

“Sugar dating” among college students in the United States

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Abstract

Sex work is and has been a consistent and ever-growing institution that continues to exist throughout the world today. Although sex work has been around for centuries, more recently a new facet of this industry has emerged: Sugar Dating. Sugar Dating is a phenomenon where individuals who are older and of a higher socioeconomic class engage in relationships with younger individuals who are of a lower socioeconomic class. The difference between these relationships and other intergenerational relationships is that Sugar Dating relationships often involve an exchange of money or gifts from the older and richer partner for the companionship of the younger partner. Research on these relationships has been limited, but the media coverage has been consistent. There has been generally positive coverage of these types of relationships in the media, which has led to a spike in interest by the general population, causing young women to engage in relationships that are said to be based on companionship when, in reality, these relationships are more focused on power, money, and sex. This paper looks at the negative effects of these relationships, including sexual exploitation and violence, and what we can do as a society to help change the narrative about sex work.

Keywords: Sex work, human trafficking, sugar dating, prostitution

Introduction

Sex work is an institution that has been around for centuries and has not only maintained, but grown exponentially over the course of history. It is hard to estimate just how many individuals are in the sex industry because it is so diverse. Some of the major facets include sex-trafficking, prostitution, and the pornography industry. Each of these have different levels of acceptance and stigma attached to them with pornography being the most widely accepted. Prostitution and sex-trafficking, on the other hand, have a negative connotation surrounding them. This often comes from the exploitation factor that surrounds these facets of sex work. Often there are children who become forced into prostitution and sex trafficking. The feelings conveyed by this line of work are understandable. However, in cases of prostitution, and generally selling sex for money, it is sometimes described as being okay if the sex worker is able to freely choose to stay in the profession (Sanders, 2006). Although this is often not seen as acceptable to most of society, there is one type of sex work that has become popularized in the past couple decades: sugar dating.

Recently, there has been a trend in acceptance in commercialization of sex, which has led to an increase in sex as a commodity being mainstreamed in society. Researchers have found evidence to support this increase in societal acceptance (Bretns and Sanders,

2010). This research focused on how sex has become overly commercialized throughout the world and the consequences of this. Bretns and Sanders found evidence to support that changes in social and economic values and structures, there has been an increase in sex work as a result. Young adults, especially college students, are at a greater financial vulnerability due to the increase in college tuition prices as well as the general increase in cost of living. Minimum wage has not increased enough for these individuals to be able to provide for themselves, which causes many college students to have to/consider moving back home. This can often times cause feelings of depression and lowered self-esteem for these adults, which can push them to finding alternatives in sex work.

Sugar dating is posed as a safe and easy alternative to trying to balance school and working one or more part-time jobs. However, sugar dating is not as simple as it may seem on the surface. Although there has not been much research done on the topic, there has been an increasing social awareness of the industry. This social awareness has led to discussions about the reality of sugar dating and the consequences that this industry has on individuals and the greater society.

Sugar dating relationships

Sugar dating is an endeavor that is almost exclusively originated through online means of

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communication. There are many dating type websites and dating applications that promote sugar babies and daddies/mommas to come together to form relationships. The main reason that sugar dating is done online is due to convenience. It is easier to meet a large variety of individuals online as opposed to in person. It takes less time and you can find out a good amount of information about an individual in a concise profile. Also, it is easier to meet people who live in a larger mileage range from an individual's location. Due to the ease of using online applications to achieve sugar dating relationships, there are a variety of online businesses that have popped up that cater to individuals seeking this type of relationship specifically. Other apps, although they don't directly cater to this population of individuals, have seen an increase in use of the services to engage in sugar dating.

There are many websites and services that have popped up to engage this rapidly growing industry and they too must tread lightly in order to avoid legal trouble. However, these types of sights are not the only way that sugar-babies and sugar-daddies/mommies are finding each other. Many individuals are using common dating and hook-up apps in order to find others who want a sugar-dating type relationship. One such app is Tinder. Tinder is a dating app that many individuals use to meet potential individuals to have some type of relationship with. Some individuals use the app for dating, casual sex, or even friendship. Individuals make a profile and can set preferences for gender and location range in miles from their current destination. From there, app users are able to see other users in their area and can choose to "like" or "not like" them. If two users both "like" each other, they will match and can proceed to have a conversation with the other and let the relationship, whatever that may be, develop from there. Tinder, as an app, does not facilitate the types of relationships users engage in, so there is no risk to the company if their customers use their app to trade sexual intercourse for material gain. Due to this, Tinder has become a popular way for individuals to engage in sugar-dating relationships.

Other than Tinder, or other general social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram, there are many specific websites and mobile applications that are geared toward sugar dating specifically. For android and ios (Apple) mobile devices, there are apps such as SugarDaddyMeet and SugaDady which work to match potential sugar babies with sugar daddies. There are also applications that match up with sugar dating websites like SeekingArrangement (Best Sugar Daddy Apps for iPhone & Android, 2018). SeekingArrangement is one of the most popular sugar dating websites currently around, with millions of members worldwide (*About us*, 2018).

Demographics

Most sugar daddies and mommas are older individuals who are high middle class to upper class. Outside of these commonalities, there is not a lot that sugar daddies and mommas have in common. Sugar babies can be both male and female and may have a sugar daddy or momma no matter the sugar baby's gender. However, most often couplings are female sugar babies and sugar daddies. This is due to a higher demand from sugar daddies for young, attractive female sugar babies. There are not as many older females looking for younger males to have this type of relationship with. This can be seen on one of the leading online meeting sites for sugar babies and daddies/mommas: SeekingArrangement. SeekingArrangement boasts about having 10 million active members, with most of their population being sugar daddies and young women (*About Us*, 2017).

SeekingArrangement actively caters to these sugar daddies who are looking for young women to have relationships with. They have a number of advertisements, both online and physical, aimed at specifically young, attractive women. Example of physical advertisements are mainly seen with billboards in major cities like Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago. Some of these billboards have saying such as "Happy 18th Birthday! Meet Your New Daddy" and "Don't get screwed by Obama care. Find a sugar daddy". Along with billboards, SeekingArrangement also has ads throughout the internet, including Google advertisements. If you google "sugar daddy" or a variation of such, about half of the results are simply advertisements for SeekingArrangement and other websites like it, not even just links to their page, but paid for advertisements from said websites. SeekingArrangement conducts video ad campaigns illustrating their services, as well. One of these commercials is very obviously targeting young, attractive women with their headline "Sugar Baby University: Say goodbye to college debt and hello to a higher class education," (*Sugar Baby University*, 2018). All of these advertisements are clearly geared toward recruiting young, attractive women to be employees of their services. SeekingArrangement goes as far as offering incentives to college students for joining their site. If an sugar baby joins SeekingArrangement using a .edu email, they will have access to a premium account for free, as opposed to paying upwards of \$1000/month that a premium account would cost normally (Kitchener, 2014).

In terms of the sugar daddies using the website, there is no outward advertisements geared toward them. This makes sense seeing as the wealthy men are the ones actively trying to find younger women and are willing to pay quite a bit of money to do so. However, there is

an incentive sugar daddies can take advantage of through SeekingArrangement. SeekingArrangement allows sugar daddies to promote the website's services on the sugar daddies' own websites (or personally) for a commission. For every sugar daddy that brings in other sugar daddies, the original sugar daddy will make commission off of all the money that the other sugar daddies pay to/through the site (*Affiliate*, 2018). This, and word of mouth, are really the only way that SeekingArrangement gains their consumers. However, it seems to work as the site is obviously profitable and successful.

Gender differences

Although sugar dating has become a common cultural phenomenon over the past decade, there has been very little research done on the topic. However, there are common patterns that can be seen through individuals' experiences with sugar dating. Sugar daddies and their female sugar babies engage in relationships much differently than sugar mommas and their male sugar babies. The biggest difference between these pairings is in regards to sex. Sugar daddy/female baby relationships tend to focus more on sex as a priority, while sugar momma/male baby relationships tend to be more about developing a nurturing relationship with sex as a possible occurrence down the road as a part of the relationship. A former female sugar baby stated that in her relationships with sugar daddies that technically "sex was never a requirement on Seeking Arrangement, though I found it was often the main aspiration for these men" (Anonymous, 2017). In another article, three male sugar babies shared their experiences with their sugar mommas. Each of the men agreed that "sex was never forced or expected in the beginning" and that "gifts were never in exchange for sex" (Hsieh, 2018). Women explain that there relationships with men often focus on sexual appeal and sexual activity. A good example of this is women often engage with men over long periods of time. One female sugar baby met with a man once and was paid \$500 for a small dinner and a few hours spent in a hotel room with a jacuzzi and champagne (Anonymous, 2017). Men describe their interactions with their sugar mommas as being more like a regular relationship, where their partner just happens to be quite a bit older and of a higher socioeconomic status. In an interview about their sugar dating relationships, three men commented that the financial status of their sugar mommas had no bearing on their relationships. The three men stated that they would have engaged in a relationship with the same women given the opportunity even outside of a sugar momma/sugar baby type relationship. These men also had monogamous relationships with their partners and the relationships

only ended due to changes in life circumstances rather than over money or a similar issue (Hsieh, 2018). Overall, it is evident that female sugar babies are more likely to engage in relationships that resemble sex work, while male sugar babies are more likely to engage in relationships that are based on mutual respect and compassion.

Consequences of sugar dating

Sugar dating is not a simple entity that is limited to effects within individual relationships. These relationships also affect society as a whole. These consequences are necessary and important to understand how sugar dating may benefit sex workers and make these types of relationships safer, and at the same time possibly be encouraging misogynistic views in society.

Positive aspects

Although sugar dating can be seen as a form of sex work, sugar dating has an advantage over other sex work platforms. Like sugar dating, other sex workers have transitioned to digital. The internet has become an easy way for sex workers to help themselves stay safe while working. It is known that sex work is a risky career for many reasons. By using the internet to their advantage, sex workers are able to find clients online and be able to do background searches and find other information before they ever meet their client in person, which allows the sex workers to stay safer while doing their jobs. Also, sex workers who work online can often avoid pimps who would exploit them and cause them pain. Being online allows sex workers to work from home and remain somewhat anonymous to other people in their life. Sugar dating is one way that sex workers are able to take advantage of the online sex industry.

Negative aspects

Sugar dating has become not only a common practice in society, but an accepted and encouraged one. The media has helped mainstream these relationships by showing only the positive aspects of these interactions. As shown above, sugar dating has also allowed many sex workers a safety net by being able to check out clients online before meeting them in person. However, many of the women who make accounts on sites like SeekingArrangement are not experienced sex workers and/or do not make an account under the assumption that sexual activity is expected. SeekingArrangement as a site does not technically promote sex for money, but most sugar daddies on the site expect sex from their sugar babies.

Researchers found that there were many sugar babies who after engaging in a few "dates" through SeekingArrangement that they felt uncomfortable and

ended up getting rid of their profile (Bien-Aime, 2017). These stories about women who feel exploited or coerced into sex from the sugar daddies that they meet on sugar dating sites are not the stories that get popularized in the media. The more popular stories are those that show the benefits of sugar dating and how college women have been able to pay for their tuition without having to get a job while in school (Wexler, 2017). Due to this absence of bad press on the realities of sugar dating, there continues to be a flood of young women seeking these types of relationships with older men, without being aware of what these men will ask of them. Due to this, many women are vulnerable to be taken advantage of due to their naivety. This is in no way the victim's fault, and society should be more open to sharing stories about what can go wrong and how to help sex workers engage with clients more safely. However, this is not the reality and instead sex workers are often blamed, or not believed, about the abuse that they may suffer at the hands of their clients. In 2013, a young woman in her mid-twenties was raped by an older man she met through SeekingArrangement. During their second "date," he pinned her down and forced her to have sex with him. The woman went to the hospital after she left and had a rape-kit done and filed a report with the police (Chung, 2017). Even though this woman did everything that society claims a rape victim is supposed to do (i.e. report immediately and keep your story straight), she was still blamed for her attack because she was a sex worker. The case was dropped by police because they deemed there wasn't enough evidence to convict her wealthy-high status, rapist. Worse, the press stated that the woman was only "crying rape" in order to try and get money from her attacker (Jacobs, 2013). This stereotype about women crying rape in order to get money is sadly a common way for society, especially the media, to claim that rate of false rape accusations is high when it really isn't. This, accompanied with the high rates of victim blaming and the high socioeconomic status of sugar-baby clients gives little room for victims of sexual violence at the hands of these men to speak up and share their stories.

The reality is that sugar dating is very similar to prostitution, but there are no legislation to help monitor this part of the sex industry. There are no protections to help sugar-babies who may become victim to sexual violence at the hands of their sugar daddies. This leaves sex workers open to predators who are looking to add to their sex trafficking or prostitution ring. Having this type of business conducted online is a good way to help weed out predators, but there is only so much a person can do to try and protect themselves, when they really shouldn't have to. Sex workers deserve just as much trust and compassion as any other individual, but sadly sex workers are believed and blamed for their victimization even more so by society than the general

population. This only causes more stigmatization and less reporting, and in turn no legislation to help protect this population of individuals.

Discussion

Sugar dating, and all it encompasses, has drawn attention from psychologists and sociologists who wonder just how close sugar dating is to prostitution and other forms of sex work. Although there are similarities, mainly that of sexual favors in exchange for monetary gifts, this is not the main issue to be discussed. Research does not need to show how sugar dating is similar to prostitution. Instead, research should be wielded to help support sex workers themselves and make it a safer industry.

Future research needs to be done on this topic. The information here is simplified and general in regards to sugar dating. Research should be done to understand further the consequences, both good and bad, that sugar dating has on society. This research is necessary in order to protect sex workers who engage in sugar dating as a part of their career, as well as to protect individuals who go into sugar dating inexperienced and at risk for exploitation. Also, further research on gender differences in sugar dating should be done to understand how the patriarchy and misogynistic tendencies affect how women view themselves as sex objects and why this may lead them into sex work, as opposed to another career.

Overall, sugar dating is just one facet of a large sex work industry. Sex work has jobs worldwide, and sugar dating is a career that comes with a higher salary than a lot of other common jobs. The promise of paid tuition, health insurance, and other expenses has drawn in millions of individuals to sugar dating. Research on this phenomenon is important so that society can understand the effects and what changes should be made to help sex workers if need be, but researchers have the duty to help de-stigmatize sex work as well

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