Department of Sociology
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The Path to the Soft Life

Exploring the Blesser Phenomenon in South Africa

Abstract

South Africa has one of the highest incidences of HIV in the world and young women are disproportionally affected. Scholars have pointed to the practice of Transactional Sexual Relationships (TSR) as a driving force behind HIV incidences among young women. However, research devoted towards understanding TSR and why women engage in these relationships remains debated. In 2016, the Blesser-phenomena, a type of TSR, surfaced on South African social media, but is yet to receive sufficient and comprehensive scholarly attention. Given the contested findings of TSR and limited research on the Blesser-phenomena, further exploration is fundamental. Blesser's are often identified as older and wealthy men who provide financial and material resources to younger women, identified as Blesses, in exchange for sex or companionship. The aim of this thesis is therefore to gain insight as to how women characterize Blesser-relationships and motivate their engagement in them. Thus, contributing with information that may be valuable for policymakers and researchers concerned with the broader HIV-endemic in South Africa. Based on empirical data collected through in-depth interviews with South African women who have first-hand experience of Blesser-relationships, Bourdieu's Theory of Capital and Social Exchange Theory are used to analyze the motivations and characteristics. Findings suggest that women's motivations to engage are predominantly rooted in a desire for economic support. Furthermore, an aspiration for a prestigious lifestyle was found to be a central motivation, commonly showcased on social media as a "Soft Life".

Keywords: Transactional Sexual Relationships, Blesser, Blesse, HIV, South Africa

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1   Introduction

South Africa has one of the highest incidences of HIV in the world (World Bank, 2023a). Young women are disproportionally affected, carrying "the burden of HIV incidence" (Zuma et al, 2022:7). Considerable research has demonstrated a correlation between the practice of Transactional Sexual Relationships (TSR) and HIV among women (Kilburn et al, 2018; Wamoyi et al, 2016, McCloskey et al, 2020) Principally, TSR can be described as a type of relationship centered around the exchange of sex or companionship for material or monetary gains (Meskó et al, 2021). Further, TSR are mostly characterized through an age-discrepancy, in which older and wealthier men provide gifts, financial or material goods to younger women (Zembe et al, 2013, Pulerwitz et al, 2021, Dunkle et al, 2007). The links of TSR to HIV are pluralistic. For example, TSR has been associated with multiple risk factors such as multiple partners, age-disparate sex, and non-condom use (UNAIDS, 2018). Furthermore, contemporary views postulate that TSR is distinct from sex-work, given that the exchange occurs in the context of a relationship, the negotiation of the relationship is not clearly stated and the fact that those engaged within TSR differentiate themselves from formal sex-work (Zembe et al, 2013; Ranganathan et al, 2017, Leclerc-Madlala, 2003).

TSR has received much scholarly attention in Sub-Saharan Africa, producing varied findings and contested meanings associated with the term, as well as creating diverging opinions on why women engage in them (Stoebenau et al, 2016). Some scholars (see.eg. Mampane, 2018, Hallman, 2004) highlight that TSR is primarily motivated by securing basic needs and thus largely defined the practice as a survival method in which women have little choice but to engage (Ranganathan et al, 2018). Historically this has been the most dominating perception of TSR (Stoebenau et al, 2016; Ranganathan et al, 2018). In the other narrative, scholars raise the issue that TSR is motivated by a desire to acquire luxury goods and a prestigious lifestyle (see e.g. Leclerc-Madlala, 2003, Groes-Green, 2013). In this way, TSR is understood as an economic strategy, in which women secure their aspirational desires. Other scholars emphasize how love and emotionality are embedded in women's motivations and meanings behind TSR (see.eg Hunter, 2010; Wamoyi, 2010).

In 2016, a new type of TSR appeared on South African social media, characterized as "Blesser-relationships" (Palfreman, 2020; Mampane, 2018). A "Blesser" is defined as an older man who can provide lavish gifts to a "Blesse", a younger woman (Mampane, 2018). In return, Blesses exchange sexual practices and companionship (Mampane, 2018; Zawu, 2022). On social media, South African women often showcase pictures of their received luxury items from their Blessers, utilizing the hashtag #Blessed (Palfreman, 2020), which has in turn impelled a Blesser-culture (Zawu, 2022). While some recent literature has investigated this topic (see e.g. Palfreman, 2020; Doyisa, 2019), the amount of research that have been devoted towards the emerging Blesser-phenomena arguably remains limited. This motivates further research to be conducted.

The distinguished complexity and "slipperiness" (Duby et al, 2021; 3239) of meanings associated with TSR, as well as the contested explanations for women's motivations to engage in them, makes it imperative to further investigate how women motivate their engagement and characterize these relationships (Sidoyi, 2023; Duby et al, 2021). This investigation probes importance given the limited literature that exists on the relatively new and emerging Blesser-relationship (Zawu, 2022; (Palfreman, 2020). Further, the investigation is important as it has taken on a new form in the context of social media, in which women are publicly and deliberately showcasing their "Blesser-experiences", probing the need to re-investigate their motivations and characterizations, as well as grasp the potential nuances. Currently, to the knowledge of the author, there is no literature who have interviewed participants who are deliberately showcasing their Blesser-experiences on social media. This research builds on in-depth interviews with South African women who have first-hand experience with Blesser-relationships and publicly showcased and vocalized it on social media. A deeper investigation behind their engagement in Blesser-relationships can contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon, as well as provide important information for interventions and HIV mitigation strategies.

1.1   Research Aims

The thesis will build upon previous research proposals by the author (see Höjer, 2021a, 2021b, 2023) and a seminar group presentation (see Höjer et al. 2021) but differs in that actual data has been collected and the theoretical framework and sampling method have been

changed. Principally, this thesis aims to further explore what women perceive as the main characteristics of Blesser-relationships and investigate their motivations for engaging in them. Here, meeting the complexity of the phenomenon is central for designing more effective policies to tackle the HIV-endemic in South Africa. The focus on women's experiences and motivations for engaging in Blesser-relationships is thus derived from a broader concern to address HIV among young women in South Africa, with the purpose of contributing with important information to enhance future HIV-responses. The research questions will thus be:

1) *What do the participants perceive as the main characteristics of Blesser-relationships?*
2) *How do the participants motivate their engagement in Blesser-relationships?*

In question 1, how the participants perceive the main characteristics of Blesser-relationships may be understood as connected to their experience and feelings of having been, or currently being, in such a relationship. Thus, the feelings and experiences voiced during the interviews will be accounted for when trying to answer this question. In question 2, the aim is to understand what motivates the participants to engage in the Blesser-relationships in the first place. By understanding the motivations behind women's engagement in Blesser-relationships, it expands the possibility to develop better policies that more accurately reflect women's desires and reasonings behind Blesser-relationships, especially given the "slipperiness" (Duby, 2021:3239) of previous findings.

To answer the research questions, the thesis will use Bourdieu's Theory of Capital and Social Exchange Theory. The interplay of these theories can assist in providing a well-rounded analysis not only on women's aspirations towards different forms of capital, but also gaining insight into the power dynamics that may characterize Blesser-relationships. Furthermore, the use of in-depth interviews can enable a richer understanding of the lived-in experiences of the participants but does not intend to draw representative conclusions of a broader population (Denscombe, 2010:41).

1.2   Outline of the Thesis

The thesis will proceed with Chapter 2, which is a literature review of the contested findings of TSR, highlighting the conceptual rigidity of TSR as well as women's differing motivations

to engage. Based on the previous research, a theoretical framework is developed and motivated in Chapter 3, which will later be used as the point departure for the empirical analysis. Subsequently, the method used to collect data is motivated and elaborated on in Chapter 4. Here, the ethical considerations of the study are also discussed. Thereafter, Chapter 5 presents the empirical analysis, in which the data collected from the interviews is analyzed and discussed through the lens of the theoretical framework. Lastly, the thesis closes with a concluding discussion of the findings and implications for future research.

2   Literature Review

Transactional Sexual Relationships and women's motivations in Sub-Sharan Africa has received far-reaching scholarly attention. Within the literature, there is a clear dichotomy, prominently identified by Luke & Kurz (2002), which either represents women as passive victims or as active agents within TSR. Additionally, Stoebenau et al (2016) has identified three updated prominent paradigms within the literature of TSR. The following sections utilizes Luke & Kurz's (2002) dichotomous representations and Stoebenau et al's (2016) three paradigms as a structure for the literature review to illuminate the contested conceptualizations of TSR, as well as reflect women's debated motivations for engaging in these relationships.

2.1   Women as Prostitutes

In the early studies of TSR in Sub-Saharan Africa, essentially all forms of sexual exchange relationships were understood and categorized as "prostitution" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). The term "prostitution" was derived from a Western epidemiological paradigm that was dominant in the early stages of the HIV-epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa (Stoebenau et al, 2016). This paradigm heavily relied on a bio-medical discourse, which essentially identified all elements of sexual exchange relationships as a "risk group" (de Zalduondo, 1991:224). As such, African women were viewed as "promiscuous" (Seidel, 1993:176) and as a "reservoir of HIV-infection" (Seidel, 1993:176). Scholars such as de Zalduondo (1991) criticized this paradigm for producing and applying a universal and morally charged understanding of "prostitution" cross-culturally to all forms sexual exchange, without personalizing and contextualizing the women under investigation (Zaldunondo, 1991:225). Similarly, Ankrah (1989) raised the importance of distinguishing between the professional prostitution that is known in the West and prostitution of poverty that is evident in developing countries (Ankrah, 1989:272). Scholars such as Parker (2001) called for the need to contextualize TSR and embrace the cultural and structural factors that shaped sexual exchange relationships. There was thus a

shift away from the "experience-distant" (Parker, 2001:167) concepts of the bio-medical discourse to "experience-near" (Parker, 2001:167) meanings of specific societies (Parker, 2001). Subsequently, the literature therefore turned to emphasize the socio-economic factors that drove TSR. This was viewed as less Eurocentric and a more accurate way of understanding Transactional Sexual Relationships (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003).

2.2   Women as Vulnerable

The following sections utilizes and teases out Luke & Kurz's (2002) dichotomous representations of women as victims or agents and Stoebenau et al's (2016) three paradigms of sex for basic needs, improved social status or material expressions of love. The first perception essentially finds that women are vulnerable and submissive to their larger structural and cultural factors (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Stoebenau et al 2016; Feilding-Miller & Dunkle, 2017). Women are thereby largely understood as being dictated by their external forces, such as their economic vulnerabilities, family pressure or socio-cultural norms of male dominance (Luke & Kurz, 2002).

Furthermore, findings within this portrayal points to gendered poverty and how men's privileged access to economic resources forces women to become more dependent on men for economic survival (Stoebenau et al, 2016; Ulin, 1992; Luke & Kurz, 2002). Quantitative studies in South Africa have found that women's economic vulnerabilities, such as a lack of income and food insecurity, are associated with women's engagement in TS as this enables them to secure basic needs (see e.g. Hallman, 2004; Tomlay et al, 2022). Similarly, qualitative findings by Freedman et al (2021) found, in the context of Madagascar, that poverty, including money for food, housing and education operated as the crucial reason for women's engagement in TS. Likewise, in the context of Malawi, Gichane et al (2021) found that socioeconomic factors of unemployment and lack of savings were associated with engagement in TSR. Furthermore, quantitative evidence from South Africa suggests that women with higher education are less likely to engage in TSR (Dunkle et al, 2004). Thus, women's structural vulnerabilities are central and largely understood as a crucial determinator in women's decisions to engage in "risky" (Krishnan et al, 2008) sexual behavior, such as TSR. In the context of Uganda, Miller et al (2010) found that young women's structural economic constraints, such as their insecure livelihoods operated as a central factor towards

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their participation in TSR. In this context, TSR was thus found to be a way for women to obtain basic households needs and money, as well as alleviating food deprivation (Miller et al, 2010). Furthermore, they found that women describe TSR as a product of desperation, especially in the case of women also needing to alleviate their children's hunger (Miller et al, 2010). Similarly, scholars such as Selepe et al (2017) and van der Heijden & Swartz (2014) found how young women, in the context of South Africa and Botswana, felt obligated and pressured into TSR to assist their families financially with economic necessities such as money for food. In this way, TSR is thus largely understood as women's survival strategy to assure basic needs such as food, shelter, electricity, and healthcare for themselves or their families (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Hunter, 2002).

Furthermore, scholars highlight how the economic asymmetry between men and women that underpins TSR, results in women feeling constrained in terms of their personal autonomy, including their ability to negotiate terms of the relationship (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Stoebenau et al, 2016). This includes factors such women's ability to decide the terms and development of the relationship, as well as their ability to demand safer sexual practices, such condom-use (see e.g. Kaufman & Stavrou, 2002; Dunkle et al, 2007; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001). For example, in the context of South Africa, Mchunu et al (2020) found that demanding condom-use would evoke a source of conflict for young women engaged in TSR and could result in women feeling unable to enforce consistent condom-use. Further, they found that economic dependency on TSR due to unemployment could strain their ability to negotiate condom-use, for some women. Similarly, in the context of South Africa, Mampane (2018) found that constrained economic living conditions among women, such as an inability to find work and low levels of education, played significant role in their decisions to engage in a Blesser-relationships, which in turn lowered their decision-making power within the relationships. His findings revealed that women were unwillingly participating in Blesser-relationships to make a living. Moreover, he found that women faced difficulties in negotiating sexual practices within their Blesser, such as demanding condom use. Therefore, women's role within the interactions of TSR is largely understood through a vulnerability lens, which strains their ability to negotiate the terms of the relationship (Hoss & Blokland, 2018). Moreover, some scholars' point to women's vulnerability and subordination in TSR by emphasizing inequitable gender norms (Stoebenau et al, 2016; Luke & Kurz, 2002). In Tanzania, Howard-Merrill et al (2022) illuminates male perspectives and experiences on TSR and men's capability to provide and control women becomes "a marker of manhood" (Howard-Merrill et

al, 2022:260). Additionally, in different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Pulerwitz et al (2021) highlight how women often need to be compliant to men's terms within TSR, which especially exacerbates the autonomy of women who heavily rely on their partners for financial and subsistence support.

2.3   Women as Agents

The other narrative "Sex for improved social status" (Stoebenau et al, 2016:186) instead finds women to be social agents, as opposed to passive victims, who actively and rationally select their partners and sexual behavior (Luke & Kurz, 2002:6). Here, Lentoor (2022) found that female university students in South Africa involved in Blesser-relationships enacted and expressed agency in their ability to fulfill wishes of social acceptance and expensive commodities. However, these findings also showcased that the gifts and material support received from the Blessers increased the negotiation power of the Blessers, which strained the Blesses decision-making power. Correspondingly, Doyisa (2019) found, in the case of South African female university students, that engagement in Blesser-relationships were largely rooted in a desire for material gain such as designer clothing and being able to live a prestigious lifestyle. However, the material benefits and gifts within the Blesser-relationships were also found to make women feel obliged to agree with their Blesser's terms. In turn, this could also result in compromising their ability to negotiate (Doyisa, 2019).

Therefore, a central theme within this literature is the notion that TSR and Blesser-relationships can be motivated by a relative deprivation, instead of absolute poverty, in which women desire for an upscale and upward lifestyle, as well as its concomitant status (Stoebenau et al, 2016). Hunter (2002) echoes this standpoint by showcasing how TSR operates differently in two separate communities, where one was an informal settlement and the other a township. He explains this by women's differing socio-economic position by distinguishing between "sex linked to subsistence" (Hunter, 2002:101) and "sex linked to consumption" (Hunter, 2002:101). In the informal settlement, women rely on TSR for economic survival and in the township, women utilize TSR to extract consumption goods in the forms of gifts, which stems from an active decision (Hunter, 2002). A central point is thus how in the Township, women's subsistence needs are met, hence engaging in TSR stems from a motivation that comes from relative deprivation, specifically a desire for luxury and

expensive goods, rather than subsistence needs (Hunter, 2002). Similarly, Leclerc-Madlala (2003) mirrors this by highlighting how women in South Africa express a new form of "needs", which are the necessities and symbols of a glamours lifestyle, including things such as designer clothing, expensive jewelry, and mobile phones. Here, she finds that some women may utilize TSR in an instrumental manner to achieve these symbols of a prosperous and successful lifestyle, which in turn elevates their status. Additionally, Moodley & Ebrahim (2019) draws attention to the fact that women who engage in Blesser-relationships are usually the ones who have pursued Blessers, as well as the fact that they display and demonstrate their status as blesses with "pride" (Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019: 29) on social media.

More recent studies by Ranganathan et al (2018) and Zawu (2022) support this through their findings on women's motivations for TSR and Blesser-relationships in differing parts of South Africa. In these contexts, women's aspiration for an upscale and modern-lifestyle, desire to enhance their self-esteem and improving their socio-economic status was linked to their motivations for engaging in Blesser-relationships. Ranganathan et al (2018) demonstrates women's relative deprivation by showcasing how women's consumption patterns within TSR are linked to a modern lifestyle, including self-enhancement and luxurious items, as opposed to practical and subsistence items in rural South Africa. Mushonga & Dzingirai (2022) showcase how in the context of TSR in Zimbabwe, when women acquired a glamourous lifestyle, it simultaneously yielded other women's respect, allowing them to "become somebody" (Mushonga & Dzingirai, 2022:5). Additionally, as Luke & Kurz (2002) highlights, within this portrayal, scholars such as Meekers & Calvés, (1997) found that women may even utilize TSR as a tool to meet high-prestige and influential people, thus accessing sources of social capital and social power, which can assist them in making job-contacts and heightening career prospects, thus sponsoring women's path of upward social mobility. Further, Masvawure (2010) demonstrates how in the context of a university in Zimbabwe, female students utilize TSR to compete for social status, which is demonstrated by flashing their ability to consistently eat out at restaurants, purchase fashionable clothes and hairdos (Masvawure, 2010). This lifestyle enabled female students to elevate themselves over their fellow students (Masvawure, 2010). Additionally, Shefer et al (2012) highlights that female students engaged in TSR to gain a sense of belonging and confidence on university campus. Conclusively, Sidloyi (2023) found that although women's engagement in Blesser-relationships in South Africa came from a position of agency, rooted in their expressed ability to actualize their lifestyle goals through Blesser-relationships, they

also expressed a financial dependency. She explains that this resulted in a compromising effect on their assertiveness, such as having less power in negotiating terms of the relationship.

2.4 Women as Seeking Love

Other studies, such as Hunter (2002), note the complexity of TSR in the context of South Africa, in which individuals engaged in TSR construe themselves as "boyfriends" and "girlfriends", and thus argues that it cannot be equated with prostitution. Similarly, Hunter (2010) echoes this notion by voicing how in South Africa, TSR, in most cases, does not take place in the context of "prostitutes and clients" (Hunter, 2010:16) but rather as boyfriends and girlfriends. Scholars such as Bhana & Pattman (2011) highlights how previous scholars have overlooked central expressions and ideals of love that exists within TSR and has instead reduced TSR to components of danger, disease, and oppression (Bhana & Pattman, 2011). To elucidate this point of view, Bhana & Pattman (2011) emphasizes how love, emotionality, security, and money is inevitably and inextricably linked for young women in a South African township. Specifically, Bhana & Pattman (2011) reveal that young women conceptualize love through men's ability to fulfill their aspirations of an upward, middle-class lifestyle, hereby their ability to provide security and material goods (Bhana & Pattman, 2011).

Similarly, scholars such (Wamoyi et al, 2010) highlights how young women in rural Tanzania view the material exchange in TSR as a way for men to express their affection, security, and love for their sexual partner. Providing gifts and monetary goods to a partner was viewed as a natural expectation if a man was to prove his love and his eligibility to marriage (Wamoyi et al, 2010). The size and regularity of men's gift-giving heightened this eligibility for marriage as it was seen as a signifier for someone who could provide for them in the long-term (Wamoyi et al, 2010). Hunter (2010) puts forward a concept which he calls "provider love" (Hunter, 2010:15) which refers to the fact that the gendered expectations of providing materiality and gift-exchange is meaningful and is exemplified when men pay "lobola" (Hunter, 2010). The practice of lobola, a longstanding tradition in South Africa and Africa, which is also known as bride-price, occurs when men pay the family of the woman he intends to marry (Mampane, 2018). In this view, TSR is thus understood as, and derived from, an extension of these ideals and practices (Stoebeau et al, 2016).

3   Theoretical Framework

3.1   Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory refers to the theoretical approach that centers around the exchange of resources, either symbolic or material, between people, and embodies the key concept of rewards, costs, and reciprocity (Sprecher, 1998). Principally, the theory holds that individuals choose social interactions that maximizes their probability of meeting their subjective self-interests (Chibucos et al, 2004). Thus, Social Exchange Theory predominantly concentrates on the relational context, including the power dynamics within a relationship (Reissing & VanZuylen, 2015:848) This thesis will restrict itself towards lending one feature of the theory, which is commonly referred to as the *principle of least interest* (Chibucos et al, 2004; Luke et al, 2011; Coock & Emerson, 1978; Van de Rijt & Macy, 2006). The principle of least interest holds that the person who is least dependent on the valued benefits of the relationship has a greater bargaining power (Luke et al., 2011; Van de Rijt & Macy, 2006). Subsequently, the person with the greater bargaining power can decide the terms of the relationship (Luke, 2011; Cook & Emerson, 1978).

3.2   Bourdieu: The Forms of Capital

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) presents a set of fundamental types of capital in his conceptual model to explain and showcase society's social hierarchy and stratification within the social world (Dillion, 2014: 429). Differences in ownership over these forms capitals thus determine the social stratification (Dillon, 2014:429). The forms of capital can also be understood as forms of power or resources (Dillon, 2014:429) and are known as economic, social and

cultural capital, all of which may lead to symbolic capital (Ihlen, 2007).

Economic capital is exchangeable to financial resources, including individual's possessed money and property rights (Bourdieu: 1986) and can also refer to things such as investments and material assets (Dillon, 2014:429). Economic capital is the most apparent and easy form of capital for individuals to measure (Dillon, 2014:429). Social capital refers to individuals' access to social connections, group memberships and alliances, which connects and leads them to profits and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital refers to an individual's education and ability to display cultural competence of a certain culture (Dillon, 2014:430). Finally, symbolic capital corresponds to an individual's recognition, acknowledgement and prestige, which can be rooted or acquired by the other forms of capital, such as economic capital (Bourdieu, 1990:118-121). Specially, symbolic capital can be defined as an "image of respectability and honorability" (Bourdieu, 1984:291) and is a subjective form of capital (Ihlen, 2007). Further, symbolic capital merely holds its value when it is recognized by others, such as group (Mead, 2020; Bourdieu, 1990:120). Building on symbolic capital, Mead (2020) elucidates how lifestyles are a central aspect of Bourdieu's (1984) symbolic capital as they can operate as "sign-systems that are socially qualified" (Bourdieu, 1984:172). Thus, differentiating between those are socially qualified and those who are not (Bourdieu, 1984:172). Therefore, the forms of capital, such as economic capital can function as resources which can be transmitted into other forms of capital and can also be exchanged or given to other, such as through a gift (Dillon, 2014:433).

3.3   Synthesis

In the previous research, it seems as if women's motivations for engaging in TSR are centered around an aspiration for different forms of capital. In the narrative where women are understood as victims of their environment, it can be inferred as a need for economic capital, predominantly in the form of subsistence needs. Here, the main characteristic of TSR is comprehended as a survival strategy, leaving women with little agency over the engagement. Conversely, in the second strand, women's motivations for engaging in TSR seem to be borne out of a desire for economic capital in the form of luxury goods, as opposed to subsistence needs. Further, this strand may encompass symbolic capital, derived from the aspiration to live a luxurious and modern lifestyle, which are associated with status. In addition, social

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capital, through the form of accessing new opportunities and resources because of the Blesser's has been found to be a common motivation. Thus, the characteristics of TSR are described as an instrumental strategy by women to actualize their aspirations. The third body of the literature emphasizes how emotionality and love are directly associated with the partner's willingness and ability to provide economic capital. Here, the main characteristics of TSR include the categorization of boyfriend and girlfriend and feelings may also be involved. Bourdieu's Theory of Capital thus seems to be apparent in the previous research and therefore a relevant theory to assist in illuminating women's motivations for engaging in Blesser-relationships. Further, it can be used to understand women's characterizations of these relationships, together with Social Exchange Theory. Specifically, the latter can be used to investigate the terms of the exchange and how the negotiations unfold.

3.3.1 Limitations

Since the thesis aims to grasp the lived-in realities of women's motivations, it is central to voice that it is beyond the scope of the theoretical framework, and thus the thesis, to analyze the deep and entrenched psychological feelings that may be connected to women's experiences of TSR. Considering that Bourdieu' Theory of Capital does not explicitly encompass feelings and emotions (Reay, 2004), this can be seen as a limitation to analysing the motivations. In particular, this is limiting when investigating elusive concepts such as love, which may be seen as problem since previous research have tied the provision of economic capital to love (see e.g. Bhana & Pattman, 2011). Connected to this, Social Exchange Theory runs on the assumption that individuals are rational actors (Chibucos, 2004). This thesis does not undertake this assumption since women's motivations to engage may not be based on rational choices based on a cost-benefit analysis (Sprecher, 1998), but rather complex social realities. Instead, the thesis only lends one feature of Social Exchange Theory, the principle of interest, to analyze the main characteristics of TSR.

4 Method and Data

4.1 Research Design

A qualitative research design has been selected as the most suitable point of departure for investigating what the participants perceive as the main characteristics of Blesser-relationships, and their motivations to engage in them. Qualitative approaches aim for both an in-depth and holistic understanding, while recognizing the richness of the lived experiences of social life (Punch, 1998:243). In this way, qualitative approaches can recognize and meet the complexity of South African women's experiences and motivations associated with Blesser-relationships. Additionally, qualitative approaches enable individuals to give meaning to their own experiences in their own words, thereby delivering rich, full, and detailed descriptions of social phenomena, such as the Blesser-phenomena (Lentoor, 2022). Given the contested and varied findings associated with women's motivations for engaging in Blesser-relationships, selecting a mode of inquiry that enabled an in-depth investigation from participants with first-hand experience was deemed as central. The qualitative approach thereby accommodates the exploratory nature of the study, and seeks to illuminate women's experiences, as opposed to predict and generalize them, for which a quantitative approach would have been suitable (Stewart-Withers et al, 2016:59).

The thesis utilized semi-structured individual interviews as the main method for collecting data. Semi-structured interviews can assist in accessing and providing deep information on individual's feelings, emotions, and experiences (Denscombe, 2010:173). Comprehensively grasping these factors was deemed central to the principal aim of the thesis. Further, semi-structured interviews enabled participants to describe and vocalize their own experiences, as well as it allowed them to raise and emphasize issues and factors that seemed important to the topic (Denscombe, 2010:100).

4.2   Sampling

As previously mentioned, the selection of participants through social media has not been done in previous research within this topic. This illustrates potential for recruiting interviewees in future research, especially since it has been highlighted that recruiting participants within TSR can be difficult (see e.g. Palfreman, 2020).

The thesis utilized a purposive sampling technique to select four participants from the social media platform YouTube. Essentially, purposive sampling embraces that deep and fruitful information is attained when focusing on a small number of research participants, purposefully chosen based on their known attributes (Denscombe, 2010:35). In this thesis, however, it should be acknowledged that the sample of four participants is especially small. Nonetheless, the interviews were relatively long, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes and are perceived to have produced rich and deep data.

Moreover, instead of being randomly selected, participants were "hand-picked" for the research with a specific purpose in mind, such as their experience within the topic of investigation (Denscombe, 2010:35). Utilizing the hashtag #Blesser and #Blesser-experience on YouTube, individuals who showcased their experiences of Blesser-relationships were discovered. Subsequently, participants were deliberately selected and contacted via email, which was publicly enlisted on their YouTube channels. In this way, the thesis is based on a smaller exploratory sample as opposed to a representative sample. Essentially, exploratory samples are utilized to attain insight and understandings of somewhat unexplored topics (Denscombe, 2010:24), such as the emerging Blesser-phenomena. Participants were thus deliberately selected based on their first-hand experience with Blesser-relationships, since they were regarded as most fitted to answer the research question (Denscombe, 2010:35). The aim of the sample was thus not to be representative, but rather to be informative (Denscombe, 2010:41), gaining an in-depth access to the lived experiences (Sidloyi, 2023). To find participants who were suitable to the research through purposive sampling, the thesis utilized a set of selection criteria. See table 1 below for the selection criteria:

Table 1: Selection criteria

No.	Criteria	Purpose
1	Presently or previously involved in Blesser-relationships.	To ensure that the participants have first-hand experience of the relationships.
2	Are public with their engagement in Blesser relationships on the social media platform YouTube.	Deemed to be a more ethical (see section 4.5 about ethical considerations and positionality).
3	From South Africa.	Follows research aim.
4	Women.	Follows research aim.
5	Age range 18-24.	Blesser-phenomena on social media appears to be most present among young women. Further, young women between 15-24 disproportionally affected by HIV in South Africa (Zuma, 2022). Range defined as above 18 due to ethical considerations (see section 4.5).
6	Understand and speak English.	Spoken language of the researcher and an official language in South Africa (Bostock, 2018).

4.2.1   Overview of Participants

The final sample is based on four out of forty contacted women who were willing to participate in the interview, reflecting the difficulty of accessing the research participants. The four women were Black and ranged between the ages of 20 to 24 years old and came from several differing areas in South Africa. Participants had differing levels of educational background. All participants had completed their secondary education, one of them had completed their higher education and two of participants were amid completing their higher education.

4.2.2   Source Material

Given that the sample is limited to a specific and small sample of individuals it should be acknowledged that the thesis faces a generalizability challenge (Robson & McCartan, 2016:110). This includes the limited ability to apply the findings to other situations and contexts (Robson & McCartan, 2016:105). Further, the findings of the thesis can therefore not be viewed as representative of a wider population (Robson & McCartan, 2016: 19).

Nevertheless, generalizability is not the aim of this qualitative line of investigation, as it rarely is within qualitative social research (Robson & McCartan, 2016:20), but rather to contribute to existing research through elucidating context-specific information and gaining a deeper insight. Furthermore, seeing as the selected participants were actively or previously involved in Blesser-relationships, they therefore had qualified and first-hand experience with the topic of investigation, thus increasing the probability of producing valid data (Denscombe, 2010:189). Conversely, it cannot be overlooked that data produced is influenced by the interviewer, as will be developed further down below.

4.3   Data Collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted online through video-call via WhatsApp between the 27th of February and the 8th of March. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded after receiving informed consent, and guided by an interview guide, which is available in Appendix A.

The thesis opted for conducting semi-structured interviews virtually, through online video-calls. This decision was rooted in virtual interviews' feasibility and ability to access remote research participants, thus overcoming apparent obstacles such as time and travel costs (Denscombe, 2010:178). Online interviews thus allowed participants from several parts of South Africa to participate. Furthermore, the choice of semi-structured interviews was based on the aim to grasp in-depth responses from the participants, as opposed to structured interviews which encourages more limited responses (Denscombe, 2010:174). Furthermore, a principal strength with semi-structured interviews is its ability to foster data, which is based on the participants priorities and opinions, as well as raise issues and ideas that they view as important for the topic of investigation (Denscombe, 2010:192). This was deemed as fundamental not only to the research questions and aim, but also to enhance the accuracy of the participant's experiences. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are advantageous in terms of enabling continuous adjustment to meet the participant's responses, such as following up on important responses (Robson & McCartan, 2016:286). In this way, the interview guide more so functioned as a guarantee that certain topics and questions were discussed by all research participants, instead of being ultimately guided by pre-determined questions as is evident within structured interviews (Denscombe, 2010:174). The interviews

thus consisted of and encouraged unplanned questions and topics by the interviewer and the participants. Further, the direct contact allowed the interviewer to ensure that she had understood what the participant was trying to vocalize, rather than being based on her own "common-sense assumption" (Denscombe, 2010:100). Moreover, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed for new ideas and issues to emerge and could also be followed up on (Robson & McCartan, 2015:286) For example, the concept of a Soft Life was a reoccurring notion that came across several interviews. Thus, the flexibility allowed the thesis to incorporate this notion.

However, interviews also consist of several weaknesses that should be accounted for. As Linabary & Hamel (2017) notes, the digital divide, hereby the unequal access to material and modern technology and technological skill, inevitably restricts online studies to those who can participate (Linabary & Hamel, 2017:101). In this way, conducting interviews online entails a limitation and representation of those who has this internet access. That being said, 70% of the South African population in 2020 used the internet, compared to the 29% of the overall Sub-Saharan African region or 85% of the European Union (World Bank, 2023b). It could therefore be argued that this digital divide is not a significant issue in terms of conducting online interviews. Furthermore, a weakness with predictability of conducting online-interviews is the fact that it relies on stable-internet connections. As several recent news articles explain, national electricity blackouts are executed for several parts of the day in South Africa to counteract a grid collapse (Trenner, 2023: Cohen & Bloomberg, 2023). In the process of scheduling the interviews for this thesis, several interviews had to be rescheduled due to these power-cuts. This reflects the reality of how interviews can be time-consuming, require thorough preparation (Robson & McCartan, 2016:286) and are highly dependent on the participants. Furthermore, it should also be voiced that online interviews may feel alienating for research participants, thus potentially creating a less comfortable atmosphere in a video-call setup compared to an interview in person (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2016). Furthermore, it should be voiced, that there may be certain "interviewer effects" (Punch:1998: 258), which may impact participant's answers, and can relate to factors such as the skill or style of the interviewer (Stewart-Withers et al, 2016:60; Punch, 1998:258). This is central to acknowledge, considering the interviewer's active involvement and communication with the participants. Further, this relates to the influence of the interviewer's positionality, which will be elaborated later. Additionally, although the internet connection was stable during the interviews, it can be argued that non-verbal cues, which are a significant

component of the communication and interpretation of the participants responses, may have been less explicit in the online-interviews, thus making it harder to detect through in video-interviews compared to face-to-face interviews (Weller, 2017:621).

Conversely, considering that the author, as a stranger, reached out to the participants online, it can be argued that research participants may have felt more comfortable and at ease meeting online, rather than in person. As Weller (2017) highlights, online-interviewing was found to generate a more informal atmosphere and viewed as less intrusive and pressuring for the participants (Weller, 2017:618). In this case, the ability for participants to be in their own space, such as their own homes, separate from the interviewer, may therefore have construed a more comfortable set-up (Weller, 2017:618). When investigating a potentially emotional and private subject like Blesser-relationships, creating a comfortable, relaxed, and non-intrusive environment was essential.

4.4   Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed shortly after they had been conducted. Subsequently, a thematic coding analysis was employed and followed Robson & McCartan's (2016:469-479) thematic coding approach.

In phase 1, all interviews were transcribed and re-read several times and occurred in several phases of the coding process. This was deemed imperative to understand and make sense of the data (Robson & McCartan, 2016:469). Further, initial ideas and thoughts were also written down for potential themes (Robson & McCartan, 2016: 469-470). In phase 2, extracts and features of the data were assigned codes and categorizations in a systematic way (Robson & McCartan, 2016:469). This entailed that similar extracts were assigned to the same codes (Robson & McCartan, 2016:469). Further, the context and details that were linked to the codes were attached to help reach and developing a potential theme (Robson & McCartan, 2016:471). Phase 3 consisted of gathering and collecting the codes into potential themes (Robson & McCartan, 2016:469). Here, techniques such as repetitions, similarities and differences of topics, statements and opinions were used to recognize themes (Robson & McCartan, 2016: 474-475). Terms and concepts, such as personal expressions that participants used themselves was utilized (Robson & McCartan, 2016:474-475), such as the

expression and phrases of a Soft Life and living soft that emerged in the interviews. Subsequently, in phase 4, the themes were organized into a thematic network in which main themes and sub-themes were presented (Robson & McCartan, 2016: 476). Finally, phase 5 consisted of utilizing the map as as tool to investigate the organized themes. This included comparing the themes and trying to develop a "theoretical coherence" (Robson & McCartan, 2016: 477). This theoretical coherence was influenced by the help of existing research and the theoretical framework.

4.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality

In terms of ethical considerations, several principles and factors were central to account for, especially given the potentially sensitive and private nature of the subject. Thus, a central ethical consideration of the thesis was to avoid doing harm or evoking any negative feelings or consequences (Robson & McCartan, 2016:205). Undertaking a potentially sensitive subject thus requires responsibility but not should not prevent it from being conducted (Robson & McCartan, 2016:207). One consideration was to not include any participants under 18, while another was to schedule the interviews at a time that suited the participants. Furthermore, receiving informed consent from the participants prior to the data collection was a fundamental step in the research process. This entailed a full explanation of the purpose of the thesis to the participants to ensure that participants had voluntarily and fully understood what they consented to (Robson & McCartan, 2016:213-215). It was thus emphasized to the participants that the interviews were conducted for academic purposes only.

Moreover, participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time without facing any consequences (Robson & McCartan, 2016:224). This was informed before the interview was conducted and re-stated after the interview (Robson & McCartan, 2016:211-214). Further, it was explained to the participants that the recordings and interview transcripts were kept confidential and anonymous (Robson & McCartan, 2016:210). This was ensured by not writing out their names (Robson & McCartan, 2016:219). Access to the interview recordings and transcripts were password-protected and could only be accessed by the author. Lastly, it was emphasized before and after the interview that participants could choose not to answer or elaborate on a question they were uncomfortable or unwilling to share (Palfreman, 2020). Furthermore, since the participants were accessed and discovered through their own

public videos on YouTube where they share their experiences of Blesser-relationships and have listed their emails publicly, it was deemed to be an ethical way to approach the participants, especially since an email easily could have been ignored.

What is more, it is important to appreciate the role of power and positionality in the research process, including the existing power relations between the researcher and the participants (Stewart-Withers et al, 2016:62). This is especially important seeing as the thesis utilized individual interviews as its main data collection and the author therefore had an active involvement and communication with the research participants. Firstly, there is an apparent power-imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee, which is evident in the fact the interviewer was the one who orchestrated and to a large extent steered the interviews in accordance with the research interest (Anyan, 2013). Further, it should be acknowledged that the author's position and privilege as a western, white, middle-class woman, inherently positions the author as an outsider of the experiences and voices of Black South Africans, especially in the context of country with a colonial history (Palfreman, 2020). In this way, the author's outsider perspective can be viewed as limiting and restricting the understanding of the women's primary experiences and motivations. For example, it should be worth raising the point that South Africa has 11 official languages (Bostock, 2018), and although all participants spoke English fluently, several local terminologies occurred during the interview. Although participants reflected that they were well-aware of the interviewer's outsider-perspective, often explaining the terminology before she could ask to elaborate, it cannot be disregarded that the interviewer's outsider position in regards to the language could have had an inhibiting effect when explaining their experiences. On the contrary, Rabe (2003:149) argues that an author's outsider perspective can also be viewed as a strength since it can increase the objectivity through an inherent detachment from the topic. Further, it is also worth noting, that the author is a woman with a similar age-range to the participants, which may have increased the comfortability of the participants, and perhaps fostered an informal and less judgmental environment. Essentially, these factors may all have influenced or regulated the participants responses such as tailoring or adjusting their responses (Linabary & Hamel, 2017:104). Principally, it cannot be overlooked that the author's own identity and background is inextricably linked to the research process, both in terms of the creation and analysis of the data (Denscombe, 2010:302). Here, it is also central to acknowledge that all researchers bring biases and subjectivities to the research that may affect the research process as well as the knowledge production (Stewart-Withers et al, 2016:62). This goes for several

parts of the research process, including the author's assessment and interpretation of the data (Stewart-Withers et al, 2016:62).

5   Empirical Analysis

5.1   Characteristics of Blesser-relationships

This section aims to answer the first research question: What do the participants perceive as the main characteristics of Blesser-relationships? In relation to this question, two main themes were found. The first one is Economic Support, in which the participants emphasized the importance of economic capital within Blesser-relationships. This functioned as the glue that held the relationship together. The second theme encompasses Feelings of Dependency in which participants vocalized a lack of influence over the terms of the relationship. Conclusively, participants had differing opinions on whether Blessers could be categorized as boyfriends.

5.1.1   Economic Support

A common perception among the four participants was the centrality of economic support, such as money and materialistic goods, when describing their Blesser-relationships. As expressed earlier, economic capital is exchangeable to financial resources, including individual's possessed money (Bourdieu: 1986) and is the most apparent and easy form of capital for individuals to measure (Dillon, 2014:429). Thus, economic capital, in the form of money and materialistic goods can be noted as fundamental characteristic of the relationships. In the context of describing a Blesser, participants described someone who could support and provide participants financially with assets such as money, phones, and clothes. For instance, participant 2 describes that "*for me, it is just someone who gives you money, gives you things, material stuff*". Meanwhile, a Blesse was described as someone who "*loves materialistic things*" (participant 4) and is "*benefitting from the entire relationship*" (participant 3). Here, the participants describe a Blesse as someone who values economic capital in the form of "*materialistic things*" and "*money*", which in turn operates as the glue that holds their Blesser-relationship together. As participant 2 expresses it: "*without the money there is no relationship, that is what I am there for*". This exclamation suggests that economic capital is

the most important aspect of the relationship for participant 2 and insinuates that that the financial reward is contingent on maintaining the Blesser-relationship. In turn, excluding the relevancy of other factors. Participant 2 exemplifies this by expressing that a Blesser can be:

> *someone who you are totally not related to, that person can be married, have children, it really does not matter as long as that person is giving you money and giving you the gifts* (Participant 2).

Here, Participant 2 insinuates that economic capital is a principal characteristic of a Blesser and thereby other factors such as the Blesser's marriage and family status are irrelevant. In this way, participants 2, 3 and 4 insinuate that economic capital, through the form of phones, money, clothes, and other material goods seems to be perceived as the main characteristic of the relationship. As voiced earlier, the forms of capital can be transmitted or exchanged e.g., through a gift (Dillon, 2014:433), which seems to be the case for the participants, specifically by receiving economic capital.

5.1.2   Feelings of Dependency

The received economic capital from the Blessers led to the topic of feelings of dependency, which could strain their negotiation power within the relationship. For example, participant 1 elucidates that Blessers were usually the ones deciding where and when they would meet and explained that *"you're dependent on them because they can give you anything you want"*. In this case, participant 1 insinuates that she feels dependent on the Blesser-relationship, which is rooted in their ability to provide *"anything you want"*. In turn, this enables the Blesser to have a greater influence on deciding the terms of the relationship. This can potentially be explained by the principle of least interest, which is, as vocalized earlier, a central aspect of Social Exchange Theory, and can also reflect the distribution of power within a relationship (Luke, 2011). As voiced above, the principle of least interest rests on the notion that individuals who are least dependent on the relationship has a stronger bargaining power to improve the terms of the relationship (Rijt & Macy, 2006; Cook & Emerson, 1978). In this case, it could be understood as if participant 1 feels more dependent to receive the subjectively valued benefits of the relationship, since she exclaims that the Blesser can provide *"anything you want"*. This can be understood as if participant 1 feels that she has more to gain from the relationship than the Blesser does. This may explain her feeling of dependency, which in turn affects participant 1's negotiation power.

Similarly, participant 2 elucidates that the potential of losing her lifestyle could also result in her obliging to her Blesser's terms. This became evident when participant 2 explained that if she were to refrain from meeting her Blesser it could increase the risk of jeopardizing the relationship: "*at the end of the day, what you realize is that, okay, if I don't do this, I will lose this person, and then I lose my lifestyle*". In this way, participant 2 implies that if she refrains from meeting the terms of the Blesser it may result in a determination of the relationship. In turn, this would result in her losing her lifestyle. This may further exemplify the principle of least interest, since it seems as if participant 2 is more dependent on the relationship to meet a valued benefit. In this case, the valued benefit appears to be her lifestyle, which leads to a situation where the Blesser bestows a greater influence to decide the terms of the relationship. This can signify that participant 2 experiences a greater dependency on the Blesser-relationship, which in turn can strain her power to negotiate, such as being able to decide on where and when they meet. Similarly, in relation to the Blesser's ability to provide extensive amounts of economic capital, such as travelling overseas and buying expensive alcohol, participant 4 explains that negotiations of the terms would usually favor the Blesser:

> *There are Blessers who let you decide on whatever. You guys can communicate and decide together what is expected and what both of you want /.../ In most cases, Blessers have the final say or the final whatever in most situations* (Participant 4).

Here, participant 4 expresses that negotiations may unfold collaboratively, however, it seems as if the Blesser has more power over the final decision. Thus, following the principle of least interest, it likely that the Blessers, given a strong economic contribution, have a greater say in dictating the terms. Participant 4 elaborates on their capacity to dictate that terms when it comes to sexual practices: *"I feel like most Blessers just don't want to have safe sex"*. Subsequently, she exemplifies by referring to someone from her neighborhood:

> *I know someone from my area who does such things, and he does not have safe sex with girls, and we know this because almost every girl he's been with uses morning after pills /.../. That's how you know that you're not even using protection* (Participant 4).

In this case, while Participant 4 does not exclaim that the *"girls"* wish to have safe sex, she implies that the terms, when it comes to sexual practices, tends to unfold according to the preference of the Blesser. Again, this can be explained by the principle of least interest*,* which suggests the person who has less to gain from the relationship has a greater bargaining power (Cook & Emerson, 1978). In this case and based on how participant 4, as well as the other

participants, have described a Blesser, it can be understood that the Blesser has more bargaining power to determine the terms of the relationship in multiple ways. The participants strained negotiation power within TSR because of their economic dependency, may explain these feelings of dependency. This resonates with previous literature in South Africa (Mampane, 2018; Mchunu et al, 2020; Doyisa, 2019; Lentoor, 2022; Sidloyi, 2023; Stavrou & Kaufman, 2002; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001). Furthermore, the importance of economic capital seemed to determine the way in which the participants categorized their partners, as will be developed down below.

Blesser vs Boyfriend

As voiced above, all participants viewed economic capital as a principal characteristic and operated as the foundation of Blesser-relationships. However, when participants were describing the relationships, there were differing opinions on whether they could be considered a boyfriend or a not. Participant 2 distinguished that a Blesser and a boyfriend could not be characterized as the same thing: "*It is very different. With a boyfriend, it's someone that you love, someone that you see a future with. With a Blesser, it's just strictly an exchange of things*". Here, participant 2 implies that a Blesser-relationship merely involves economic capital and thus separates Blessers from boyfriends. Similarly, participant 3 and 4 describes Blessers and boyfriends as different things because a Blesser-relationship was "*mainly just materialistic stuff*" (participant 3) and *"you just do it for money"* (participant 4). Here, they imply that the role of economic capital within the relationship, determined how they categorized the relationship, specifically that the Blesser could not be a boyfriend.

On the contrary, participant 1 explained how Blesser-relationships could be described differently from person to person, but that in her case: *"I would just say it's like a normal relationship because he introduced me to his friends, his family, to everybody I was his girlfriend, he was like, this is my partner. Someone I love"*. Here, participant 1 explains that her Blesser-relationship can be seen as a "normal relationship". Thus, although economic capital was an important characteristic of the relationship, participant 1 still perceived her Blesser-relationship as a "normal relationship" in the way that she categorized him as her boyfriend. What can be taken from this is thus that, for participant 1, the importance of economic capital and feelings of love can co-exist in a Blesser-relationship. This resonates with previous findings suggesting that love and emotionality can also be central characteristics of TSR (see e.g. Bhana & Pattman, 2011) and construe their Blessers as boyfriends in South Africa (see e.g. Hunter, 2010, 2002).

5.2   Motivations for Engaging

This section aims to explore and answer the second research question: How do the informants motivate their engagement in Blesser relationships? In relation to this question, two main themes and a sub-theme was found. The first one is Luxury, in which the participants emphasized the desire for luxurious goods as a central motivation. The second main theme encompasses participants aspiration for a prestigious lifestyle, in which the sub-theme a Soft Life was central.

5.2.1   Luxury

The first, main theme that emerged during the interviews was the participants desires and appeals towards luxurious and materialistic goods. As voiced earlier, this appears to be economic capital since it is exchangeable to money (Dillon, 2014:429). This could, for example, take form through *"luxury trips"* (participant 1) *"long-inch weaves"* (participant 2) and *"expensive alcohol"* (participant 4). In this way, the aspirations towards economic capital can be understood as something that goes beyond subsistence needs. Terminologies and descriptions such as "luxury" and "expensive" can for instance be understood as something that links to affluence and wealth. Incidentally, participant 2 explains that her Blesser-relationship is "*a way to fund my lifestyle*" in which her Blesser can "*spoil you*". Similarly, participant 3 voices that a Blesser "*sponsors your life*" and "*gives you materialistic stuff*". Here, the participants imply a desire for economic capital that can fund an affluent lifestyle, rather than survival. These statements align with the notion that women's motivations may not always come from a position of absolute poverty, but rather relative deprivation as findings by Stoebenau et al. (2016) emphasizes as a central distinction when investigating women's motivations and meanings behind TSR.

Thus, participant's engagement in Blesser-relationships seem to go beyond explanations of poverty. For example, participant 3 compared herself with women from other, more disadvantageous backgrounds and explains how this shapes differences in their motivations for engaging in Blesser-relationships *"some [women] come from a disadvantaged background so they need to consider the fact getting this bag, this bag being this Blesser, that means my family will starve. It's not about luxury"*. In this context, participant 2 distinguishes between herself, who implies a desire and want towards luxurious things, and women who

engage in Blesser-relationships to fulfill subsistence needs. Similarly, participant 1 describes how her work allows her to sustain herself and explains that Blesser-relationships are not restricted to individuals from "*poor families*" and elaborates with "*If you have money or not, you are still involved with these people*". Here, it can also be understood that participant 1 distances herself from the idea that Blesser-relationships come from a position of poverty by explaining that involvement is not determined by a lack of economic capital. Lastly, participant 4, explains that *"I have parents, they look after me, I don't really need anything"*. Thus, also denoting that her engagement with a Blesser is not borne out of absolute poverty, as she implies that her family supports her. Although participant 3 distances herself from a *"disadvantaged background"*, she does elucidate how this can be a reality for other women, especially when experiencing food insecurity at home. This therefore contrasts findings such as Selepe et al (2017) and Heijden & Swartz (2014), which highlight how women feel obligated into TSR to assist their families financially. Similarly, participant 2 expresses that:

> *I can confidently say that I don't go to bed hungry, /.../ but at home, they only help you with necessities like food and toiletries, anything that is about leisure and luxury, they don't give you that. And as a girl, you want to experience certain things* (Participant 2).

Here, participant 2 insinuates that her basic needs, such as food and toiletries, are secured and makes use of terminology such as *"want"*, rather than a *"need"*. In this case, this is linked to a want for something that entails leisure rather than necessities for survival. Therefore, the four participant's motivations seem to resonate with a desire for luxury, thus contradicting previous literature that emphasizes the economic vulnerabilities as driving the engagement in TSR (see e.g. Krishnan et al, 2008, Hallman, 2004; Miller et al, 2010; Tomlay et al, 2022; Gichane et al, 2021; Selepe et al, 2017; Heijden & Swartz, 2014).

5.2.2   Prestigious Lifestyle

In addition to luxury, participants emphasized that a desire for prestige was a central motivation for their engagement in Blesser-relationships. For example, it was explained that a Blesser allowed the participants to go on "*spa-dates*" (Participant 1), "*travel the world together*" (participant 3) and "*stay at luxury hotels*" (participant 4). This seemed to hold a prestigious value for the participants, thus potentially reflecting a desire for obtaining symbolic capital, in addition to economic capital through luxurious, materialistic goods. As

stated earlier, symbolic capital can be defined as an image of "respectability and honorability" (Bourdieu, 1984:291), which can perhaps be discernable in the way that participants described this lifestyle. For instance, the participants identified the lifestyle as "*beautiful*" (participant 1), or as "*living your best life*" (participant 4) and that a person living this lifestyle is someone who can "*succeed*" (participant 2). These positive descriptions of the lifestyle denote that participants associate the lifestyle as something admirable and respected, as well as that achieving this lifestyle is socially valued. Further, the marker of success that comes with the lifestyle indicates a sign of achievement. Thereby, the ability to partake in the experiences enlisted above can also be seen as a what Bourdieu (1986:22) describes as marker of credit, as it becomes symbol of this exclusive and prestigious group. These statements align with findings from South Africa (see e.g. Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Ranganathan et al, 2018; Zawu, 2022), hereby that women's motivations for TSR are rooted in a wish to access commodities that represent a modern and glamorous lifestyle.

Moreover, the prestige that is connected to this exclusive lifestyle can be further exemplified in the context of participant 3 comparing her life from before she had engaged in a Blesser-relationship. Specifically, she explains how she would see her peers being able to afford a lifestyle that she could not:

> *I would basically just see these girls, mostly from my school, girls my age you know, and I was like, how are they doing this life? How are they affording this life? /.../ you question yourself right, you become envious, and it makes you ask yourself like, okay I want this life too, she's my age so how is she living this life and I am not?* (Participant 3).

Here, participant 3 seems to describe her peers as having been able to achieve something that is desired, explicitly stated when exclaimed "*I want this life*". In turn, this makes her feel like an outsider to this desired lifestyle, signifying a feeling of exclusion. Seeing her peers bestow this symbolic capital, hereby the recognition that is connected to lifestyle, makes participant 3 question her own life-position, which leads her to the decision of pursuing a Blesser *"and then my friend told me about what was happening, and I was like, oh, I wanna do this"*. In this context, participant 3 explains that her friend introduces her to the Blesser-phenomenon and a potential path towards this sought-after and coveted lifestyle.

Further, this may also align with the notion that lifestyles, which are central to Bourdieu's dialog on symbolic capital (Mead, 2020), can be "sign-systems that are socially qualified" (Bourdieu, 1984:172), thus, differentiating between those who reflect this recognition of

being socially qualified and those who are not (Bourdieu, 1984:172). Thus, in the case of participant 2, she elucidates how people from her school, her peers, can live this prestigious and thus socially qualified lifestyle, which can in turn be seen as classifying her own lifestyle as socially unqualified. Particularly, participant 2's emphasis on how she becomes *"envious"* of their lifestyle, insinuates that she perceives their lifestyle as preferable to her own. Similarly, participant 2 reflects upon her elevated life-style status after engaging in Blesser-relationships:

> *I was a nobody, that girl from /.../. I was irrelevant and then all a sudden, I'm here /.../ getting all these things, people look up to me now, and I was like okay I'm not just that girl anymore and honestly, I like it. I'm enjoying this life* (Participant 2).

Here, she potentially expresses that she transitioned to this lifestyle, not only geographically, but perhaps also in terms of status and how she perceives herself. Drawing on the Bourdieu's (1986:172) idea that lifestyles can function as sign-systems of what is distinguished as socially qualified and what is not, it can be seen as if participant 2 compares herself, in the previous lifestyle as *"irrelevant"* and as a *"nobody"*, thus signifying a socially unqualified lifestyle. Afterwards, when participant 2 obtains this lifestyle through her Blesser-relationship, she implies that people around her now perceive her differently, specifically by looking "*up*" to her, which can be understood as a token of recognition, thus an acquisition of symbolic capital. Additionally, as Bourdieu (1990:120) and (Mead, 2020) elucidates, symbolic capital merely holds its symbolic value when it is recognized and credited. This may be reflected when participant 2 describes how others seem to apply this marker of recognition to herself. Thus, it appears that the desire for symbolic capital is accrued through economic capital and from the ability to partake in experiences that signify this up-scale lifestyle. This mirrors the feeling noted in Mushonga & Dzingirai (2022) that the acquired glamorous lifestyle and respect that comes with TSR produced a feeling of having "become somebody" (Mushonga & Dzingirai, 2022:5). Furthermore, it aligns with literature that found achieved social status and prestige to be a central motivation for engaging in TSR (see e.g. Lentoor, 2022; Zawu, 2022).

Furthermore, although participants predominantly expressed a desire for economic and symbolic capital, it can be argued that social capital functioned as an indirect motivation for the participants. Social capital refers to an individual's social network that connects them to a set of opportunities and resources, which in turn increases their portfolio of capital (Dillon,

2014:431-432). Essentially, social capital can be viewed as "a membership of a group" (Bourdieu, 1986:247) which "entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (Bourdieu, 1986: 247). Here, social capital and symbolic capital seem to be interwoven. However, the Blessers themselves can potentially be seen as a form of social capital on its own. This is because they operate as the direct access to other resources and opportunities while leading them to their more apparent desired forms of capital, namely economic and symbolic capital. Specifically, the Blessers connects and actualizes the participant's aspirations by turning them into members of the group that is associated with the credited lifestyle. Incidentally, participant 2's exclamation that "*I'm living the life that I'm living, and I want to live through them",* can be seen as an example of how social capital, in the form of the Blesser, operates as an underlying motivation that yields them economic and symbolic capital.

The Soft Life

At the core of the participants aspirations towards a luxurious lifestyle, a detected desire to live, what was described as, a Soft Life was noted. When asked what this entailed for the participants, they described a lifestyle that is *"stress-free"* (participant 2), *"easy"* (participant 1) and *"getting anything you want"* (participant 4), with a specific emphasis on luxurious and materialistic goods. Thus, the Soft Life can be viewed as equivalent to this luxurious lifestyle as described earlier, but with a specific emphasis on the ability to live *"easy"*. Furthermore, it was expressed that social media, such as YouTube and Instagram, was the main sources where the Soft Life was displayed and demonstrated, both by themselves and by others. Indeed, it was through their demonstration of the Soft Life on YouTube that the author discovered and subsequently recruited the participants for this thesis.

On the topic of social media, it was exclaimed that the Soft Life "*Is everywhere on social media, like Instagram. It's like picture perfect"* (participant 1) and that *"social media and influencers, they represent this Soft Life, and we want to be like them"* (participant 3)*.* Here*,* participants 1 suggest that social media is where the *"picture perfect"* and luxurious Soft Life is displayed. Meanwhile, Participant 3 proposes that generally, people aspire to attain this lifestyle, which is demonstrated by people on social media, thus they *"represent this Soft Life".* This may once again resonate with Bourdieu's definition of symbolic capital as "an image of respectability and honorability" (Bourdieu, 1984:291), and the central notion that it is only legitimate when it is recognized (Mead, 2020; Bourdieu, 1990:120). Firstly, it seems as if the Soft Life is depicted and perceived as something that carries status, especially given

that it is described as something people strive for. Secondly, since social media is the main arena where the attained economic capital and lifestyle is displayed, as well as recognized and credited, this can be seen as an acquisition of symbolic capital.

Here, a slight difference between the pursuit of the luxurious lifestyle and the Soft Life was found. Although both lifestyles seem to be driven by and centered around economic and symbolic capital, an emphasis on the desire for leisure and having less obligations in life was found to be more attributed to the Soft Life. This may resonate with the pursuit of modernity, as described by Leclerc-Madlala, (2003:1). This refers to modern commodities as a motivation for pursuing TSR, since they operate as symbols for a modern and credited lifestyle (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). The symbols for a Soft Life may thus be luxurious commodities, but also elements that reflect a stress-free and easy life. The desire and emphasis on an easy life was further portrayed by participant 2:

> *I could work for this lifestyle. But I feel like working is too much. I'm not a girl who wants to work. It's not like I want to be a housewife, but I want things to land on my hands easily. So, there are other ways, but for me, this is the way I prefer* (Participant 2).

Here, participant 2 explains how her achieved lifestyle can be obtained by herself, and thus further showcases how her motivations for engaging in a Blesser-relationship seem to stem from a desire to live a perceived elevated lifestyle, rather than fulfilling subsistence needs. Further, participant 3 exclaims how living "easy" is a deemed to be a better fit for her. Furthermore, building on the coveted symbols of the Soft Life, participant 4 describes the Soft Life as "*living large*" and illuminates that "*it's not just an uber /.../ you're in a Mercedes G-class*" and "*you're in a club /.../ you're not working*". Here, she describes the regular life, where one must work and take an uber, which is an analogy for transportation in a taxi. This is then compared to the Soft Life, where one can spend one's time on leisure, such as in the nightlife at a club, and through transportation in an expensive car that is associated with status. What can be drawn from this is that the Soft Life is depicted as bestowing status, which appears to be evident in her comparison of what it is and what it is not. Again, this may resonate with how lifestyles can operate as what Bourdieu (1986:172) refers to as sign-systems of what is socially qualified and what is not. In this case, participant 4, seems to categorize the Soft Life, as socially qualified and the regular life socially unqualified.

6   Concluding Discussion

In light of South Africa's high incidence of HIV and young women's disproportionate HIV burden, this thesis has further investigated the emerging Blesser-phenomena. With the aim of contributing to knowledge that can improve future HIV responses, the thesis has sought to meet the complexity of how women characterize Blesser-relationships, and their motivations for engaging in them. To do this, empirical data was collected through in-depth interviews with women who has first-hand experience of Blesser-relationships. The thesis then proceeded to answer two research questions: 1) What do the participants perceive as the main characteristics of Blesser-relationships? 2) How do the participants motivate their engagement in Blesser-relationships?

Regarding the first research question, a common perception was that the attainment of economic support, such as materialistic goods and money, was a key characteristic of the Blesser-relationships. Additionally, feelings of dependency were found to be a principal characteristic. These feelings may reflect the Blesses greater dependency on the Blessers to meet their valued benefits, namely, to achieve a lifestyle. As such, it was implied that the Blessers had greater influence on the terms of the relationship, which in turn weakened the Blesses decision-making power. The terms could for example concern when and where they would meet, as well as sexual practices such as condom-use. These characteristics, which were rooted in the participants own experiences, seemed to align with the concept that is fundamental to Social Exchange Theory, namely the principle of least interest. This is line with previous findings suggesting that women's ability to decide the terms within TSR may be strained due to economic asymmetry (see e.g. Kaufman & Stavrou, 2002; Dunkle et al, 2007; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Mchunu et al, 2020; Mampane, 2018).

Moreover, the importance of economic support within the relationships seemed to determine how the Blesser was categorized. The majority held that a Blesser could not be identified as a boyfriend due to the centrality of economic support and exclusion of love and emotionality. Meanwhile, the minority held that a Blesser could be categorized as a boyfriend due to the inclusion of love and emotionality within her relationship. Together with this, economic

support was a deemed as an important characteristic of her relationship. Thus, the co-presence of love and economic support within TSR align with some previous findings (see e.g. Hunter, 2010; Bhana & Pattman, 2011).

Regarding the second research question, a desire for luxury and an upscale lifestyle was found to be a fundamental motivation for engaging in Blesser-relationships. As such, it was implied that the participants basic needs were fulfilled, insinuating that their motivations were not borne out of a position of absolute poverty. Thus, explained with Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, it was found that economic capital through luxury was a principal motivation. This challenges the literature that predominantly views women's economic vulnerabilities as the key motivation for engaging in TSR (see e.g. Hallman, 2004; Tomlay et al, 2022; Gichane et al, 2021; Miller et al, 2010).

What is more, a desire for a prestigious lifestyle was implied as another main motivation for engaging. With the help of Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, the desire was explained as an aspiration for symbolic capital. This was found in the lifestyle acquired through Blesser-relationships and how it was compared to a normal lifestyle. At the core of this was the concept of a Soft Life, which appeared to be especially present on social media. Further, social media was found to be the main arena where attained economic capital received recognition, thus gaining symbolic capital. This confirms previous studies suggesting that the desire for a prestigious lifestyle was a core motivation for engaging in Blesser-relationships (see e.g. Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Mushonga & Dzingirai, 2022; Lentorr, 2022; Ranganathan et al, 2018; Zawu, 2022).

6.1   Future Research

There has been a call for future research to include a male perspective on TSR (Pulerwitz et al, 2021; Ranganathan et al, 2017; Duby et al, 2021). As Blesser-relationships occur between two people, acquiring a well-rounded understanding of the dynamics such as the terms of the relationships seems imperative for future research. Furthermore, since the thesis, to the knowledge of the author, was the first paper to recruit participants through social media with limited time and resources, this may illustrate potential for future research. This is especially important as the Blesser-phenomena evolves in the context of the social media era. Here,

particularly the concept and centrality of the Soft Life deserves further attention in future research.

7   References

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8   Appendix A: Interview Guide

Informed Consent

- Introduce myself and the purpose of the research.

- Explain what the interview will be used for and where it will be published.

- Inform that the participants will remain anonymous, and that the data will only be accessed by the author.

- Inform that the participants can choose not to answer or elaborate a question that they feel uncomfortable with, or are unwilling to answer.

- Explain that the participants have a right to withdraw from the research during the interview and after the interview has been conducted.

- Receive informed consent.

- Ask if I can record the interview.

- Ask if there are any questions before we start the interview.

Interview Questions

Initiation

1. "How are you?"
2. "Tell me about yourself"
   a. Prompts: Background, age, where are you from, what are you working with, education.

Definitions

3. "What is a Blesser?
   a. "How would you define it?"
4. "What is a Blesse?
   a. "How would you define it?"
5. "How did your Blesser relationship start?"
   a. "Did you approach him, or did he approach you?"

6. "Have you been in more than one Blesser-relationship?"

7. "Would you say that there is a difference between a Blesser and a boyfriend?"

Expectations

8. "What were your first-hand expectations when engaging in a Blesser relationship?"

9. "What was expected from you as a Blesse?"

10. "What was expected from him as a Blesser?"

Experience and motivations

11. "How did you decide and negotiate the terms of the relationship?"

12. "Can you describe the experience?"

    a. "What feelings and emotions did you have during the Blesser-relationship?"

13. "Has your Blesser relationship changed anything for you?

    a. "In your life, mindset or surroundings?"

14. "What was the outcome of your Blesser relationship?"

    a. "Why and who ended it?"

15. "How does your friends and family view your Blesser relationship?

16. "Why did you want to be in a Blesser-relationship?"