

Kathryn Mae Kurlychek

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#SUGARBABIES:

Perceptions of Agency and Sugar Culture on TikTok

In 2011, the MTV hit documentary show *True Life* aired its 233rd episode, entitled “I’m a Sugar Baby.” The series, popular for documenting the lives of culturally marginalized people (gamers, prostitutes, and the Amish among them), used its sugar baby episode to follow three young self-proclaimed “sugar babies” through 44 minutes of drama and luxury. It was also one of the earliest examples of “sugaring” portrayed in a mainstream media context. Since then, sugar babies and sugar daddies have appeared with greater frequency in popular media contexts— from episodes of *Dr. Phil* to BBC documentaries (Cordero 4).

The glamorous and relatively untold world of sugaring revolves around what are deemed as “mutually beneficial relationships,” established between older, affluent individuals (typically male) and younger (typically female) persons of lower economic status (Cordero 3; Daly 2; Nayar 335). “Sugaring,” also known as “sugar dating,” “sugar relationships” or “sugar arrangements,” is a form of paid companionship wherein wealthy benefactors provide financial compensation in exchange for companionship. Sugaring exists on a broad continuum— from platonic exchanges to sexual relations— and often overlaps with the spheres of sex work, online

dating, and hook-up culture. Therefore, sugaring's sudden pop-cultural spotlight has forced participants to reckon with long-standing norms regarding intimacy and sexuality.

Yet, sugar dating's newfound visibility may also exemplify certain and broader shifts in contemporary understandings of normative relationships. As market deregulation and individualism take hold in socioeconomic spaces (Brents & Sanders; Daly 17; Nayar), the commercialization of sex and intimacy has increasingly become widespread— and perhaps even accepted. Moreover, technological innovation has enabled the expansion of commercial sex markets as well as opened up opportunities for online dating and relationships (Cordero 1).

Feminist scholars such as Sharon Lamb and Laina Y. Bay-Cheng, among others, have argued that liberating marketspaces and a growing acceptability of the body as a commodity have translated into modern constructions of female sexuality. In addition to “traditional” metrics of evaluating sexuality and sexual deviance— such as the slut/prude/virgin continuum (Tolman et al. 298)— female agency and empowerment have established themselves in recent years as measures by which to judge and classify a healthy female sexuality. These changing perceptions of what sexual expressions are appropriate and normal fuel both growing industries of sexual commerce and also society's willingness to participate— whether as consumers, sellers, or both— in such institutions.

Given the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of current American society, it is perhaps no great wonder that markets of intimacy, such as those indulged by the practice of sugaring, are gaining wider credibility. As non-normative dating subcultures assert their presence with increasing frequency in digital marketspaces, both the internet and social media platforms have become primary facilitators and mediators of the sugaring phenomenon.

One such platform is the short video-sharing application *TikTok*. TikTok found mainstream popularity during the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns in the spring of 2020; however, the app was already recognized among many adolescents and young adults prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Khattab 2-3). The social networking site accommodates a vast audience of users—over 689 million worldwide (“TikTok Statistics”)—and myriad accompanying subcultures.

Over the past year, in particular, TikTok has witnessed a significant rise in the popularity of sugaring among its users. Financial instability among young women on TikTok—exacerbated by the realities of pandemic life—has encouraged greater interest in sugaring to a number of women on the platform, who view the practice as a fun and low-committal way to earn extra cash (Meley). A subcultural “niche” on the app, dubbed “Sugar Baby TikTok,” has sprung up to harbor this interest, enabling a community of primarily female-identifying users on the platform to spread information about and awareness of the practice. To date, the hashtags #sugarbabies and #sugarbaby have over 530 million hits and 490 million hits on TikTok, respectively (Meley).

This feminist project serves as an analysis of the practice of sugaring as a potential form of girl’s and women’s agency on TikTok. I contend that shifting expectations of healthy female sexuality, which prioritize autonomy and agency and are heightened by the advent of neoliberalism in American society, have contributed to the promotion and validation of sugaring amongst young women. In the following paper, I will attend to the pre-existing literature on sugar dating, encompassing an explanation of what sugar dating is and why sugar relationships have come under such frequent scrutiny, before moving into an examination of agency and feminist scholarship as it pertains to sugaring. I will then consider how sugar dating is positioned as empowering, especially to young female sugar babies, online and specifically on TikTok.

Ultimately, I suggest that the video-sharing app TikTok enables sugar babies to seemingly embody ideals of a healthy female sexuality, and discuss the impact that these videos have on a largely young, female demographic of users.

What is “Sugaring” and how can we Define “Sugar Culture?”

A most basic representation of sugar dating renders it as a relationship trend in which financial compensation is exchanged for dating and companionship. Yet, as Sarah Daly notes in her 2017 thesis *Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies: An Exploration of Sugar Dating on Canadian Campuses*, “the ‘sugar dating’ phenomenon” is riddled with complexities (Daly 2). Typically speaking, sugar relationships occur between an affluent older man and a young woman of “lesser” financial means, wherein the woman’s companionship is exchanged for financial support. Largely heterosexual in practice, the male provider— aka the “sugar daddy”— supports his dependent “sugar baby” via cash allowances that can range between \$1,000 to \$5,000 per month (Desoto 9), as well as the proliferation of other lavish gifts such as expensive meals, vacations, luxury clothing items or jewelry (Cordero 16).

At first glance, sugar dating may appear wholly transactional. Indeed, its compensatory nature has positioned sugaring within a broader sex work debate— however, the realities of sugar dating are far more nuanced. Both Jacqueline Motyl (2013) and Maren T. Scull (2020) note that sugar relationships comprise many variants of companionship, most of which do not legally qualify as prostitution. Motyl argues, for example, that many sugar babies do not engage in sexual conduct with their sugar daddies until (or unless) a romantic connection has been established (Motyl 946-947). She goes on to categorize sugar arrangements in three ways: the

first is exemplary of prostitution, in which money is exchanged outright for sex. However, categories two and three both involved “high levels of companionship” (Motyl 946) which obscure the boundaries between sex work and traditional relationships. The establishment of emotional intimacy as a condition for sexual relations locates these types of arrangements beyond the realm of transactional sex, and thereby do not qualify as prostitution.

Similarly, Scull typifies sugar relationships in her 2020 paper, “‘It’s Its Own Thing’: A Typology of Interpersonal Sugar Relationship Scripts” as “unique relational packages” (Scull 138) which are highly tailored to the wants and needs of the individuals involved (Scull, 2020). While these arrangements sometimes do take shape as overt sex work (or “sugar prostitution”), Scull categorizes six other possible variations of sugar relationships: compensated dating, compensated companionship, sugar dating, sugar friendships, sugar friendships with sexual benefits, and pragmatic love (Scull 142-151). A number of these variations include or require the sugar baby to provide their benefactor with what is known as “the girlfriend experience” (GFE), which encompasses the sharing of quality time, traditional-style dates, and sometimes also sex. To this end, many participants involved in sugar arrangements outside of sugar prostitution stressed emotional connection as a prerequisite for sexual interactions, and emphasized consent in instances of sex acts (Scull 147-148).

At the same time, Scull’s research showed the vast majority of sugar daters, specifically, understood sex to simply be part of the arrangement. Moreover, expectations for emotional intimacy also included a certain level of control or restraint across all sugaring variations, since the vast majority of sugar daters are either non-monogamous or wish to maintain discretion around their involvement in sugaring (Scull 148). In this way, sugar arrangements again blur

boundaries between prostitution, escort work, and more acceptable iterations of dating culture such as “hooking up” and non-monogomy.

The nuanced realities of sugar arrangements make it difficult to generalize the phenomenon as wholly deviant; moreover, these complexities also trouble our ability to demarcate the structures of power or levels of agency present and available to individuals in sugar arrangements. For example, how can consent be negotiated in a relationship where sex is simply “part of the deal?” Or, how much power do sugar babies hold in negotiating arrangements, given that sugar daddies maintain an economic stronghold? Questions of agency and power such as these will be addressed in the following sections of this paper. It is important to keep in mind, for now, that negotiations of power and agency are contested amongst sugar daters and feminist scholars alike, and therefore continue to require a deeper consideration that remains open to interpretation.

Popularly deemed as “mutually beneficial,” sugaring boasts benefits beyond compensation and attention. While financial support is of primary importance to sugar babies (DeSoto 8), many women also seek companionship, friendship, and even mentorship from a sugar daddy. Given that sugar dating is popularly marketed to college-aged women between the ages of 18-26, the opportunity to gain career-related knowledge can be a powerful draw for many (DeSoto 9). In fact, a notorious sugar-dating website, SeekingArrangement.com, has campaigned specifically to a female college student demographic through offering free premium memberships to anyone who enrolls using a college email address; as of 2021, the site boasts over 11 million college-aged sugar babies, with over 8 million of those being female-identifying (SeekingArrangement 2021).

To this end, Srushti Upudhyay's 2021 paper "Sugarling: Understanding the World of Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies" suggests that many sugar babies desire professional mentorship from their sugar daddies. By sampling a pool of public profiles available on SeekingArrangement.com, Upudhyay determined a number of potential incentives for sugaring among both sugar daddies and sugar babies. Specifically, her study found that 40% of sugar baby profiles sought mentorship and career guidance from their sugar daddies, with some even perceiving their sugar daddy as a potential networking source (Upudhyay 6). One profile indicated a desire for "the relationship to be professional/friendly while learning and experiencing new things together"; another expressed interest in "drama-free stability and guidance," while "sharing mutual passions and interests." (Upudhyay 6-7). Clearly, the perceived experience possessed by sugar daddies is of significant appeal to young women emerging into the job market.

In turn, many sugar daddies maintain that sugar arrangements are equally beneficial. Indeed, sugar daddies expressed desire to serve as advisors to their sugar babies (Upudhyay 7). Sugar daddy profiles included in Upudhyay's study emphasized wanting a sugar baby who was not only attractive, but also intelligent and knowledgeable; this reaffirms the idea that sugar daddies, like sugar babies, desire a relationship outside or beyond transactional sex from their arrangements. Indeed, companionship and the "GFE" are primarily cited as the impetus for sugar daddies to seek sugaring arrangements. Many career-driven sugar daddies share feelings of loneliness as a result of their profession, which may demand regular travel or time-consuming commitments (Upudhyay 7). The emotional support and attention provided by sugar babies in these instances eases this burden. In many ways, the benefit of sugar arrangements for sugar daddies mimics stereotypical relationship ideals, wherein the woman provides emotional

assistance and comfort to her male partner. The difference, of course, is that physical and emotional comfort are expected to be readily provided at the sugar daddy's request, since this is the commodity for which he is directly paying.

The myriad expectations that sugar daddies and sugar babies have for their arrangements are typically expressed at the outset. As Mia DeSoto notes in her 2018 thesis, "A Content Analysis of Sugar Dating Websites," sugar relationships are "often comprised of a written or verbal contract that explicitly states the expectations of both parties involved" (Desoto 21). Contractual agreements are negotiated in the first few meetings between a sugar daddy and a sugar baby; these meetings serve the dual purpose of establishing expectations as well as mutual "chemistry" among parties (reinforcing the sugaring script that emotional connection is important to the success of an arrangement). They may also encompass an agreed-upon length for the relationship, the frequency of contact, and/or the amount of money per meeting (DeSoto, 21).

Ultimately, sugaring operates at the intersection of dating cultures— including traditional dating and hook-up culture— and modern-day sex work. This occupation of a liminal space allows sugar daters to uniquely define the facts of their arrangements, in order to satisfy the needs of both parties involved. As a form of "paid intimacy," sugar dating is discussed in both emotional and economic terms, which posit sugar daters as agentic and empowered in mutually beneficial relationships. Shared emphases on chemistry, emotional intimacy and consent enable sugar daters to maintain a certain distance from stigmas associated with traditional sex work, which is traditionally viewed as socially deviant or, in much of feminist discourse, a violation of women's rights and bodily autonomy. Although sugar relationships can be broken down into a number of categories, certain themes generally transcend most variations. Namely: an agreement

that is “mutually beneficial,” a desire for genuine connection or emotional intimacy between partners, and, of course, the interchange of monetary compensation for companionship.

These general norms help shape a broader “sugar culture” in which sugar daters participate. We can understand sugar culture as the contextual backdrop for sugar relationships; the dating subculture that often acts as a point of reference and support for both sugar daddies and sugar babies. Modern sugar culture is often characterized by the circulation of rules, tips and tricks, and even advice online. Chat forums such as SeekingArrangement.com’s *LetsTalkSugar* and FundMySugarBaby.com’s *SugarDating Forum*, for example, provide opportunities for sugar daddies and sugar babies to share their experiences with sugar dating, as well as circulate norms (such as the standard range for cash allowances) and proffer advice to individuals new to the culture.

Popular media, too, has picked up on the sugar dating phenomenon in recent years, thereby increasing sugaring’s popular exposure and contributing to modern sugar culture. News pieces in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Vice*, and even *BusinessInsider* abound with recounts of real-life sugar dating experiences. Sugar babies have been featured on popular television broadcasts, such as *Dr. Phil* and *MTV* (Daly 4); a number of documentaries— produced by companies like CBC, BBC and youtube— have also begun to appear. As sugar dating gains increasing traction among young women as a viable source of substantial income, sugar culture has gradually started taking up more space in online and popular discourse. However, this recent rise in visibility still requires the consideration of a broader historical and socioeconomic context that has played a significant role in crafting the norms of contemporary sugar dating.

The negotiation of intimacy in a market context is nothing novel. Indeed, notions of the “kept” woman or “the mistress”— women who are provided for in secret by a wealthy man— have existed for decades (if not centuries), and are both closely associated with modern iterations of sugaring (Daly 21). Sarah Daly’s 2017 thesis postulates that the specific term “sugar daddy” may have originated in the early 1900s, when the heir to the Spreckels Sugar Company, Adolph Spreckels, married Alma de Brettville— a socialite woman “24 years his junior” (Daly 21). Despite historical stigmatization toward “kept” women (and the wealthy men who supported them), global industrial change and the liberalizing attitudes that came with it ultimately reshaped certain traditional values around relationships— namely, through the creation of a sex industry.

Barbara G. Brents and Teela Sanders catalogue this shift in their 2010 paper, “Mainstreaming the Sex Industry: Economic Inclusion and Social Ambivalence.” In their work, Brents & Sanders engage how cultural change and neoliberalizing capitalist markets enabled the commercial sex industry to integrate itself into modern socioeconomic institutions. This integration— or “mainstreaming”— of the sex industry is arguably the product of what Brents & Sanders dub “late-capitalist mass consumption,” which encourages individualist and egalitarian attitudes through the expansion of free-market policies (Brents & Sanders 44). Ideals of consumer freedom and choice in particular (otherwise known as neoliberal ideals) have slowly taken the place of governmental regulation and intervention in the marketplace, allowing the sex industry to develop into a multi-billion dollar enterprise.

Deregulation of the market has encouraged a freedom-of-choice rhetoric that “has spread to the regulation of morality and sexuality,” according to Brents & Sanders (46). As economic attitudes around sex and intimacy have liberalized to match pace with market demand, social

institutions have similarly detached from certain traditional values pertaining to sexuality and relationships. The body became accepted with greater frequency as a commodity: increasingly available and thus increasingly disposable. The freedom of choice for consumers to use or dispose of this commodity was emphasized as an economic imperative, so much so that the commodity itself ultimately became irrelevant. Rather, it was “the right to choose” which mattered (Brents & Sanders 46).

Interestingly, agency and choice rhetoric are often employed by sugar daters as central to distinguishing their relationships from participating in a sex work industry. In other words, neoliberalist ideals around the commodification of intimacy and the body are essential to the construction of sugar relationships. In this manner, sugar daters, and particularly sugar babies, are able to self-identify as holding power or even being empowered to commodify themselves for financial gain.

The fact that the normalization of sex work has enabled sugar daters to gain legitimacy in contemporary economy and social structures makes it once again difficult to parse out the differences between sugar arrangements and more explicit forms of sex work. Indeed, debates over the sexual underpinnings of sugaring have colored much of related feminist research. Previous considerations of Motyl’s (2013) and Scull’s (2020) work are exemplary of this debate; additionally, Kavita Nayar’s 2017 article “Sweetening the Deal: Dating for Compensation in the Digital Age” broaches this topic in its consideration of whether sugar daters embrace or resist the overlaps between their relationships and sex work. This “sex work debate” has also framed feminist discussions of agency and sexuality as expressed through sugaring.

Ultimately, broad social and economic changes over the past century have enabled sugaring to contend as a legitimate form of contemporary industry. Additionally, widespread cultural change has contributed to the visibility of a “sugar culture” which asserts itself with increasing presence online and in popular culture. A greater visibility of sugaring is reflected in rising participation in the practice, as social media markets sugaring to young women as a reasonable (if not acceptable) and desirable path to financial well-being. Thus, we can define sugar culture as one in which sugar daters— and specifically sugar babies— perceive themselves as empowered through mutually beneficial relationships which embrace non-traditional norms of dating, sexuality, and intimacy in a digital marketplace.

How Do Sugar Babies Negotiate Agency in Sugar Relationships?

An important aspect of empowerment is the individual’s perceived ability to claim their own autonomy. In the instance of sugaring, sugar daters— and particularly sugar babies— believing that they have unbridled agency in negotiating the terms of their relationships is paramount to their personal and sexual expressions. Popular media has played an important role in promoting sugar dating as empowering, and as such has encouraged scores of would-be sugar babies to consider entering arrangements themselves. In her 2018 article “‘Sugar Dating’ Among College Students in the United States,” Nama O’Donnell argues that relatively positive media coverage of sugar relationships has contributed to rising participation in sugar dating among young women (O’Donnell 1). In reference to “positive media coverage,” O’Donnell alludes specifically to notions of empowerment structured around sugar arrangements. As previously

argued, the centering of choice rhetoric in conversations about sugar dating presents it as a sexually and economically liberating form of relationship, especially for young women.

While modern trends in sugaring might be new, questions of women's sexuality, oppression and empowerment are not. Since the 1980s, feminist theory has engaged with questions of female sexuality (Fine; Debold; Gill; Tolman). In a more recent 2010 *Sex Roles* article, feminist theorist Sharon Lamb reviews the themes of such arguments, alongside a consideration of what constructs a healthy female sexuality.

Generally speaking, female sexuality has been maintained as virtuous. Young girls and women were traditionally steered away from outward expressions of sexuality, often by health and sex education courses which reinforced the notion that sex is “dangerous” for women (Lamb 295). The socially-enforced suppression of female sexuality has been argued as an echo of greater oppressions enacted upon women by a patriarchal society (Lamb 295).

In efforts to counteract patriarchal control over women's bodies, feminists began theorizing constituents of a healthy and agentic female sexuality. Lamb's work outlines these common precepts as: desire, subjectivity, and pleasure. These three terms are linked in their intention of centering female pleasure and bodily autonomy in women's sexual experiences. Moreover, each component— desire, subjectivity, and pleasure— also act as responses to historically “problematic” areas for women's sexual expression, those being: objectification, abuse and victimization, and expectations for female passivity (Lamb 296). By emphasizing *desire*, for example— defined as the embodiment of sexual feelings— girls and women are enabled to reclaim pleasure in sexual encounters, outside of simply “giving someone else pleasure through their bodies or performances” (Lamb 297). Similarly, *subjectivity*— described

as a position opposite female sexual objectification— empowers women to act on their own sexual desires, and encourages open expressions of female sexuality.

These constructions of a healthy female sexuality work to return sexual and bodily autonomy to women, who typically experience repression and control over their bodies under patriarchal societies. What's more, this ongoing effort to restore female sexual agency has been amplified in recent years by the advent of neoliberalism within socio-economic institutions. Laina Y. Bay-Cheng argues to this end in her 2015 article, "The Agency Line: A Neoliberal Metric for Appraising Young Women's Sexuality," wherein she asserts that a "neoliberal script of sexual agency" has infiltrated modern conceptions of female sexuality (Bay-Cheng 279).

Bay-Cheng, like other feminist scholars (Debold; Tolman) acknowledges that female "virtue" (or lack thereof) is the primary evaluative metric by which we assess female sexuality in U.S. culture. However, she contends that this "virgin/prude/slut" continuum has grown to encompass newfound considerations of agency and personal autonomy (Bay-Cheng 279). Moreover, these considerations have grown in tandem with advancing neoliberal rhetoric (280), which, of course, advocates similar ideals of choice in a market context. No longer is female sexuality construed merely in "reactive" terms to "male overtures" (282)— rather, sexual agency has become an important new gauge in assessments of female sexuality.

This paradigm shift has unsurprisingly lent to greater showcasing of "female sexual power" (281) as well as the centrality of desire, choice, and self-interest in girl's and women's sexual expression. Liberalizing attitudes have also expanded the social acceptability of non-traditional relationships (such as same-sex and nonmarital relationships) creating space for new iterations of intimacy and sexual expression (281).

In their 2015 paper, “Mobilizing Metaphor: Considering Complexities, Contradictions, and Contexts in Adolescent Girls’ and Young Women’s Sexual Agency,” Deborah L. Tolman, Stephanie M. Anderson and Kimberly Belmonte corroborate Bay-Cheng’s work, supporting the notion that neoliberalism’s ideals of choice and personal agency have come to shape social conceptions of appropriate, if not empowering, sexual behavior (Tolman et al. 297). Tolman and her colleagues further nuance Bay-Cheng’s work, by arguing that understandings and perceptions of agency may differ across age groups. Specifically, their paper asserts that the distinct developmental periods among adolescent girls and young women have marked differences in what is normal and appropriate, and therefore require separate consideration (Tolman et al. 301; Vasilenko et al.; Katz-Wise and Hyde; Lamb;). For example, the meaning of “sexual agency” for an adolescent girl, who is still in the process of forming an understanding of and relationship to her own sexuality, differs greatly from its connotation among, say, an 18 year old girl (301).

All of these findings can be translated into the world of sugaring. The scripts and associated norms of sugar culture, which construct choice and agency as tenets of sugar dating, enable sugar babies “[to] be acknowledged as agents and granted all due respect for their freedom of [their] sexual choice” (Bay-Cheng 286). Subjectivity, as touched upon by Sharon Lamb, moves hand-in-hand with agency. Indeed, Bay-Cheng insists that “the subjective nature of agency” (286) provides women with the opportunities to control (to varying extents) the outward perceptions of their sexual conduct, in order to position themselves within a certain, empowered light. Once again, for sugar babies it is the “right to choose,” in neoliberalist terms, which ultimately overshadows the content of the choice itself. This emphasis on agency further allows sugar babies to create a narrative about their behavior which not only validates their conduct in sugaring relationships, but posits their participation as empowering.

However, these neoliberal constructions of agency around sugar dating are, arguably, illusory. Neoliberalism's "system of rhetorical defenses" (Bay-Cheng 287) outwardly prizes and promotes individuality, personal responsibility, and choice; however it continues to maintain systemic imbalances and oppression behind the scenes. Examples such as the perilous state of women's access to reproductive and sexual health choices; the dependence of youth on systems which inhibit their personal freedom and expression; and even institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism all compound under neoliberalism, thereby expanding "the rights and dominion of some at the expense of others" (287). In other words, the infiltration of neoliberalist rhetoric in female sexual expression may mask itself as empowering, when in actuality it limits or denies access to sexual expression for many.

Similarly, Nayar's 2017 article, "Sweetening the Deal: Dating for Compensation in the Digital Age," suggests a similar finding. The commodification of sexuality, Nayar argues, has become so entrenched in "egalitarian discourse" (344) and the framing of consumer choice as agency that it is increasingly difficult to identify the labor of paid intimacy from the choice to service or consume it. Dynamics of power inherent to paid labor are obscured by choice rhetoric, thereby sustaining economic inequities under the guise of free will.

Brittany Cordero's previously discussed thesis presents a kindred argument: "[sugar babies]. . .acknowledged their ability to exercise some power within the confines of the [sugar] relationship. . . That said, both the Sugar Daddy and the Sugar Baby are still operating within the confines of the patriarchal structure" (Cordero 98). Paralleling Bay-Cheng's argument, Cordero's assertion that sugar relationships mimic heteropatriarchal structures of oppression (specifically through the sugar baby's dependence on her benefactor) offers a counterargument to the notion

that sexual autonomy and choice differentiate sugaring from more traditional styles of relationships.

Nonetheless, for many women sugaring continues to embody the ideals of a healthy sexuality, through its proliferation of choice, centrality of pleasure, and allowance of women to view themselves as agentic subjects in their relationships. Nayar's aforementioned work, while critical of neoliberalist rhetoric, presents a valid counterpoint to the assertions made by Bay-Cheng and Cordero: "[sugar dating] subverts familiar narratives of self-sacrifice and the emotional management of others" (Nayar 344) which are typically associated with women's relationship roles. Sugar babies' ability to prioritize their self-interest, and even put a price on the time and emotional energy expended in these relationships, is subversive to typical patriarchal expectations for women in relationships (344). Additionally, the emphasis on communication, and the inclusion of a contract for sugar arrangements, gives sugar babies the opportunity to "communicate demands more clearly" than is common in "normative dating culture" (344).

Perceptions of Sugaring Online and in Social Media

While sugar daters credit a number of reasons to sugaring's growing popularity, one key contributor often remains overlooked: the role of technology. Truly, in order to understand sugar dating's sudden salience in modern culture, we must consider the role of technology in the mediation of intimacy and sexual commerce. Since the launch of online dating sites at the turn of the 21st century, romance and dating culture has become increasingly digitized (Lamphere & Lucas; Kitchin & Dodge). Online dating as an industry accrues billions of dollars annually, with websites and mobile applications pandering to all dating niches (Duguay; Lamphere & Lucas).

As digital spaces embrace markets of intimacy, sites for sugar arrangements have appeared in number.

The first-ever sugar dating website launched in 2006 under the domain SeekingArrangement.com, and saw instantaneous success. Since this time, dozens of sugaring platforms have surfaced within a digital marketspace; however, SeekingArrangement (now simply under the domain “Seeking.com”) remains at the forefront of modern sugaring relationships and discourse. To date, the site boasts over 20 million members worldwide, with a ratio of eight sugar babies per single sugar daddy (“SeekingArrangement”).

In addition to websites such as SeekingArrangement, which directly facilitates the formation of sugar arrangements, a discussion of sugaring would be incomplete without the inclusion of social media platforms that promote the acceptability and normalization of these relationships within a growing sugar culture. I contend that the past decade has marked a radical shift in the furtherance of sugaring, as social media sites have begun to accommodate new and overlapping apertures of representation. I further argue that the social media app TikTok is the most compelling among these platforms for its sugar baby subculture which advocates sugaring to a much more generalized audience—the majority of which are adolescent girls and young women.

The exposure of sugar culture on TikTok introduces sugaring to users who may have otherwise been unaware of these types of relationships, in a manner that both normalizes and encourages participation in sugaring, specifically for young women, as an economically and sexually liberating path to independence and success. In the following sections, I delineate the similarities and differences between long-standing sugaring website SeekingArrangement and

the social media application TikTok, in order to discuss the role of agency and identity in the promotion of sugaring to young girls and women.

Seeking Arrangement

Founder and CEO of SeekingArrangement.com, Brandon Wade, felt inspired to start the website as a solution to his own problems. Wade self-described his character as “nerdy,” lacking in both experience and perceived appeal to women (Luo); hence, SeekingArrangement (SA) was born as a way to attract women based on what he felt could make him stand apart: his money (Cordero 19). The SA website details its mission in the following way: “Seeking Arrangement is the leading Sugar Daddy dating site where over 20 million members fuel mutually beneficial relationships on their terms” (“SeekingArrangement”). The notion that SA enables users to create relationships “on their own terms” saturates the site’s registration and informational pages, implying the inherent, agentic nature of sugar dating and using it as a marketing strategy. SA’s registration page also features links to the site’s popular media coverage, including articles published in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Business Insider*, and *The New York Times*, among others (SeekingArrangement; Cordero 23).

In essence, SA functions like a dating website, similar in format to platforms like eHarmony or Match.com. Users of the site can create dating profiles that display basic identity markers— age, occupation, general location— and also allows for the inclusion of a short biography, as well as a description of the type of arrangement the user is seeking. The descriptions given by users commonly employ the sugar culture “lingo,” as previously touched upon by DeSoto, Scull, and Upuday. Sugar babies, for example, may include a plea for mentorship or stress emotional connection in their profiles. In addition to dating-style profiles,

sugar daddies and sugar babies are able to interact on SA through viewing and favoriting one another's profiles. The website also features a user inbox that sugar daddies and sugar babies can use to directly communicate with one another.

Following its inception, SA quickly gained public attention. Despite carefully constructed guidelines that prohibit using the site to solicit prostitution or escort services, SA still received critical backlash for its promotion of transactional relationships; Wade even experienced denunciation as a "pimp" in media coverage for his role in facilitating "the sale of women's bodies" (Daly 34). Perhaps most famously, however, are the website's direct campaigns to college-aged women. SA's "Sugar Baby University" was launched in 2011 in a direct appeal to college women struggling with financial debt as a byproduct of their education. In an attempt to attract a female college demographic, SA continues to offer free premium memberships for anyone who registers with a ".edu" email address (Daly 35; "SeekingArrangement"); the "Sugar Baby University" homepage also features a running debt clock of student debt in the USA, as well as the top colleges nationwide for sugaring ("SBU Students in the USA").

SA's increasing appearances in the mainstream— regardless of the nature of such attention— contribute to the growth of an online sugar culture. Indeed, within the first decade of SA's launch, more than one thousand online resources pertaining to sugaring were created, ranging from "how-to" guides, to chat forums, to new sugaring platforms (Cordero 4). SA, too, contributes to this sugar culture via its discussion forum and blog, LetsTalkSugar.

LetsTalkSugar (LTS) provides information and support for SA users (and sugar babies in general), with content divided among sub-headers such as "SUGAR 101," "NEWS," "ADVICE," "FASHION," and more. LTS's homepage offers glamorous glimpses into the world of sugaring, with photos of diverse young women and shirtless, silver-haired men attached to

articles with titles like “4 Things to Perfect on Your First Date with a Potential Sugar Daddy,” and “Getting to Daddy’s Heart Through His Stomach” (“Let’s Talk Sugar”). The blog also features a host of resources reiterating the empowering benefits of sugaring, including a 2019 advice piece titled “How Feminists Can Capitalize in an Arrangement” (“Let’s Talk Sugar”).

While these resources are available to anyone who seeks them out online, thus contributing to greater mainstream attention on sugaring, they generally circulate only among individuals who are already members of the platform and/or participating in sugar dating. In the following section, I turn to more recent sites that have taken up a sugaring subculture with a modern twist, enabling greater promotion of sugaring to a broader demographic.

TikTok

The mobile application TikTok gained mainstream recognition during the height of COVID-19 quarantines last spring. The video sharing app, owned by Chinese company *ByteDance*, is the top video sharing app worldwide, boasting 80 million users in the U.S. alone (Khattab 2). TikTok enables users to create and share short-form videos ranging between 15 and 60 seconds long. These videos can contain all manner of content, and fall under innumerable genres— from dancing, to comedy, to education, activism, and more. The app’s algorithm tends to link videos thematically (usually by hashtags) and curates specialized content for each user’s home page based on previously liked videos. In this way, users can experience a broad variety of content in rapid succession, and also receive new content based on what the algorithm thinks they like.

According to a 2020 study conducted by Mona Khattab, TikTok has seen particularly massive success among adolescents, teens, and individuals in their early twenties (Khattab 2).

TikTok itself corroborates such a claim: of its 80 million U.S. users, roughly 48 million— or 60 percent— are between the ages of 16-24 (“TikTok Statistics”). Of that 48 million, an additional 60 percent (28 million users) are female-identifying (“TikTok Statistics”). These statistics indicate that the majority of TikTok’s users are young women.

TikTok caters to a vast audience of users; as a result, myriad subcultures can be found participating on the app. Subcultures on TikTok— or “niches”— cater to one specific type of content. For example, #spiritualtok engages users on spiritual growth primarily through education, such as proffering advice about yoga, meditation, and even crystal healing. #Foodtok, another niche, connects foodies through the sharing of recipes, kitchen hacks, and even nutritional advice. Other examples of TikTok niches include #hairtok (for hairstyles and hair growth), #witchtok (Wicca and pagan-related content), #planttok (for sharing plant advice and aesthetics), and #lesbiantiktok (content created by and for lesbian TikTok users). Given the breadth of interests and identity cultures circulating on the app, it is perhaps no surprise that sugaring has found a foothold here, as well.

In addition to differences in audience, it is important to note that TikTok’s facilitation of sugaring greatly differs from that of SA’s. While SA functions specifically as a dating website to connect sugar daddies and sugar babies, TikTok does not promote any one specific mission or form of content— rather, it accommodates a wide variety of topics as guided by user participation. As a result, the presentation of sugaring on TikTok does not facilitate sugar dating so much as it enables sugar daters to participate in and spread awareness of a shared sugar culture.

As an example of this influence on TikTok, at the outset of this paper the hashtag #sugarbabies had roughly 211 million hits on TikTok (“TikTok Statistics”). To date, the same

hashtag has over 530 million views. Within a sex-positive niche, sugar babies on TikTok have begun cultivating a sugar culture tailored to the peculiarities of the app— such as the posting videos that showcase lavish gifts or other economic benefits of sugaring, or by providing short informational videos which overview sugar dating apps, do's and don'ts, and general advice on sugar dating.

In a recently published Refinery29 article, author Chloe Meley goes “Inside The Sugar Baby School of TikTok” in an effort to discern how the app engages with sugar culture. Through interviews with popular sugar baby creators on TikTok, as well as a content analysis of trending sugar baby videos, we glimpse an insight into the growth of “Sugar Baby TikTok” among app users.

One such user is Candis, found on TikTok at @candiserianna. Candis originally joined SeekingArrangement in the fall of last year before deciding to create a TikTok account as a way to chronicle her experience as a sugar baby (Meley). She quickly found an audience on the app; her account, created in December of 2020, has close to 11,000 followers and her videos have a combined 43,000 likes (@candiserianna). Candis's posts function as a safe space for other sugar babies, providing advice on topics such as which sugar dating apps to use and how to use them safely and effectively (Meley). Candis also asserts that her videos are meant to empower her viewers: “Whatever you think you're worth,” Candis tells us, “Add tax.” (Meley).

User @thehelpfulho, also known as Wendi, was likewise a practicing sugar baby prior to joining TikTok. Similar to Candis, Wendi uses her platform to spread awareness about the realities of sugar dating to an audience of over 61,000 viewers (@thehelpfulho). Her videos range from Q&A's to social media dating advice, to helpful know-how for sugar babies. Like

Candis, Wendi also stresses feelings of empowerment as bestowed by her participation in sugar dating.

Candis's and Wendi's accounts are not used for creating new arrangements— rather, they participate within a larger sugar culture on TikTok which intended to create a space of support, advice, and community among sugar babies on the app. Sugar Baby TikTok is largely dedicated to debunking and de-mystifying the myths of sugar dating through education, with a particular (and familiar) emphasis on sugaring's distance from sex work (Meley). While Sugar Baby TikTok parallels other sex-positive niches on the app (such as #strippertok), it feels particularly insistent on a distance from sexual intimacy in sugar relationships.

For example, Wendi remains adamant in her posts that “sugar dating goes far beyond— and sometimes doesn't even include— physical intimacy” (Meley). In line with sugaring scripts, notions of companionship between sugar daters are particularly emphasized on her platform. Similarly, Candis has clarified in her posts that sugaring *does not need* to involve sex (Meley). Many other users who circulate advice for sugar babies maintain these declarations, identifying alternative modes of sugaring which do not necessarily include sexual intimacy, or even in-person interactions.

Although both Candis and Wendi are examples of pre-established sugar babies joining TikTok as a way to share their journey and experience, Meley's article also touches upon those sugar babies which were persuaded to seek out sugar arrangements as a result of their exposure to the practice on TikTok. As a part of her research, Meley posted her own video on the app, asking viewers to comment whether they had ever felt enticed to become a sugar baby as a result of the content they consumed on TikTok. The testimonials she received— over 100 comments— were a resounding *yes*. One user commented saying, “[t]empted is an understatement, I think

about it at least once a day” (Meley); another jokingly insisted, “girl, who hasn’t?” (Meley). Many users even commented to say that they had “gotten their start” in sugaring thanks to Sugar Baby TikTok! (Meley). These commendations from TikTok users suggest the influence that Sugar Baby TikTok has on young women— and specifically, that sugaring is widely perceived as a viable economic decision to make, as well as a positive experience for sugar babies.

Advice and how-to’s— the established staples of sugar culture— are not the only way that sugaring is promoted on TikTok. The short-video sharing format of the app means that sugar babies may also visually showcase the perks of their lifestyles. Indeed, some of the most highly viewed videos under the hashtag #sugarbaby include girls flaunting their expensive gifts, going on fancy dinners and vacations, or sharing screenshots of their bank account balances (which are usually enviable). User @serenaileen, for example, shared a video titled “A Day in the Life with a Sugar Baby” on February 23rd, wherein she documents her trips to the nail salon and mall, as paid for by her sugar daddy; since its posting, the video has racked 1.8 million likes. Another TikTok user, @maddi.sun, shared a video last November of her and her friends enjoying a glamorous day spent on a yacht with a wealthy older man, with footage set to the song “Meet Me Halfway” by the Black-Eyed Peas. The video was captioned “when one friend has a sugar daddy we all have a sugar daddy” (@maddi.sun) and accrued 3.6 million likes.

Displays of luxury items or enviable experiences on TikTok (also known as “flex” culture) contribute significantly to a sugaring narrative that empowers young women by promising to increase their economic status and independence. These “flex” videos exemplify an emerging facet of sugar culture, which emphasizes identity performance as a means of attracting mainstream attention. Of course, many sugar baby users— and especially those which dedicate content to sharing advice and debunking sugaring myths— contend that Sugar Baby TikTok is

“here not only to flex, but to teach as well” (Meley). Nonetheless, the impact that these components of TikTok’s sugar culture have together are clearly powerful, and contribute to perceptions of sugaring as fun, liberating, and empowering.

Ultimately, sugar culture on TikTok is not a terribly far cry from the types of sugar cultures facilitated on SeekingArrangement or in other online spaces. However, Sugar Baby TikTok remains distinctive in its presentation of information. Not only does the video formatting of the app enable a new type visibility for sugaring— one previously inaccessible to those outside of the sugar culture— but it also facilitates a greater sense of community and trust among practicing sugar babies and interested users. Moreover, TikTok’s sugar culture is widely accessible to users of the app, either through hashtag searches or by the random appearance of sugar baby-related content on user’s homepages (which is how I first experienced the phenomenon). In addition to broadening the audience exposed to sugar culture, Sugar Baby TikTok also centers empowerment in its narrative of sugar dating. As Meley puts it, “conversations about self-esteem, body confidence and sexual liberation— as well as what empowerment can and should look like— are an integral part of Sugar Baby TikTok” (Meley). The increased exposure of sugaring through TikTok, as well as the conversations about sexual agency that Sugar Baby TikTok facilitates, play valuable roles in the normalization of sugaring and, indeed, sex work more broadly.

TikTok and Perceptions of Agency

Clearly, the sugar culture created on TikTok is one that is deeply committed to a philosophy of female sexual liberation and empowerment. Sugar babies on TikTok circulate content that advocates, through education and “flex culture,” both the normalization of sugaring

as well as the de-stigmatization of sex work more broadly. Specifically, TikTok sugar babies seem to encourage, if not embody, the ideal of a smart, independent, and self-sufficient young woman who is both beautiful and confident enough to get what she wants. These ideals of womanhood for sugar babies closely resemble conceptions of a healthy female sexuality—and, particularly, one that prioritizes agency as a determinant of healthy sexuality.

As we know, both Tolman and Lamb assert that pleasure, subjectivity, and choice play significant parts in present-day conceptions of healthy female sexual expression. Indeed, these facets of sexuality are constructed in opposition to traditional narratives that oppress, objectify, and subjugate women sexually (Lamb 297). Given that pleasure and choice construct perceptions of sugar dating within TikTok's sugar culture, becoming a sugar baby is, in essence, a healthy expression of female sexuality.

These perceptions echo the broader sugar culture, in their reliance on sexual agency as a pathway to achievement. Likewise, the distinction of sugaring from other forms of sex work—despite its acknowledgement of utilising erotic power for personal gain—also remains true to the scripts of the broader sugar culture. Indeed, the emphasis on sugaring *not* requiring sexual relations feels especially prevalent within Sugar Baby TikTok. The ways that girls manage their proximity from being labeled as a “slut” on the virgin/prude/slut continuum mimics the distance that sugar babies put between their relationships and sex work, and may even account for why TikTok sugar babies—who advertise to an audience that may contain individuals under the age of 18—are so adamant about sugaring not requiring physical intimacy.

Nonetheless, “neoliberal scripts of agency” enable sugar babies to put themselves in positions where they are able to exercise increased control over their bodies, thereby reclaiming some level of bodily autonomy from a patriarchal system. Yet, as previously noted by Nayar,

neoliberal choice rhetoric ultimately obscures dynamics of power by placing the responsibility of the choice into the hands of the individual; thus, sugar babies may position themselves in agentic seats of power, but they are also responsible for the construction of their own empowerment.

As Isabela Granic and her colleagues note in their 2020 Psychological Inquiry article, social media “provide[s] opportunities to assert agency and build identity narratives with redemptive themes” (Granic et al. 2023). As much as TikTok invites a close-knit community of sugar babies through the sharing of videos, as a social media platform it inherently authorizes sugar babies on TikTok to create and perform an identity that most suits their self-narrative. While this control may seem empowering, the choices available for sugar babies continue to exist within and be constructed by institutions that remain inherently patriarchal. Therefore, these negotiations of sexual agency require “patriarchal bargains” (Cordero 76) that return sexual autonomy in some areas or to a certain extent to sugar babies, but not fully.

Conclusion

The relatively sudden and mainstream visibility of sugaring and sugar culture follows in the wake of vast socioeconomic changes within contemporary American institutions. Specifically, neoliberalist practices that encourage a deregulation of marketspaces and prioritize consumer choice have opened opportunities for market expansion, and enabled a greater legitimization of sexual commerce. These economic changes have also encouraged cultural shifts, such as the adoption of an individualist ideology. In addition, they have also asserted that choice and agency are both personal and economic imperatives. Neoliberalist rhetoric, too, has come to influence personal expression and conceptions of normative behavior, particularly where female sexuality is concerned.

The normalization of sex work and sugaring on TikTok is a principal example of this reality. Within a sex-positive niche on the social media app TikTok, sugar babies have found a community wherein they can showcase the perks of a sugaring lifestyle, and also contribute to a larger conversation which “debunks” stereotypical myths and stigmas surrounding the practice of sugaring. This debunking process is characteristic of sugar cultures found on other platforms: it heavily distances itself from notions of sex work, while at the same time insisting that consensual participation in sex work industries can be and often is empowering for many women. However, what sets Sugar Baby TikTok apart from other sugaring platforms is its ability to visually convey information, lending to a greater sense of credibility and intimacy among viewers in the community, and particularly adolescent and college-aged females.

Sugar Baby TikTok has seen phenomenal growth over the past year, engaging thousands of users and encouraging at least as many to consider adopting a sugar baby lifestyle for themselves. The primary grounds for engaging in sugaring are the promised ability to exercise personal autonomy, choice, and independence in a relationship which deviates from normal heterosexual roles. However, whether sugar relationships actually subvert power dynamics and empower sugar babies, or simply emulate patriarchal constructions of relationships and emphasize a “right to choose” regardless of the choice is still highly contested regardless of the choice. That is, while sugar babies may feel empowered in their choice to engage in sugar arrangements, these relationships and negotiations still occur within a patriarchal culture. In the context of sugar arrangements, specifically, older males maintain the ultimate power within a capitalist society— money.

Future research would benefit from a consideration of how this content, which is accessible to minors on the app, may influence emerging senses of sexuality and sexual

expression among a younger demographic of girls. Nonetheless, the sugaring phenomenon on TikTok speaks to a broader revolution among young women's willingness to claim and express their sexuality in ways that feel empowering to them.

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