combination with one another, and these posts may serve to normalize and even glamorize gender inequalities and sexual exploitation.

Even prior to its original publication in 1955, *Lolita* took on a life of its own in the media and in the global cultural consciousness. The novel has spawned two film adaptations, several spin-off books by other authors, a few stage plays, a fashion movement, and hundreds of pornographic films, books, dolls, and photos. Both the novel’s content and its cultural impact have made it ripe for academic reflection and criticism, and hundreds of essays and articles have been and continue to be written about the juggernaut that is *Lolita*. Lana Del Rey, sugar culture, and Tumblr, on the other hand,
are all relatively new phenomena, and only a handful of articles have been written about them.

Social networking sites are of increasing interest to researchers, but very little academic research has focused on Tumblr in comparison to other sites, despite Tumblr’s popularity among young people. I sought to describe the size and analyze the expressive content of communities on Tumblr that share posts regarding Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. Describing the media practices of individuals in these communities may offer possible explanations for their fascination with these topics. Young women’s interest in Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture on Tumblr may be of concern for many because it seems to romanticize, glamorize, or otherwise celebrate sexual exploitation, underage sexualization, and/or women’s submissiveness. Therefore, I also sought to answer questions raised by the popularity of Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture on Tumblr. For instance, why might young women on Tumblr choose to share posts relating to these things? How are these young women interpreting the images and texts they share? Is this a means of expressing sexuality or desire, or are these individuals subverting or parodying these images and ideas as a means of critiquing gender roles and expectations? By showing the connections between postfeminist media practices that center on Lolita, Lana Del Rey, sugar culture, and Tumblr, I have provided a link between many previously unconnected areas of research on literature, film, popular culture, sex work, and social networking sites. More broadly, I sought to contribute to understanding the ways in which individuals use Tumblr to make sense of themselves and the society in which they live. Evaluating these Tumblr communities using a “technologies of sexiness” framework provides insight into the ways in which
postfeminist, neoliberal ideas are both perpetuated and resisted online (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010).

**Literature Review**

**Postfeminism**

Rosalind Gill’s (2007b) concept of postfeminism provides a useful framework for thinking about the ways in which Lolita, Lana Del Rey, sugar culture, and Tumblr function in culture, specifically for women. Gill (2007b) defined postfeminism as “a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes” (p. 147). These themes include:

- The notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill, 2007b, p. 149)

Additionally, Gill (2007b) wrote, “No discussion of the postfeminist sensibility in media would be complete without considering irony and knowingness” (p. 159). As Gill (2007a) wrote, “Postfeminism should be conceived of as a sensibility, and postfeminist media culture should be our critical object; the phenomenon which analysts must inquire into and interrogate” (p. 254, emphasis in original). The notion of femininity as a bodily property is evident in media that treat bodies that meet conventional standards of beauty and desirability as women’s primary character traits (Gill, 2007a, p. 255). The shift from objectification to subjectification refers to the ways in which women are characterized as
“active, desiring sexual subjects” who willingly participate in their own objectification (Gill, 2007a, p. 258). Regarding the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline, Gill (2007a) wrote that three features distinguish the present moment:

First, the dramatically increased intensity of self-surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside the disavowal of such regulation); secondly the extensiveness of surveillance over entirely new spheres of life and intimate conduct; and thirdly the focus upon the psychological—upon the requirement to transform oneself and remodel one’s interior life. (p. 261)

Notions of individualism, agency, and choice “are central” to the postfeminist sensibility, as are “notions of ‘being oneself’ and ‘pleasing oneself’” (Gill, 2007a, p. 259).

Additionally, Gill (2007a) noted that current media culture tends to ignore political and cultural influences on behaviors, representing nearly every action as an expression of individuality and autonomy. The makeover paradigm refers to the fact that people (mostly women) are made to believe “that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way” and that they can be transformed by following the advice of so-called experts (Gill, 2007a, p. 263). More recently, as Gill and Elias (2014) noted, this makeover paradigm has shifted from an emphasis on physical self-regulation to “more insidious” psychological self-regulation (p. 180). The resurgence of ideas about sexual difference serves to “(re-)eroticize power relations between men and women” by constructing difference as sexy, and this discourse of natural sexual difference can serve to perpetuate gender inequalities “by representing them as inevitable and—if read correctly—as pleasurable” (Gill, 2007a, p. 265). The sexualization of culture refers to the explosion of discussions about sex in media in addition to the increasing sexualization of “girls’,
women’s and (to a lesser extent) men’s bodies in public spaces” (Gill, 2007a, p. 256). The emphasis on consumerism can be observed in the ways in which consumer practices are framed as solutions in the makeover paradigm, while the commodification of difference can be observed in the ways in which people are encouraged to capitalize on their supposedly natural sexual differences in order to earn money. Gill (2007b) noted that irony and knowingness serve many purposes in the postfeminist sensibility, including “establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs, at a time when being passionate about something or appearing to care too much seems to be ‘uncool’,” offering “an internal defense against ambivalent feelings,” and “outwardly rebutting charges of taking something (or worse still, oneself) too seriously” (p. 159). The most important function of irony and knowingness in the postfeminist sensibility, according to Gill (2007b), is as a means of “‘having it both ways’, of expressing sexist, homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually ‘meant’” (p. 159).

According to Gill (2007b), postfeminism informs an increasing number of media such as film, television, and advertising. Indeed, postfeminism even informs a number of academic works. A fairly recent example of the latter is Hakim’s (2011) Erotic Capital, in which she introduced the notion of “erotic capital,” a “combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation, and social skills,” as an important sociological concept (p. 1). Postfeminist sensibilities are not necessarily anti-feminist sensibilities, as Gill (2007a) wrote: “What makes contemporary media culture distinctively postfeminist, rather than pre-feminist or anti-feminist, is precisely [an] entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (p. 269). Therefore, a work can include feminist ideas and still
TELL ME YOU OWN ME, GIMME THEM COINS

classify as postfeminist. Although this notion of postfeminism emerged ten years ago, it is increasing in relevance as a means of critiquing the effects of neoliberal societies on women.

**Postfeminism and Neoliberalism.** Evans and Riley (2014) defined neoliberalism as “a form of governance that argues that market forces, rather than state intervention, should be allowed to drive the economy” (p. 3). This logic is also applied to citizens, “who are encouraged to think of themselves as autonomous individuals responsible for their own welfare” (Evans & Riley, 2014, p. 3). Citizens are therefore required to engage in constant self-surveillance and self-transformation in order to remain relevant in an ever-changing economy. Gill (2008) argued that both postfeminism and neoliberalism are central to understanding contemporary media culture. Gill (2008) found three primary connections between postfeminism and neoliberalism. First, both postfeminism and neoliberalism are characterized by the notion that individual choices and behaviors are not influenced by external social or political pressures or limitations (Gill, 2008). Second, Gill (2008) asserted that both neoliberalism and postfeminism assume a rational, independent, self-surveilling subject. Third, Gill (2008) observed that women are expected to express more autonomy, practice more self-regulation, and work more toward self-transformation than are men. In short, both neoliberalism and postfeminism serve to place greater demands on women than on men.

Evans and Riley (2014) defined postfeminist sentiment as “a fusion between neoliberal subjectivity and a feminist politics reimagined through the logic of consumerism” (p. 16). For instance, Evans and Riley (2014) wrote that “sexiness” has become a commodity, which is sold to women using supposedly feminist “discourses of
‘choice’, ‘autonomy’, and ‘liberation’” (p. 1). Oksala (2016) noted that femininity, which, as Gill pointed out, is often understood to be a bodily property, is now considered a means by which women may increase their “human capital” (p. 124), an idea that is central to Hakim’s (2011) Erotic Capital. In a neoliberal cultural context, “women are encouraged to work on their bodies and identities through consumerism” (Evans & Riley, 2014, p. 3). As Evans and Riley (2014) pointed out, “The constant transformation required by this kind of consumerism means that femininity is constituted as a site of self-surveillance and discipline” (p. 13). The danger of this ideology lies in the fact that the cycle of consumerism never ends, which “sets people up to fail, while encouraging them to locate these failures as their own individual failures rather than as failures of the social structure, or in the logic of neoliberalism itself” (Evans & Riley, 2014, p.133). Therefore, neoliberalism may lead women to view their own bodies, psychologies, and even selves alternately as sites of self-surveillance and discipline and as sites of failure.

Postfeminism and Social Media. Gill’s ideas about postfeminism were formulated before the explosion of social media, but her ideas remain relevant to evaluating social media content. Dobson (2015) noted that scholarly work regarding the meaning and value of young women’s digital media practices reveals contrasting ideas. For instance, some scholars “position the Internet as a ‘safe space’ for girls and young women to experiment with self-expression” and suggest that girls and women are empowered by their ability to control their own representations, while others note “the dominance of gender-typical styles of self-representation that occur online, and the continuation of gendered gazes and economies of visibility,” particularly on social networking sites (Dobson, 2015, p. 43). Dobson (2015) argued that young women’s
digital media practices are “politically significant” because they reveal methods used by young women to navigate postfeminist social conditions and conventional gender expectations (p. 2). Furthermore, she wrote:

It is vital to explore what girls’ and young women’s own public self-representation and media practices can tell us about the requirements of contemporary postfeminist femininity, as well as its boundaries and ‘constitutive limits’. Likewise, it is important to investigate how girls and young women themselves negotiate postfeminist conditions . . . via their digital media practices and self-representations. (Dobson, 2015, p. 51)

Scott (2010) argued that examining technology as a postfeminist tool is beneficial for revealing the illusory nature of the technology user’s liberation and agency. Banet-Weiser (2011) wrote that the ideals and accomplishments of the postfeminist individual “are supported and enabled by similar ideals and assumptions about the contemporary interactive subject who realizes her individual empowerment through and within the flexible, open architecture of online spaces” (p. 278). For instance, Dobson (2015) found that young women tend to construct their identities on social media as “an ongoing project, available for constant monitoring and revision,” and that their social media profiles work “to foster a sense of confidence and self-acceptance,” which she noted are “two highly valued traits of postfemininity” (p. 104-105). Postfeminist sensibilities permeate online culture to a similar or even greater degree than offline culture.

**Postfeminism and Technologies of Sexiness.** Evans et al. (2010) introduced a theoretical framework in which sexualized consumer products, services, and discourses may be thought of as “technologies of sexiness” which express both the power and the
pleasure aspects of contemporary femininity (p. 126). In this framework, social networking sites may be thought of as technologies of sexiness that express contradictory ideas about women’s sexuality. For instance, these technologies may be used by women to express their own subjective sexualities and sexual desires, but they are also created by a culture of consumerism in which “sexual knowledge” is packaged and presented in such as way as to produce a profit (Evans et al., 2010, p. 126). Additionally, although these technologies may allow individuals to subvert and parody notions of traditional gender and sexuality in a pleasurable way, these parodies and subversions “draw on, and thus repeat” these traditional discourses (Evans et al., 2010, p. 126). These technologies also provide opportunities for women to reimagine their sexualities, but these may be appropriated by the media to “re-produce dominant discourses that objectify women and limit those who can participate in sexualized culture” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 127). Therefore, the technologies of sexiness framework understands postfeminism as a “doubled movement” that both expands and limits possibilities for women to make sense of themselves (Evans & Riley, 2014, p. 134).

**Lolita**

Perhaps no fictional character has been as widely misinterpreted and misrepresented as Lolita. For decades, Lolita’s name has invoked the image of a precociously seductive girl. In the novel, however, Lolita is portrayed as “an unhappy little captive with ‘absolutely nowhere else to go’ besides Humbert’s arms, who squirrels away her allowance in order to collect enough to run away from him” (Bordo, 2000, p. 305). Although Humbert, as the unreliable narrator, aims to convince readers of Lolita’s sexual precocity, he sometimes lets slip small details that suggest Lolita is an average girl
who puts on a brave face every day but “sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment [he] feign[s] sleep” (Nabokov, 1997, p. 176). Nevertheless, Lolita’s name fails to conjure this image of a courageous but miserable victim of abuse. As Bordo (2003) wrote, “Twelve-year-old victims of incest are never called Lolitas. We employ the term . . . to emphasize the erotic power of young, sexy teenagers” (p. 126). This distortion of Lolita’s character is due to a combination of factors including Humbert’s mythic narrative, critics’ acceptance of Humbert’s narrative, misleading book covers, misrepresentations of Lolita in film, and the very nature of the film industry, all of which have contributed to the image of Lolita that reverberates throughout our popular culture today (See, e.g., Bayma & Fine, 1996; Bertram & Leving, 2013; Bordo, 2000; Durantaye, 2006; Durham, 2008; Goldman, 2004; Pifer, 2003; Pifer, 2013; Savage, 2015; Sinclair, 1988; Wells, 2015; Zimmer, 2013; Zimmer, 2014).

**Humbert’s narrative.** *Lolita* is considered a classic work of unreliable narration, with Humbert portraying a “self-contradictory” clown who “depicts himself as alternately monstrous, buffoonish, witty, brutish, tender, malevolent, and kind” (Riggan, 1981, p. 93). Part of Humbert’s strategy is to employ mythological archetypes to placate readers’ moral objections to his point of view and actions. Humbert’s use of mythological details and narratives places Lolita in the role of Eve, relegating Humbert to Adam and portraying him as the victim of her deceptive charms (Bordo, 2000; Goldman, 2004). Beauvoir (1972) described this mythological creation as the “new Eve,” which merges the “green fruit” and “femme fatale” archetypes to create a new, highly desirable creature (p. 10). She wrote of the new Eve, “In the game of love, she is as much a hunter as she is
prey. The male is an object to her, just as she is to him” (p. 20). By portraying Lolita as a temptress, Humbert seeks to convince readers of his own innocence.

Durham (2008) connected the mythology surrounding Lolita to the mythology surrounding girls’ and women’s sexualities today, which she identified as “the myth of sex as girls’ exhibitionism, the myth of sex in terms of an ideal body type, the myth of sex as linked to youth, the myth of sex as violence against women, and the myth of the male gaze” (p. 40). She wrote of the many “Lolitas” that populate the media, “[They are] fabrications. They serve market needs and profit motives, and they are powerfully alluring, especially to the young girls whose vulnerability they exploit” (p. 26). She argued that these myths of sexuality exploit and limit the sexual agency and expression of girls in much the same way that Humbert’s myth exploited and limited the sexual freedom of Lolita.

**Critics’ acceptance of Humbert’s narrative.** Critical reception of the novel was key to spreading the mischaracterization of Lolita as a seductress. Bayma and Fine (1996), for example, found that 20 out of 25 initial reviews of *Lolita* were positive and that every positive review accepted Humbert’s unreliable characterization of Lolita. Durantaye (2006) also found that reviewers’ opinions of Lolita aligned with Humbert’s, which runs counter to the facts about Lolita revealed in the novel. In fact, Nabokov’s wife Véra once lamented at a press conference, “[Lolita] cries every night and the critics are deaf to her sobs” (as cited in Durantaye, 2006, p. 175). Durantaye (2006) conceded that Lolita is easily misinterpreted due to the complexity of the unreliable narration in the novel, but the fact that critics continue to misconstrue her as sexually promiscuous and
somehow responsible for her fate over fifty years since *Lolita*’s publication is difficult to explain.

**Covers of the novel.** Recently, authors have begun analyzing the role that covers of the novel have played in perpetuating the myth of Lolita as a seductress. In a letter to his publisher, Nabokov (1989) expressed his wish for the cover of *Lolita* to be “romantic, delicately drawn, non-Freudian and non-juvenile” (p. 250). Additionally, he wrote, “There is one subject which I am emphatically opposed to: any kind of representation of a little girl” (Nabokov, 1989, p. 250). If no one could produce a cover illustration that satisfied Nabokov’s wishes, he asked that the cover simply consist of a white background with LOLITA written in bold black font (Nabokov, 1989, p. 256). Unfortunately, Nabokov’s wishes for the cover of the novel have not been respected.

As Pifer (2013) wrote, many covers of the novel are “blatantly misleading,” portraying Lolita “replete with spherical female breasts, shapely legs encased in sleek stockings, and/or [a] nubile torso framed in [a] slight bra [or] bikini” (p. 145). Savage (2015) performed a visual discourse analysis on 185 covers of *Lolita* and found that the most common image is one of Lolita herself, typically portrayed as seductive and therefore blameworthy. Zimmer (2013) found that most covers of *Lolita* throughout the years fit into one of two categories, artistic or anatomic, with the rest categorized as simply text. An artistic cover is a painting or drawing that is not of Lolita but may be of a character similar to Lolita, while an anatomic cover is a photograph or rendition of Lolita and/or Humbert (Zimmer, 2013). Zimmer (2014) also published an online exhibit of 210 *Lolita* covers from 40 countries, ranging from 1955 to 2013. Analyzing these covers revealed that 86 are artistic, 69 are anatomic, and 49 are simply text. Additionally, 116
covers featured Lolita alone, nine featured Humbert alone, and 22 featured Lolita and Humbert together. Of the covers featuring Lolita, eight depicted her in her underwear, and 17 portrayed her as naked. Overwhelmingly, publishers have ignored Nabokov’s wishes for the novel’s cover.

**Film narrative.** Much of the blame for Lolita’s cultural misrepresentation can be placed on Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne, who adapted *Lolita* to the big screen in 1962 and 1997, respectively. Both Kubrick and Lyne attempted to make the pedophilic relationship between Humbert and Lolita more acceptable to both censors and audiences by increasing her age from twelve to fourteen. Wells (2015) wrote that Kubrick essentially “airbrushes [Lolita] into a 1950s pin-up model,” while in the novel Lolita is described as unwashed, unkempt, and lanky. Lyne dresses Lolita in ruffled crop tops and short skirts, while in the novel Lolita wears non-feminine clothes like overalls.

Bordo (2000) compared the Lolita of the novel to the Lolitas of Kubrick and Lyne’s films. She found that Kubrick’s Lolita aligns with the Eve archetype Humbert tries to present in the novel, placing the responsibility for his “fall” on her “manipulative, predatory, and vulgar shoulders” (Bordo, 2000, p. 306). Lyne’s Lolita, on the other hand, is more complicated:

[She] is a highly passionate girl too and—although she’s deeply wounded and cries like a baby when Humbert slaps her across the face in anger—appears to get turned on by a little sexual violence . . . As he throws her on the bed and [rapes] her, she becomes sexually excited, giving him ardent, deep tongue kisses, then alternately cackling wildly and swooning with pleasure at his rough treatment. (p. 313)
The Lolita of Nabokov’s novel, by contrast, is never shown to “swoon with pleasure” at Humbert’s treatment of her. Humbert tells the reader, “Never did she vibrate under my touch . . . I dubbed her My Frigid Princess” (Nabokov, 1997, p. 166). In the cultural zeitgeist, it seems that Kubrick and Lyne’s emotionally and sexually manipulative Lolitas have in many ways solipsized the Lolita of Nabokov’s novel.

**Film industry.** Kubrick and Lyne’s adaptations of *Lolita* are consistent with the film industry’s long-running perpetuation of the myth of the sexually precocious young girl. Both Pifer (2003) and Sinclair (1988) wrote about Hollywood’s exploitation of the sexual appeal of pre-pubescent girls, including Shirley Temple, Sue Lyon (who portrayed Lolita in Kubrick’s film), Nastassia Kinski, Jodie Foster, and Brooke Shields. Beauvoir (1972) wrote about Brigitte Bardot’s role as the “child-woman” who best exemplifies the “Lolita Syndrome” in the movies. Beauvoir (1972) described the appeal of the child-woman thusly:

> The adult woman now inhabits the same world as the man, but the child-woman moves in a universe he cannot enter. The age difference reestablishes between them the distance that seems necessary to desire. At least that is what those who have created a new Eve by merging the ‘green fruit’ and ‘femme fatale’ types have pinned their hopes on. (p. 10)

The recent resurgence of child-women and Lolitas in popular culture suggests that the “new Eve” figure continues to captivate today.

**Lolita in popular culture.** Images of Lolita are increasingly common in current popular culture, driven in part by the rise of social media and in part by the use of Lolita imagery in popular music. Bertram and Leving (2013) noted a recent “explosion of
Lolitamania in pop music” (p. 16), while Wells (2015) wrote, “Popular culture rewards adult women who act like children for the collective erotic enjoyment that will not speak [pedophilia’s] name.” Wells (2015) identified Katy Perry as an artist whose secret to success is her childishness (her first pop album cover featured her recreating a shot from Kubrick’s Lolita). Bertram and Leving (2013) identified Lana Del Rey as the most commercially successful of the current “Lolita-inflected” artists, describing her image as a “blend of nymphet and femme fatale transported from the 1950s and 1960s into today” (p. 16). This combination of nymphet and femme fatale echoes Beauvoir’s (1972) description of the “new Eve” (p. 10). Brill (2015) called Del Rey’s debut album Born to Die “essentially a lyrical shrine to Lolita” and argued that she is responsible for the recent popularity of heart-shaped sunglasses at music festivals and “the slew of Nabokov misquotes on Tumblr.” These writings suggest that Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and Tumblr are connected in many people’s minds.

**Lana Del Rey**

Lana Del Rey, whose albums have sold nearly 10 million copies, actively promotes the association of herself with Lolita. Del Rey’s first studio album, Born to Die, features multiple references to Lolita. In an interview promoting the album, she described her persona as “Lolita got [sic] lost in the hood” (Swash, 2011). She even has Nabokov’s name tattooed on her arm (Hiatt, 2014). One of the songs on Born to Die is entitled “Carmen,” which is one of Humbert’s favorite nicknames for Lolita in the novel (Del Rey & Parker, 2012). The hook of the song “Off to the Races” begins with the line, “Light of my life, fire of my loins,” which is the first line of Lolita, and Del Rey alludes in the song to a poem that Humbert writes to Lolita in the novel (Del Rey & Larcombe,
2012). This song also features the line “Tell me you own me, gimme them coins” (Del Rey & Larcombe, 2012), which brings to mind Lolita “firmly clutch[ing] a handful of coins in her little fist” (Nabokov, 1997, p. 184). Additionally, a bonus track on the album is entitled “Lolita,” the unreleased music video for which features clips from both film adaptations of the novel (Nhishmily, 2012). “Lolita” perpetuates the idea of Lolita as a seductress, with lyrics such as, “Kiss me in the D-A-R-K dark tonight/ D-A-R-K do it my way” (Del Rey, Howe, & Robinson, 2012). Finally, in “Diet Mountain Dew,” Del Rey sings about wearing “heart-shaped sunglasses,” which evokes the image of the 1962 Lolita adaptation’s theatrical release poster (Del Rey & Daly, 2012). Del Rey has also worn heart-shaped sunglasses in photo shoots, music videos, and concerts.

Lana Del Rey’s album, Ultraviolence, contains themes that reflect sugar culture, including money, power, sex, and exploitation. Fowles (2014) wrote of Del Rey’s Ultraviolence persona, “In essence, she’s a grown woman living inside that tireless teenage daydream of what it means to be an adult—yearning for agency but still wanting to be someone’s baby, too terrified to grow up but hating the powerlessness of youth” (p. 23). Zoladz (2014) wrote, “Ultraviolence seems to suggest how unfulfilling it is to embody a male fantasy.” Still, Fowles (2014) argued that there is power in this position, writing that “Del Rey’s Ultraviolence is brutal, sexy, and submissive, but she’s managed to make herself the subject of the narrative, not the object, even if the subject is a passive one” (p. 23). Some songs on the album describe “fighting exploitation with more exploitation” (Zoladz, 2014). For instance, on “Money Power Glory,” Del Rey sings, “I want money, and all your power, and all your glory/ Hallelujah, I’m gonna take you for all that you got/ Hallelujah, I’m gonna take them for all that they got” (Del Rey &
Kurstin, 2014). Power (2014) wrote of the song, “The slide between ‘you’ and ‘they’ sees theft as both personal and systematic: I can fuck (with) you, but I will also destroy the whole world that makes ‘you’ possible” (p. 14). In the song “Fucked My Way Up to the Top,” Del Rey facetiously sings that she did just that (Del Rey & Heath, 2014a). This interplay of feminist and anti-feminist ideas of subversion and submission, as well as the prevalence of irony and knowingness in *Ultraviolence*, marks it as a postfeminist work.

Indeed, Lana Del Rey is a postfeminist artist in many respects. Hopper (2014) argued that Del Rey “has a profound understanding of how women are viewed in America, and layers her work with a vulnerability that reflects the lack of control women often have of their own lives and choices.” Cooper (2014) suggested that Del Rey “set[s] to music the human drama of altering yourself to survive and rise” in a neoliberal society. Massey (2017) wrote of Del Rey:

She is a reflection of a logical response to our [young women’s] inheritance. We will be surveilled under a masculine gaze whose warmth or coldness toward us will often be largely out of our control, whether we pass them on the street, surrender our names to them in marriage, or pray to them in the blackness of night. We might as well find love among the ones we can see.

However, Del Rey is often shown being choked in her music videos, and some of her lyrics may be interpreted as romanticizing abuse. For instance, in the song “Ultraviolence,” she sings, “He hurt me, but it felt like true love” (Del Rey & Heath, 2014b). Regarding the images of abuse common in her music and her videos, Cooper (2014) pointed out, “She writes her own songs and music video treatments,” and therefore, “She’s the one willing these scenarios into existence, romanticizing the very
things that hurt her.” Del Rey has said that her “idea of a true feminist is a woman who feels free enough to do whatever she wants” (as cited in Cooper, 2014). This mixture of potentially feminist critiques of women’s precarious position in society with postfeminist notions of agency and choice devoid of political or social influence is what makes Del Rey a postfeminist artist.

Lana Del Rey remains relatively unexplored in the academic realm, but each exploration of her suggests her as a particularly rich subject of study. Fetveit (2015) analyzed the aesthetics of Del Rey’s music videos and suggested that Del Rey alternates between two personae in her early music videos: the Queen and the Renegade Teen. Fetveit (2015), describing each persona, wrote:

While the Queen tends to appear as a beautiful, late-1950s diva in long gowns, often in a style reminiscent of singers like Julie London, the Renegade Teen is prone to wear late-1960s style rough jean shorts, Converse sneakers, baggy T-shirts, and also a tan-fringed suede biker jacket. In many ways, this seems to be Del Rey’s way of combining the “green fruit” and “femme fatale” archetypes described by Beauvoir (1972) as the “new Eve” (p. 10). In fact, in her short film “Tropico,” Del Rey is portrayed as Eve in the garden wearing only roses, dancing seductively with Adam until she finally takes a bite of the forbidden fruit and falls onto the stage of a strip club (Del Rey, 2013). This combination of mythological and nostalgic Americana imagery is characteristic of much of Del Rey’s music and videos.

Vigier (2012) argued that Del Rey represents the contradictions facing young women who have followed the prescribed path to success and yet are still unable to
achieve real liberation and satisfaction. However, Vigier (2012) did not argue that Del Rey’s music is radical or progressive. Rather, she stated that it expresses the dissatisfactions that women continue to feel despite claims that the goals of feminism have been achieved. In fact, Del Rey’s music often contains themes that may seem antithetical to feminist values, such as “submissiveness, nostalgia, and a tendency to indulge in self-destructive behavior” (Vigier, 2012, p. 4). Additionally, Vigier (2012) noted, “Del Rey has a penchant for exploring the power relationships at play within specific types of sexual relationships, and represents the woman’s role as the weaker one” (p. 8). Nonetheless, Vigier (2012) disagreed with outraged critics who accused Del Rey of glamorizing domestic abuse and rape, writing, “When Del Rey sings ‘You’re no good for me/ but I want you,’ she may well be expressing the paradoxical feelings of many women” (p. 10). Rather than question why Del Rey sings about abusive relationships, Vigier (2012) argued, “We need to ask why so many women choose to accept abusive relationships and suffering” and suggested that the answer “may be in the lack of real alternatives” presented to them in a postfeminist media landscape (p. 10).

Sugar Culture

Millions of young women (and some young men), along with millions of older men (and some older women), are seeking sugar arrangements online. According to Motyl (2013), a sugar arrangement “consists of three elements: (1) a sugar daddy, (2) a sugar baby, and (3) an allowance” (p. 931). An allowance typically takes the form of a prepaid credit card, a credit card, cash, or a PayPal transaction and often covers a sugar baby’s living expenses, rent, and/or tuition, with spending money left over. Interestingly, Miller (2011) found that searching for the terms “student loan,” “tuition help,” “college
support,” or “help with rent” on Google returns results that include advertisements for sugar arrangement sites (p. 33). In 2016, over 1.2 million college students sought financial aid from sugar daddies on SeekingArrangement.com (“Sugar baby university,” 2016).

Interest in sugar culture as a subject of study has increased in recent years, primarily in terms of prostitution in law journals. In the 1976 California Supreme Court case Marvin v. Marvin, the court decided that a sugar arrangement does not constitute prostitution unless sex is explicitly required by the arrangement (Deeks, 2013). Representatives of SeekingArrangement.com argued that sugar babies differ from prostitutes by virtue of the fact that sugar daddies want sugar babies to “stick around,” while few clients wish for prostitutes to do so (“Paying for college,” 2015). Still, sugar babies are typically advised to ask their sugar daddies to help them maintain a certain “lifestyle” rather than provide them with an “allowance” in order to avoid prosecution (“Paying for college,” 2015).

Aside from their blunt transactional element, Motyl (2013) suggested that sugar arrangements differ from traditional dating arrangements in two regards: the encouragement of non-monogamy and the commonality of sugar babies having “real” boyfriends aside from their sugar daddies. Ultimately, Motyl (2013) concluded that the law is not sufficient to prevent prostitution in sugar arrangements and suggested that law enforcement infiltrate sugar-dating sites to prevent online prostitution. Miller (2011) discussed the nuances that differentiate sugar arrangements from traditional prostitution. For instance, solicitations on prostitution sites very rarely mention sex explicitly, but sugar babies often advertise their sexual strengths on their sugar-dating profiles.
Additionally, sugar daddies do not critique sugar babies on sugar-dating sites, while customers often critique prostitutes on prostitution sites. Deeks (2013) argued that sugar-dating sites are at risk of prosecution under the Communications and Decency Act of 1996 but are unlikely to face legal action due to the fact that laws in United States are “ill-equipped to deal with online prostitution” (p. 245). Despite the popularity of sugar arrangements as a subject of study for law scholars, no cultural scholars have published anything about sugar culture.

**Tumblr**

Social networking sites are of increasing interest to scholars, but very little academic research has focused on Tumblr in comparison to other sites, despite Tumblr’s popularity among young people. As of March 2017, Tumblr had over 340 million blogs and over 145 billion posts (“About Tumblr,” n.d.). Tan (2013), in a survey of over a thousand individuals ages 13 to 25, found that Tumblr was the most popular social networking site, with 61 percent of 13- to 18-year-olds and 57 percent of 19- to 25-year-olds reporting using it regularly. However, other researchers have placed this number closer to 25 percent (Lenhart, 2015; Mander, 2016). Still, in 2014, Tumblr overtook Instagram as the fastest-growing social platform (Lunden, 2014), and Tumblr is currently the second largest microblogging site, behind only Twitter (Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014). Microblogging sites are considered to be halfway between traditional blogging and social networking sites, containing intermediate quality content and intermediate social interactions. Two statistical analyses of Tumblr have been conducted, and researchers found that the most prevalent posts on Tumblr are photo (78 percent) and text (14 percent) posts, with quote, audio, video, chat, link, and answer posts remaining
relatively rare (Chang et al., 2014; Xu, Compton, Lu, & Allen, 2014). Despite Tumblr’s reputation as a visually driven microblogging platform, Howard (2012) found that the site includes many lengthy posts, including textual analyses and analyses of social issues.

A few authors have written about the ways in which young people use Tumblr as a site for authentic self-expression. Xiao (2013) suggested that Tumblr is the ideal social networking platform for teenagers and artists because its anonymity allows users the freedom to express themselves in a way they cannot on sites with mandatory name registration like Facebook. Indeed, many users consider Tumblr to be a “site of emotional authenticity” (Hart, 2015, p. 201). Renninger (2015) found that several of Tumblr’s structural features encourage the formation of communities of marginalized groups on the site. For instance, comments are de-emphasized, which de-incentivizes trolling, and private and anonymous forms of interaction are available. Oakley (2016) found that this is especially true for LGBTQ communities. Kanai (2015) examined young women’s productions of authentic individualities and authentic belonging through the performance of youthful femininities on Tumblr and suggested that young women employ strategies to negotiate the tension between demands of proving one’s “true and individual self” and the need to be recognized as “belonging in commonality.”

The anonymity and emotional openness of Tumblr has encouraged the formation of communities around common struggles with depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (See, e.g., Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss, Sowles, Connolly, Rosas, Bharadwaj, Grucza, & Bierut, 2017; Dobson, 2015; Seko & Lewis, 2016). Dobson (2015) interrogated the trend of self-injury and “cutting” Tumblr blogs and framed them as part of a larger trend of young women using social media to record their pain and suffering, seek supportive
communities, and search for help (p. 148). Seko and Lewis (2016) performed a visual narrative analysis of 294 posts in self-injury communities on Tumblr and found that photos depicting self-injury are decreasing in popularity in favor of memes expressing feelings of general hopelessness. Seko and Lewis (2016) emphasized the role that Tumblr blogs play for individuals in self-injury communities as means of “exploring, adopting, and rejecting the various discourse and cultural artifacts available to them” (p. 15).

Some research has focused upon Tumblr as a site of sexual discourse. Because Tumblr does not restrict sexually explicit content, unlike other social networking sites such as Facebook or Instagram, discourses and expressions of sexuality have thrived on the site. Zeglin and Mitchell (2014) found that individuals on Tumblr seem to consider intimacy as separate and distinct from sexuality, which they found alarming as sexual educators. Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015) found that practices of “self-shooting,” or sharing nude photos of oneself, were positive experiences for most individuals doing so on Tumblr. Tiidenberg (2016) found that in “self-shooter” communities, authenticity is highly valued. These studies show that communities coalescing around sexual content are common on Tumblr in comparison to other social networking sites and that these communities may vary widely.

Several scholars have evaluated Tumblr as a site of artistic creation and curation. Eler and Durbin (2013) examined what they called the “teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic,” which they described as an expression of a point of view. Expressions of this point of view take the form of “visual art, altered self-portraits, and writing that is personal and vulnerable” (Eler & Durbin, 2013). Valentine (2012) wrote about artists choosing to share their artworks exclusively on Tumblr, utilizing the site’s features as an aspect of the
art itself. Steinhauer (2013) suggested that what makes Tumblr an interesting medium is the fact that it “straddles the line between private and public” and that it “isn’t necessarily an art space, but neither is it a mundane and quotidian one.” Bianconi (2013) asserted that “the need to negotiate with media already in circulation” is central to Tumblr. Tumblr helps users do this by forcing them “to think abstractly about images, to face the collision between images” (Bianconi, 2013). The images shared on Tumblr allow individuals and artists to send “messages about their internal aesthetic state of consciousness at any given time” (Hovagimyan, 2013). Despite the multiplicity of ways individuals use Tumblr, usage almost always involves sharing images, and these images are typically understood as expressing something about the individuals sharing them.

**Current Research**

Clearly, some individuals have found young women’s interest in Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture worrisome because it seems to romanticize, glamorize, or otherwise celebrate sexual exploitation, underage sexualization, and/or women’s submissiveness. I expanded upon the literature above by describing the size and analyzing the expressive content of communities on Tumblr that share posts regarding Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. I sought to answer some of the questions raised by young women’s apparent interest in these topics on Tumblr. For instance, why might young women on Tumblr choose to share posts relating to Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture? How are these young women interpreting the images and texts they share? Is this a means of expressing sexuality or desire, or are these individuals subverting or parodying these images and ideas as a means of critiquing gender roles and expectations? More broadly, I sought to contribute to understanding the ways in which individuals use
Tumblr to make sense of themselves and of the societies in which they live. Evaluating these Tumblr communities using a technologies of sexiness framework may provide insight into the ways in which young women both perpetuate and resist postfeminist, neoliberal ideas online.

Methods

Textual analysis was chosen as the best method for examining Tumblr users’ understandings of Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. Defined as an “educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of [a] text,” textual analysis aids in understanding “the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). Knowledge of relevant “intertexts,” or texts “that audiences have on hand when they interpret [a] text,” is what makes a guess “educated” (McKee, 2003, p. 92). The primary text in this analysis is the content found on blogs of the top amplifiers of a post created by Tumblr user NymphetsLife (see explanation below). Some relevant “intertexts” include the blogs of the top contributors in the Lolita and Sugar Culture communities on Tumblr.

Data Collection

I used Union Metrics to identify influencers on Tumblr who create and share content relating to Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. Union Metrics is a cloud-based subscription software that provides social media analytics across Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr. Union Metrics allows users to set up “trackers,” which allow them to analyze public posts on Tumblr that contain one or more keywords, phrases, tags, or URLs. These trackers provide an overview of Tumblr “communities.”
Each community includes “contributors,” or “users who are creating content,” and “curators,” or “users who liked or reblogged [a] post” (Rogers, 2016a; Rogers, 2016b). Reblogging a post is equivalent to sharing a post, and amplifiers are users who reblogged a post and had many other users reblog it from them. “Notes” refer to the number of combined reblogs and likes that a post receives.

I set up two trackers, one labeled “Lolita” and one labeled “Sugar Culture.” I set up the Lolita tracker to collect and analyze posts that contained the keywords “Lolita” or “nymphet” as well as posts tagged with the keywords “loleeta,” “Lolita,” or “nymphet.” I excluded posts tagged with the keywords “Lolita fashion,” “NSFW” (not safe for work, usually denoting sexually explicit content), “porn,” “DDLG” (a common acronym for a sexual fetish involving “daddy doms” and “little girls”), or “DD/LG.” I set up the Sugar Culture tracker to collect and analyze posts that contained the keywords “sugar daddy” or “sugar baby” as well as posts tagged with the keywords “sugaring,” “sugar bowl,” or “sugar world.” I excluded posts tagged with the keywords “porn” or “NSFW.”

These trackers gathered data from October 16, 2016, to January 1, 2017. Union Metrics analyzed the data and created graphs showing the number of posts that were made, the number of notes these posts received, and the number of individuals who were active in the Sugar Culture and Lolita communities during this period. Additionally, Union Metrics ranked the most popular posts, post types (e.g. photo, text, video, etc.), contributors, curators, and tags in each community overall.

Sample

The Tumblr communities being studied are known in social network research as “networks of implicitly undirected ties” (Ackland & Zhu, 2015, p. 229). There are four
primary types of social networks that form on social networking sites. These include networks of implicitly directed ties, networks of explicitly directed ties, networks of implicitly undirected ties, and networks of explicitly undirected ties (Ackland & Zhu, 2015). Most online social networks are formed on the basis of one or more individuals confirming ties with other individuals by, for example, “following” them on Twitter (a network of explicitly undirected ties) or “friending” them on Facebook (a network of explicitly directed ties). An example of a network of implicitly directed ties is a forum such as Reddit in which users are only connected by commenting on the same thread. Networks of implicitly undirected ties, by contrast, involve individuals who may not recognize ties with one another but are grouped together by a researcher based on certain criteria. These types of networks are largely hidden or invisible because the connections are formed by researchers based on “co-usage or co-occurrence” of tags or keywords rather than by the individuals involved (Ackland & Zhu, 2015, p. 230). In this case, the networks, or communities, being studied were tied together through co-usage of certain keywords and tags.

Because the Lolita and Sugar Culture communities on Tumblr contained relevant intertexts that could aid in the understanding of the primary texts, I took a sample of 25 blogs from each community. This sample was chosen from the top contributors in each community, excluding irrelevant users. The blogs that were excluded from the sample included 47 Lolita fashion blogs, 38 pornography blogs, 12 deleted blogs, 11 miscellaneous blogs, six art blogs, five fan blogs, three food blogs, two DDLG blogs, two self-harm blogs, one book blog, and one quote blog.
To obtain the primary texts, I used the nonprobability sampling method known as snowball sampling, in which the sample is collected by identifying a case of interest, finding another case connected to that case, and so on until the desired sample size is reached. Although this methodology does not typically produce a sample population that is representative of the general population, this was not a deterring factor for this type of descriptive research. I collected my sample by identifying amplifiers of content created by the Tumblr user NymphetsLife, who was chosen due to relevance and popularity in both the Lolita and Sugar Culture communities.

NymphetsLife was ranked as one of the top ten most popular contributors in both the Lolita and Sugar Culture communities. NymphetsLife regularly created and shared images of Lolita and Lana Del Rey as well as quotes from Lolita and lyrics from Lana Del Rey songs. Additionally, NymphetsLife tagged many posts with “sugar daddy” and “sugar baby.” Therefore, NymphetsLife represented a Tumblr user at the intersection of the Lolita and Sugar Culture communities with an interest in Lana Del Rey. NymphetsLife was the most popular contributor in the Lolita community and the sixth most popular contributor in the Sugar Culture community, with over 28,000 notes in the period measured.

I chose to identify amplifiers of a NymphetsLife post containing a GIF (short for Graphics Interchange Format, a digital image file typically used to create looping animations created from multiple static images) of Lana Del Rey singing, “You can be my full time daddy,” shown in Figure 1. This post was chosen because it was tagged with the keywords “nymphet” and “sugar daddy,” thereby making an implicit connection between Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. The post received 1,386 notes in the
period measured, including 350 direct reblogs, 389 amplified reblogs, and 647 likes. I found 17 relevant post amplifiers, excluding four pornography blogs, two self-harm blogs, and two blogs that were deleted. Therefore, I had a primary sample size of 18 blogs in the NymphetsLife community, including NymphetsLife.

**Procedure**

I analyzed the data qualitatively using textual analysis. Texts were collected for analysis by scrolling through the blogs in the Sugar Culture sample, then the Lolita sample, and finally the primary sample. I scrolled through about fifty of each blog’s most recent posts. Additionally, I searched for key phrases such as “Lolita,” “Lana,” “daddy,” and “sugar” within each blog in order to identify content relating to Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. I made notes while browsing each blog, documenting content that represented a recurring theme as well as recurring words, phrases, images, and visual elements that might offer clues about how these communities understood and made sense of the content they created and shared. One thing that makes Tumblr a unique medium is the fact that users are able to customize the appearance and features of their blogs. Therefore, I also made notes of similarities in the appearance of blogs.

**Results**

**Sugar Culture Community**

According to Union Metrics, over 147,000 individuals were active in the Sugar Culture community on Tumblr between October 16, 2016, and January 1, 2017. During this period, over 28,000 posts were created regarding sugar culture, and these posts amassed almost 750,000 notes. Individuals in the Sugar Culture community on Tumblr exhibited postfeminist, neoliberal values, which were reflected in the advice they
provided, the images they curated, and the type of posts they shared. Additionally, individuals in the Sugar Culture community created and shared posts that suggested a connection between Lana Del Rey, Lolita, and sugar culture. Interestingly, many individuals in the Sugar Culture community expressed disappointment or disenchantment with the sugar baby lifestyle and discouraged other young women from pursuing it.

Many individuals in the Sugar Culture community shared advice with one another such as “how to stand out as a sugar baby,” “how to give amazing blow jobs,” “strategic sugar shopping,” and “how to become his dream girl even if you’re not.” This proliferation of advice reflected the postfeminist makeover paradigm because the advisors were treated as experts who could help inferior or lacking sugar babies improve. Additionally, the advice offered typically reflected the postfeminist and neoliberal emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline. For instance, in the post entitled “strategic sugar shopping,” the advisor suggested that sugar babies should monitor themselves when shopping in order to suit their sugar daddies’ preferences, money, and patience. Much of this advice also reflected the postfeminist emphasis on consumerism, the commodification of sexual difference, and the shift from objectification to subjectification. One sugar baby told her followers, “Sugaring is about marketing yourself as a luxury commodity worthy of investment,” and another told hers, “Time invested in yourself is never time wasted.” Sugar babies in this community were encouraged to view themselves and their bodies as commodities and investments, and this self-objectification was seen as an active and independent choice. Still, most individuals in the Sugar Culture community showed awareness that they were putting on a performance of femininity for their sugar daddies. One sugar baby wrote, “You’re
selling a fantasy. He wants to buy the lie. Sell it. Get paid. Collect that check, the end.”

Therefore, advice shared in the Sugar Culture community on Tumblr exhibited many elements of postfeminist, neoliberal culture, and individuals in this community expressed an awareness that their actions reflected male desires, but they framed their actions as autonomous, rational choices made in pursuit of money and power.

While advice posts were common in the Sugar Culture community, most individuals primarily posted photos on their blogs. The photos shared by individuals in this community tended to feature scenes of upscale living, luxury clothing, and even stacks of cash, as shown in Figure 2. This is representative of a postfeminist emphasis on consumerism. Some photos also prominently featured eroticized female body parts such as breasts and buttocks, as shown in Figure 3. This reflects the postfeminist notion that femininity is a bodily property. The fact that most of these photos were selfies seems to indicate a postfeminist emphasis on subjectification rather than straightforward objectification. The photos shared on blogs in the Sugar Culture community featured upscale living and eroticized female bodies, which reinforces and even glamorizes aspects of postfeminist, neoliberal culture.

There were several evident connections to Lolita and Lana Del Rey on many blogs in the Sugar Culture community. For instance, many users shared images that featured women holding lollipops in their mouths, which is an image that was commonly found in the Lolita community. Many individuals in the Sugar Culture community created and shared memes that reveal Del Rey’s supposed status as a sugar baby. Figure 4, which depicts a woman calling her sugar daddy after listening to Del Rey once, is a meme that indicates the influence of Del Rey upon many sugar babies. Figure 5 depicts
Pepe the Frog (a deliberately crudely drawn anthropomorphic frog, typically used as a vehicle to depict various emotions, in this case sadness) dressed as Del Rey and was shared with a caption that jokingly suggested that anyone who reblogged the image would “get a rich sugar daddy.” Another post declared that the “aesthetic” for 2016 was “wearing [Rihanna]’s fur collection and cute lingerie sets, drinking red wine and smoking a pink cigarette outside my sugar daddy’s patio while listening to Lana Del Rey’s Ultraviolence album.” These memes were imbued with a palpable sense of irony and knowingness that is characteristic of the postfeminist sensibility. Despite the sense of irony, these memes and images reveal that both Lolita and Lana Del Rey hold a special place in the imaginations of many individuals in the Sugar Culture community.

Despite the glamor, good humor, and freedom that individuals in the Sugar Culture community on Tumblr expressed, they seemed to also feel a sense of discontentment and disenchantment with the sugar baby lifestyle. Many posts were directed at potential sugar babies warning them about the downsides of the lifestyle. For instance, one sugar baby wrote, “Sugaring is emotionally draining. I would never recommend a young girl I know to do this. Never.” Another post was entitled “Reasons you shouldn’t be a sugar baby.” Still another sugar baby told teenagers eagerly waiting to turn 18 so that they could become sugar babies, “These old men will suck the life out of you.” The contradiction between this discontentment and the glamorous and confident posts of most individuals in the community can be explained using the technologies of sexiness framework. While the sugar baby lifestyle can provide women with financial security, sexual freedom, and cultural capital, it reproduces traditional gender roles in
which women are reliant on men for their financial well being and are responsible for fulfilling men’s desires potentially at the expense of their own.

**Lolita Community**

Between October 16, 2016, and January 1, 2017, over 121,000 individuals were active in the Lolita community on Tumblr. These individuals created over 30,000 posts regarding Lolita, which amassed over 630,000 notes in the period measured. Most individuals in the Lolita community used their blogs to curate visual content that often revolved around images found in *Lolita*. Many of the recurring motifs on these blogs, such as pink roses, lollipops, and heart-shaped sunglasses, also recur in the film adaptations of *Lolita*, and these blogs regularly shared images from these films. These motifs served to reinforce the postfeminist resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference. Additionally, Lana Del Rey seemed to be connected to both Lolita and sugar culture in the minds of these individuals. Many individuals in this community shared posts expressing depressive thoughts, which may indicate that some of these individuals blamed themselves for their failure to attain satisfaction within a postfeminist, neoliberal society.

The aesthetic of blogs in the Lolita community is epitomized by the screenshot of one of the blogs shown in Figure 6. In this screenshot, around a quarter of the images include flowers. Flowers of all kinds and pink roses in particular could be found all over the blogs in the Lolita community. Images of lollipops were constant, often featured in or near a pouting mouth, typically red, and frequently heart-shaped. Heart-shaped sunglasses were depicted on faces, alone, with *Lolita* novels, with lollipops, and in countless other scenarios, and many blogs included links where the accessories could be
purchased. The image shown in Figure 7, which depicts a girl in a blouse with a pink rose print, holding a red, heart-shaped lollipop and wearing heart-shaped sunglasses, encapsulates these three motifs.

The three recurring motifs of roses, lollipops, and heart-shaped sunglasses served the purpose of reinforcing ideas about natural differences between the sexes. The implications of these motifs are clear. Roses bring to mind fragility, romance, beauty, and love. Lollipops are associated with sweetness, youth, and in this context, sensuality and sexuality. Heart-shaped sunglasses are flirty, kitschy, and associated with Lolita. Recognizably feminine bodies frequently accompanied these motifs in the images shared by individuals in the Lolita community. For instance, the lollipop motif almost always appeared along with a glossy mouth, which reinforced the notion that females wear makeup and evoked oral sex. Roses were often depicted as prints on dresses and skirts, which are conventionally feminine clothing items. Heart-shaped sunglasses were typically shown being worn by women coquettishly posing for the camera, as in the promotional photo of Sue Lyon as Lolita in Figure 8. For individuals in this community, these motifs seemed to represent femininity, which was juxtaposed with masculinity, thereby reinforcing ideas of natural sexual difference.

Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture seemed to be connected in many of these individuals’ minds. Users frequently posted images from Lana Del Rey videos overlaid with quotes from Lolita, or images from Lolita overlaid with lyrics from Lana Del Rey, as shown in Figure 9. One user placed a GIF of Del Rey snarling at the camera next to a GIF of Sue Lyon as Lolita snarling at Humbert, as shown in Figure 10. This remixing of
media involving Lolita and Del Rey underscored the seemingly complementary nature of them as well as the blurring of the lines between them in many users’ minds.

This connection between Lolita and Lana Del Rey sometimes extended to sugar culture as well. For some, listening to Del Rey’s music created an emotional and cognitive connection to sugar culture. As one individual with the username Sad-Lolita put it, “I listen to so much Lana Del Rey I deserve a sugar daddy.” This post was steeped in irony, but it revealed an association of Del Rey with sugar culture nonetheless. Some in the Lolita community engaged in practices that could be viewed as extensions of sugar culture. For instance, many users featured links on their homepages with labels such as “spoil me” that redirected to their Amazon wishlists so that individuals wishing to buy them gifts could do so. Additionally, many users expressed a desire to have a sugar daddy but did not acknowledge the work involved in being a full-time sugar baby.

Many individuals in the Lolita community shared posts expressing depressed sentiments and a preoccupation with death and pain. For instance, one individual shared a post reading, “On all levels except for physical I am dead.” One individual entitled their blog “Fucked up doll” and their bio read “there’s nothing you could do to me I wouldn’t do to myself.” Many individuals in the Lolita community shared photos of knives, of bleeding wounds, and of bruises. These images were consistent with some of the self-injury trends on Tumblr described in other research. Within the technologies of sexiness framework, these depressive tendencies may be understood as a symptom of a postfeminist, neoliberal culture in which individuals, and especially women, are encouraged to see themselves as the source of their own unhappiness, failure, or struggles, rather than the culture or political structure in which they find themselves.
NymphetsLife Community

According to Union Metrics, over 36,000 users were active in both the Lolita and Sugar Culture communities on Tumblr in the period measured, including NymphetsLife. The connection between Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture was more explicit in the NymphetsLife community than in the Sugar Culture or Lolita communities. Individuals in the NymphetsLife community typically shared images that adhered to a more narrowly defined aesthetic than those in the other communities that were analyzed. This aesthetic heavily featured stereotypically feminine symbols such as cherries and flowers alongside symbols of violence and sadness such as blood and tears. Many of these blogs also shared and edited images from Lana Del Rey music videos and the two film adaptations of *Lolita*. The connection to sugar culture was evident in the proliferation of posts expressing a desire for a sugar daddy. The online behaviors of the individuals in this community reflected conditions of postfeminism as well as a sense of discontent with these conditions.

The aesthetic adhered to by many individuals in the NymphetsLife community is well represented in the screenshot of one individual’s blog, shown in Figure 11. This aesthetic heavily featured stereotypically feminine imagery such as teacups, flowers, hearts, and the color pink alongside violent imagery such as the snarling wolves with blood dripping from their teeth shown in the top right-hand corner of Figure 11.

Recurring symbols of femininity that were found on the blogs of the top amplifiers included the color pink, heart-shaped sunglasses, lollipops, cherries, flowers (typically pink roses), lingerie, and feminine bodies. Recurring symbols of violence and sadness included knives, tears, fire, blood, and bruises. Additionally, many of these blogs shared...
images that were explicitly sexualized and even pornographic. For instance, Figure 12 shows a mouth overflowing with moisture holding two cherries. This combination of youthful, feminine, violent, and sexualized images was a hallmark of the blogs in the NymphetsLife community.

Individuals in the Lolita community on Tumblr made explicit connections between Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. An image shared by NymphetsLife, shown in Figure 13, exemplifies this connection. The image depicts Del Rey posing in front of a billboard for a sugar-dating website that reads, “Need a Summer Job? Date a SUGAR DADDY.” Another individual went by the username DollyDelRey, used a profile image depicting a single pair of bright red, heart-shaped sunglasses, and had a header photo that depicted Del Rey. This user shared a post reading, “Wanted: a sugar daddy who transfers money into my account for nothing in return other than a selfie with a smile on my face,” as well as another reading, “Concept: an online sugar daddy that sends money for nothing in return.” All of these posts and images were shared with a sense of irony and knowingness, but they still revealed the explicit connection many of these users made between Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. It is clear that these individuals were not actually sugar babies and were not interested in entering real sugar arrangements. Many individuals in this community expressed a casual interest in sugar culture as a concept without expressing any interest in becoming a sugar baby professionally, which may indicate a disapproval of or disinterest in the sexual power exchanges inherent in a sugar arrangement.

By sharing posts that are youthful, feminine, violent, and sexualized, individuals in the NymphetsLife community both complied with and rebelled against postfeminist
values. The symbols of femininity shared by these individuals served to reinforce postfeminist values of natural sexual difference much like the symbols shared by individuals in the Lolita community. Because many of these images were sexualized, they also reflect the postfeminist sexualization of culture. While the proliferation of these types of images suggests an adaptation by these individuals to postfeminist media culture, the simultaneous popularity of violent and melancholy images reveals a small rebellion against and a significant discontent with this culture. This aligns with a technologies of sexiness framework in which women are simultaneously freed and limited by postfeminism.

**Choking**

Throughout the Sugar Culture community, the Lolita community, and the NymphetsLife community, choking was mentioned multiple times. Choking is seen as a socially deviant erotic activity, or a kink. Incorporating choking into sexual relations typically involves pressing not on the windpipe but on the arteries of the neck in order to inhibit oxygen flow to the brain, causing lightheadedness. However, most of the posts regarding choking were entangled with darker and more complicated sentiments of depression, suicidality, and self-injury. For instance, one particularly popular post read, “highkey [explicitly or publicly]: want 2 b choked 4 the kink. lowkey [implicitly or privately]: hope the choke kills me.” This element of suicidality was present in many posts about choking, including a post that read, “casually choke me until I die,” as well as one reading, “plz choke me. either in a sexual way or a lethal way. I’m not picky.” These posts are imbued with a sense of irony that is characteristic of the postfeminist sensibility, which serves to establish distance between the individuals sharing the posts and the
troubling sentiments they are expressing. These sentiments reflect the association of sex with a series of juxtaposed ideas—youth and death, pleasure and pain, freedom and constraint, and happiness and discontent—in these Tumblr communities. This aligns with the technologies of sexiness framework in which neoliberalism and postfeminism are understood as providing women with possibilities that are both empowering and disempowering. When women are not able to achieve a sense of self-actualization or satisfaction from the choices with which they are presented, they are encouraged to assume that they themselves are the reason for this failure rather than the choices they are presented with or the system in which they live. It is not difficult to imagine this situation leading one to indulge in self-destructive fantasies or behaviors.

Discussion

In my research, I sought to determine the size and analyze the expressive content of communities on Tumblr that create and share posts regarding Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture. I also sought to answer questions arising from the existence and popularity of these communities. For instance, why might young women on Tumblr choose to share posts relating to these things? How are these young women interpreting the images and texts they share? Is this a means of expressing sexuality or desire, or are these individuals subverting or parodying these images and ideas as a means of critiquing gender roles and expectations? More broadly, I sought to gain an understanding of the ways in which individuals in these communities use Tumblr to make sense of themselves as women and of the society in which they live.

The Sugar Culture, Lolita, and NymphetsLife communities provide examples of the ways in which some young women participate in and make sense of postfeminist,
neoliberal social conditions. I found that between October 16, 2016, and January 1, 2017, hundreds of thousands of individuals were active in these communities, that they created and shared tens of thousands of posts, and that these posts amassed over one million notes in the period measured. Tumblr provided individuals in these communities a means of both reproducing and critiquing these social conditions by sharing and receiving advice, sharing jokes and ideas, and curating images that adhered to a certain aesthetic. Individuals in these communities seemed to interpret Lolita and Lana Del Rey as examples of a certain type of performative femininity which they strove to embody. Sharing images and quotes from both *Lolita* and Lana Del Rey seemed to be a means for these individuals to express sexual desire using the cultural artifacts available to them. Sugar culture, then, was seen as a means of earning the money necessary to satisfactorily embody the type of consumer-oriented femininity exemplified by Lolita and Lana Del Rey.

The aesthetic of the Sugar Culture community involved images of luxurious consumer goods and sexualized female bodies. In the Lolita community, the aesthetic revolved around symbols of femininity found in *Lolita*: pink roses, lollipops, and heart-shaped sunglasses. The NymphetsLife community combined these symbols of femininity with symbols of violence and melancholy, which may indicate discontent with the postfeminist, neoliberal social conditions in which they live. This mirrors Seko and Lewis’s (2016) finding that individuals may use Tumblr as a means of “exploring, adopting, and rejecting the various discourse and cultural artifacts available to them” (p. 15). The aesthetic adhered to by many individuals in the NymphetsLife community is exemplary of a peculiar type of femininity, which is at once submissive and rebellious,
soft and sharp, naïve and jaded. It brings to mind Beauvoir’s (1972) description of the 
“new Eve” who combines the “green fruit” and “femme fatale” archetypes in order to 
reestablish the distance between men and women that seems necessary to foster sexual 
and romantic desire (p. 10).

Sugar culture influenced each of these communities to varying degrees. Most 
individuals in the Sugar Culture community made a living as sugar babies and considered 
themselves to be sex workers. Individuals in the Lolita community engaged in some 
aspects of sugar culture. For instance, many of them posted links on their blogs to 
Amazon wishlists so that followers could purchase them gifts and shared posts expressing 
a desire for sugar daddies. Individuals in the NymphetsLife community expressed a 
desire for a sugar daddy who would give them money and buy them gifts for nothing in 
return, acknowledging that the actual sugar baby lifestyle is not desirable, a statement 
many in the Sugar Culture community confirmed. Individuals in all of these communities 
seemed to recognize their own embodied femininities as performative and seemed to 
consider sugaring to be a means of gaining the funds necessary to maintain a 
satisfactorily feminine appearance.

Lana Del Rey holds a central place in the imaginations of many individuals in 
these communities. She demonstrates the possibility of actualizing the femininity for 
which many of these young women seem to be striving. At the same time, she openly 
expresses the profound feelings of disappointment, injustice, and hopelessness that many 
of these young women seem to feel. When she sings, “I’m a sad girl, I’m a sad girl/ I’m a 
bad girl, I’m a bad girl,” she articulates the tendency for young women negotiating 
postfeminist, neoliberal social conditions to locate their failures within themselves rather
than within the systems that limit them (Del Rey & Nowels, 2014). Furthermore, she provides an example of the ways in which the humiliation, pain, and subordination inflicted on young women by a postfeminist, neoliberal society may be experienced as pleasurable. This is evident in lyrics such as “He hit me and it felt like a kiss” (Del Rey & Heath, 2014b) as well as in her music videos in which she is shown in the throes of ecstasy while being choked (Del Rey, 2012). Therefore, by sharing images of Lana Del Rey as well as lyrics to her songs, individuals in the Sugar Culture, Lolita, and NymphetsLife communities revealed the ways in which they identify with her music, her image, and what she represents, which seems to be the disenchancing and unfulfilling experience of conforming to postfeminist, neoliberal social conditions.

The popularity of posts in these communities conflating choking, eroticism, and suicidality illustrates the limitations of postfeminism, neoliberalism, and technologies of sexiness. This finding reinforces and expands Zeglin and Mitchell’s (2014) research, which found that individuals on Tumblr considered sexuality to be divorced from intimacy, and vice versa. These findings also suggest that Beauvoir’s (1972) observation that media establish distance between men and women that seems necessary to desire is continuing today and that social networking sites like Tumblr allow individuals to establish and maintain this distance themselves rather than relying on Hollywood to do so. However, these individuals still relied on imagery and tropes created by Hollywood and the music industry, as evidenced by the prevalence of images from Lolita and Lana Del Rey music videos. This aligns with Bianconi’s (2013) suggestion that Tumblr encourages users to negotiate with and think abstractly about media already in existence as well as Seko and Lewis’s (2016) finding that Tumblr may be used by individuals as a
means of “exploring, adopting, and rejecting the various discourse and cultural artifacts available to them” (p. 15). Therefore, although individuals in these communities may have employed irony and knowingness in an attempt to distance themselves from the ideas, images and texts they shared, their posts reveal the influence of both current and past media culture on their own knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors.

By remixing images and words from Lolita and Lana Del Rey and associating them with aspects of sugar culture, these Tumblr communities have created a unique new phenomenon and aesthetic which still contains echoes of the past, including a sexually exploitative film industry that normalizes the sexualization of young bodies and the “Lolita Syndrome” described by Beauvoir (1972). This aligns with Evans and Riley’s (2014) technologies of sexiness framework, in which women are understood as being able to act freely, “but not in the context of their own making, nor with technologies that are discursively or symbolically neutral” (p. 135). Individuals in these communities expressed their emotions and desires in a neoliberal, postfeminist context using Tumblr, a visually driven medium that may serve to perpetuate objectification and self-surveillance. The images created and shared by individuals in these communities are politically significant because they reveal the ways that young women use Tumblr as a mechanism with which to navigate postfeminist, neoliberal social conditions in which women are limited by social, economic, and political pressures, and are simultaneously led to believe that these pressures hold no influence over their individual lives or behaviors.

Additionally, as Hovagimyan (2013) found, the images shared on Tumblr allow individuals and to send “messages about their internal aesthetic state of consciousness at any given time.” Therefore, the prevalence of posts expressing depressive, suicidal, and
self-destructive ideas indicates that these individuals may have experienced the failures of neoliberalism and postfeminism as personal or individual failures. This insight may help feminists develop more effective ways of communicating with young people about gender issues. Rather than criticize them or lament their seemingly anti-feminist actions, feminists may have more success pointing out to these young people that the discontent they are experiencing is the result of a neoliberal system that sets them up for failure.

**Limitations**

This research was limited by the difficulty of searching and analyzing Tumblr. The software used to collect and analyze the data only allowed the collection and analysis of data for a three-month period. Many posts and blogs that would have been useful in this research may have gone undetected due to many individuals’ lack of tagging and captioning photos. Additionally, some users may have tagged posts with keywords simply to gain followers or clicks, which could have influenced the measurements of these communities. Furthermore, my sampling method was biased toward blogs with large numbers of followers.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Moving forward, researchers interested in studying the Sugar Culture community might analyze its racial, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics. In the future, researchers might analyze other media or communities online to determine whether these findings extend to other groups with other interests. Researchers may also continue to test the relevance of Gill’s (2007b) concept of postfeminism and Evans et al.’s (2010) concept of technologies of sexiness as theoretical frameworks. In light of the popularity
and influence of *Lolita*, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture among young women, these topics should continue to be researched in the context of gendered social issues.
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Figures

*Figure 1.* NymphetsLife post showing Lana Del Rey singing, “You can be my full time daddy.” The post was tagged with the words “nymphet” and “sugar daddy,” thereby making an implicit connection between Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture.

*Figure 2.* A screenshot of a blog in the Sugar Culture community. Many photos shared by individuals in the Sugar Culture community featured scenes of luxurious living.
Figure 3. A screenshot of a blog in the Sugar Culture community. Selfies posted by individuals in the Sugar Culture community tended to feature eroticized female body parts such as breasts and buttocks.

*listens to Lana Del Rey once*

Figure 4. A meme that circulated in the Sugar Culture community which jokingly suggested that listening to Lana Del Rey once will prompt one to find a sugar daddy. This meme revealed the influence that Lana Del Rey has on many sugar babies.
Figure 5. A meme that circulated in the Sugar Culture community, which depicted Pepe the Frog dressed up like Lana Del Rey, the caption of which jokingly claimed that anyone that reblogged the image would get a rich sugar daddy. This meme revealed the strong association of Lana Del Rey with sugar culture.

Figure 6. A screenshot of one of the blogs in the Lolita community. Individuals in this community curated visual content featuring variations on motifs from *Lolita*, such as pink roses, lollipops, and heart-shaped sunglasses.
Figure 7. An image from a blog in the Lolita community featuring pink roses, red lollipops, and heart-shaped sunglasses. Almost all of the blogs in the Lolita community included images featuring variations on these three motifs.

Figure 8. A photograph of Sue Lyons taken to promote the 1962 Lolita film adaptation. Individuals in the Lolita community on Tumblr often shared similar photos of girls and women in heart-shaped sunglasses coquettishly posing for the camera.
Figure 9. A photograph of Sue Lyons taken to promote the 1962 Lolita film adaptation overlaid with a lyric from Lana Del Rey’s song “Lolita.” Individuals in the Lolita community frequently shared images from Lolita overlaid with quotes from Lana Del Rey songs or images from Lana Del Rey music videos overlaid with quotes from Lolita.

Figure 10. An image of Lana Del Rey snarling at the camera (left) and Sue Lyon as Lolita snarling at Humbert (right). One user created a post placing these images side by side, making an explicit connection between Lana Del Rey and Lolita.
Figure 11. A screenshot of an individual’s blog. The images shared by individuals in the NymphetsLife community adhered closely to the aesthetic demonstrated by the images in this screenshot, which involves a combination of youthful, feminine, violent, and sexualized images.

Figure 12. A sexualized image of a mouth overflowing with moisture holding two cherries between the lips shared by an individual in the NymphetsLife community. Many images shared by individuals in this community were sexualized and even pornographic.
Figure 13. Lana Del Rey posing in front of a billboard for a sugar-dating website that reads, “Hey students, need a summer job? Date a SUGAR DADDY.” This image, shared by user NymphetsLife, exemplifies the connections made by the NymphetsLife community between Lolita, Lana Del Rey, and sugar culture.