

An Exploratory Study of Sugar Relationships in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Sugarbook, a dating application that connects sugarbabies and sugarparents, experienced a server crash due to a massive surge in registrations from the Philippines in 2020. It had approximately 200,000 Filipino users by 2021 – with 76% registered as sugarbabies, and nearly half of them were students. This surge prompted Senator De Lima to file Senate Resolution 609 in January 2021, initiating a legislative inquiry into the escalating use of sugar dating sites. This resolution highlighted sugar relationships as a social problem, especially impacting young women grappling with pandemic-induced economic hardships. It is common knowledge in Sociology that trying to solve a problem can yield varying outcomes: success, failure, exacerbation of the issue, or the creation of new problems. These undesirable outcomes may result from a lack of understanding of the problem, the proposed solution, or both. With this in mind, the study explored the lived experiences of Filipino sugarbabies to gain a better understanding of the nuanced nature of sugar relationships. The research was able to identify the motivations behind the entry of sugarbabies into this kind of relationship, the process of discovering and participating in them, the expectations they are expected to fulfill, and the risks that are associated with these relationships.

Keywords: Sugar Dating; Transactional Relationship; Deviance; Philippines

INTRODUCTION

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Philippine society experienced various trends and phenomena. Each month brought new trends, which helped Filipinos cope with the monotony and economic challenges brought about by the government-imposed isolation measures. By the latter part of 2020, public attention started to shift to a dating application called Sugarbook. Unlike Tinder and Grinder, which are predominantly used to match people looking for either heterosexual or

homosexual long-term relationships and hookups, Sugarbook matches “sugarbabies” with “sugarparents”. By the third quarter of 2020, the aforesaid online dating platform announced that its servers had temporarily crashed due to the surge of registrations from the Philippines. The succeeding weeks saw local media putting a greater spotlight on the platform and its rise to popularity. According to news reports, the application experienced a 65% online traffic surge from the Philippines from March to August 2020 (Malasig 2020). By January 2021, the platform had around 200,000 users from the Philippines (Lopez 2021). Within this population of registered users, Sugarbook reported that 76% of Filipino users registered as sugarbabies, and almost half of this sugarbaby population are students (Quismundo 2020).

What do sugarbaby, sugarparent, and sugar relationship mean? These terms are often associated with a man (the sugarparent) who is in a relationship or marries a much younger woman (the sugarbaby). Over the years, these terms have been adopted by the public. A sugar relationship, in essence, has been regarded as a relationship with two vital elements: (1) a significant age difference between the sugar parent and sugar baby wherewith the sugar parent is older, and (2) the presence of money or gifts as a primary consideration for the formation and maintenance of the relationship. Indeed, in the case of Sugarbook, the application tried to capture the kind of relationship they peddle as one where *“romance meets finance; build and negotiate the terms of your relationships.”*

Following the public attention on sugar relationships due to Sugarbook, the Philippine Congress also joined in on the conversation. On January 12, 2021, Senator Leila De Lima filed Senate Resolution 609 which sought for a legislative inquiry into the increase in use of sugar dating sites. The resolution made use of the term “sugar dating” which was regarded as an *“alternative means of livelihood”* and a *“transactional dating practice typically characterized by an older wealthier person and a younger person in need of financial assistance in a mutually beneficial relationship. Under this arrangement, the “sugarbaby” is given financial assistance by a “sugar daddy or mommy” in exchange for companionship and other favors which are mostly sexual in nature.”* The existence of this resolution implies that sugar relationships, or sugar dating, is becoming recognized as a social problem in the country.

In Blumer’s (1971) classic thesis of social problems as collective behavior, he argued that *“social problems are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup”*. This “collective definition” undergoes a series of stages. First, there must be social recognition wherein the public becomes increasingly aware of the social condition. In this case, this happened in the latter part of 2020 when public attention became focused on sugar dating due to Sugarbook. Second, there must be social legitimation wherein influential entities in society, such as the media, officially recognize the existence of the social condition. This is clearly the case in sugar dating given the

news coverage over Sugarbook. Third, there must be a mobilization for social action wherein a call to resolve the social condition – now recognized as a social problem – is made. This is where the Senate resolution comes in. The fourth stage of Blumer's thesis is the development and implementation of a plan of action wherein a societal response to the problem is formulated and implemented with the aim of arriving at the fifth stage: problem resolution. The concern with the fourth stage is that a plan of action developed and implemented to solve the problem may either solve the problem, prove ineffective in solving the problem, worsen the problem, or even inadvertently produce a new problem. These negative results of the fourth stage may be brought about by an improper understanding of the problem, of the solution to the problem, or both. This, therefore, begs the question: What do we know about sugar relationships?

One of the major contributions in the literature about sugar relationships is provided by Scull (2019). Through in-depth interviews with women in the United States who have been in sugar relationships, Scull discovered that the common definition of sugar dating known by the public does not wholly capture the nuances of the relationship. In the study, Scull was able to identify seven types of sugar relationships: *Sugar Prostitution*, *Compensated Datings*, *Compensated Companionship*, *Sugar Dating*, *Sugar Friendships*, *Sugar Friendships with Benefits*, and *Pragmatic Love*.

In a study of sugar relationships in Sweden, on the other hand, Gunnarsson and Strid (2021) were able to identify three general forms of sugar relationships: (1) sex only, (2) dating including sex, and (3) dating without sex. These three forms overlap with the typology provided by Scull. The study also identified three forms of compensation that may be present in sugar relationships: (1) monetary payment for every engagement similar to Scull's sugar prostitution and compensated dating, (2) an unregulated or unstructured form of monetary support similar to those found in many of Scull's typologies, and (3) an arrangement wherein the sugar parent merely covers the expenses of the sugar baby such as the monthly bills.

While Gunnarsson and Strid's study bears several similarities with Scull's, what their study adds to the conversation is their inquiry into the sugar baby's motivation for entering the sugar relationship. Their analysis showed that less than half of their respondents entered the sugar relationship primarily for monetary considerations – a subversion of the traditional understanding of sugar relationships. Indeed, the study identified that sugar babies whose arrangement only revolves around sex were the ones whose only motivation for entering the sugar relationship was purely instrumental – monetary compensation. Furthermore, it is worth noting that these sugar babies were not pushed into the relationship due to acute economic problems. Instead, sugar babies who fall under this category tend to have other sources of income, and the monetary compensation from the sugar relationship only serves to boost their revenue and allow for more luxuries in life. Further, sugar babies with dissimilar arrangements with their

sugar parents emphasized that they obtain intrinsic gains from interacting with their sugar parents. The nature of a sugar relationship allows them to be more selective of who will be their sugar parent, as opposed to prostitution, and they can choose those who give them intrinsic rewards such as tenderness and satiation of their thirst for adventure. There is also a varying degree of emotional ties between sugar babies and sugar parents, and a sense of friendship often emanates from the relationship. For some sugar babies, the sugar relationship also provides a venue wherein they experience the benefits of a romantic relationship without the burdens of having to commit or reciprocate as much.

In the context of online platforms that facilitate sugar relationships, a study conducted by Nayar (2017) focused on those using Seeking Arrangement - an online website designed to facilitate sugar babies and parents. The study showed that in sugar relationships, the goal is to create a harmonious blend of emotional connection, similar to traditional dating, with transactional aspects. Consequently, sugar relationships are perceived as mutually beneficial compared to conventional relationships due to clear agreements and structured arrangements that define emotional availability and expectations. This structured framework empowers the sugar babies to express their desires and requirements openly, which is not commonly found in traditional dating scenarios where certain intimate acts are expected without explicit communication. The study further highlighted that the foundational premise of sugar relationships resides in the capacity of both the sugar baby and sugar parent to overtly state their anticipations for compensatory considerations – both in terms of intimacy and financial transactions. This act serves to establish explicit boundaries and engender a mutual understanding of capabilities and contributions within the context of the relationship. In contrast, within conventional relationships, the expectation often rests on the assumption that such understandings will organically materialize as the relationship deepens. Further, although the involvement of monetary or non-monetary compensation is evident, the classification of sugar relationships as a form of sex work becomes a disputed point. Intriguingly, sugar babies purposefully differentiate themselves from traditional sex workers. As stated in the study, sugar babies express dissatisfaction with “sugar daddies” who disregard the emotional aspect of the sugar relationship, thereby reducing the relationship to a mere economic transaction which could then devalue the depth of the relationship. The study also underscores the capacity of women to appraise the value of their emotional contributions within intimate relationships and to engage in negotiations regarding economic benefits.

These studies suggest that sugar baby-sugar parent relationships may be more complex than a mere exchange of sex and gifts. The nuances that make it substantially different from prostitution, should be considered when crafting policies to address sugar dating (Gunnarsson & Strid 2021). True to the tradition of the Sociology of Deviance, Scull opined that:

“Whenever I read an article about ‘sugar daddies’ or ‘sugar babies,’ I often saw the same sensationalistic slant: the women are desperate, starving college students engaging in prostitution. As someone who studies deviance, I knew there were more important nuances to these relationships” (as cited in Erickson 2019)

All aforementioned information about sugar dating was obtained from other countries. While informative, it is based on foreign cultures and social conditions. Therefore, there is a necessity to examine this phenomenon in its local context to further understand its nuances. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Filipino sugar babies, guided by the following questions:

1. What are the motivations of sugar babies for entering into a sugar relationship?
2. How do sugar babies find sugar parents?
3. What are the desirable characteristics that sugar babies look for in sugar parents?
4. What are the role expectations ascribed to sugar babies in a sugar relationship?
5. What are the risks encountered as a direct or indirect result of a sugar relationship?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study followed a qualitative research design with in-depth interviews as the data-gathering strategy. Participants were recruited through two strategies: first, a digital poster calling for participants was posted on various social networking sites. Two elements were utilized as the inclusion criteria for the recruitment of participants: (1) they must be at least 18 years old to ensure that they are legally mature enough to give written consent to participate in the interview, and (2) they identify themselves to be or have been, a sugar baby and are currently, or have experienced being, in a sugar relationship. The second criterion – that they identify themselves as a sugar baby – is very important because there is no definite or universal definition of sugar relationships or sugar babies (Sum & Sehu Mohamad 2022). The study recruited participants from all sexual orientations and gender identities.

The study was able to interview nine participants, among which seven were enrolled as students – with being working students, and the remaining five as full-time students. The other two participants held formal employment at the time of the interviews. In terms of gender identity, three participants identified as part of the LGBTQIA++ community, with two of them identifying as homosexual males and one as a homosexual female while the other participants consisted of two heterosexual males and four heterosexual females. The participant’s involvement in sugar dating had varying

durations, ranging from months to years. Furthermore, the number of sugarparents they had engaged with also varies with some that are in their first sugar relationship at the time of the interview while others already had several sugarparents.

Given the quarantine imposed in the country during the timeframe of the study, the interviews were conducted online. All participants were briefed on the nature of the study and their freedom to stop participating at any part of the interview should they feel uncomfortable with the conversation. Each interview lasted for at least an hour. The identities of all participants are also kept confidential. No monetary reward was provided to the participants. Thematic analysis was performed to unearth themes emanating from their narratives. Findings were conveyed to selected participants for validation. They have consequently concurred with the study results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Motivations for entering a sugar relationship.

Entry into a sugar relationship was prompted by various motivating factors narrated by the participants. These motivations are the following:

- 1. *Financial Concerns.*** Monetary concerns were a common motivator for most of the participants to engage in sugar relationships. These monetary concerns were reportedly rooted in three different contexts. First, two participants explained that their family's financial constraints were unable to satisfy the needs of all household members, thus prompting them to provide for themselves. Second, two participants explained that circumstances such as being estranged from their family or needing to pursue higher education far from home necessitated living alone and entering sugar relationships provided them with financial support for both daily and educational needs. Finally, five sugar babies explained that the monetary rewards of sugar relationships were attractive for affording luxuries, or "luho." The compensation allowed them to acquire luxury items without depleting their budgets, echoing the findings of Gunnarsson and Strid (2021).
- 2. *Curiosity.*** Fascination with the experience of sugar relationships also played a significant role as a motivator for most of the participants. Ideas about sugar relationships before their entry were mainly obtained from two sources: (1) peers with experience as sugar babies and (2) online information. Peers performed three functions: (1) providing information about sugar relationships, (2) serving as role models for sugar babies and the rewards they enjoy, and (3) normalizing sugar relationships and reducing participants' reservations. Online information about sugar relationships, meanwhile,

essentially serves as an extra source of information. Interestingly, a search for information about sugar relationships on the web would yield a variety of webpages, beyond news articles that follow the “sensational” approach (Scull, 2019). Many of these narratives claim that sugar relationships are not as exploitative as believed. However, it is notable that most of these narratives came from dating websites that serve as platforms for sugar relationships.

3. ***Attraction to mature “partners”.*** Some participants also expressed that there exists a distinct allure in the pursuit of sugar relationships. This “allure” was rooted in the assumption that their engagement as sugar babies would connect them with older individuals, which is seen as new and rewarding due to the assumed maturity that comes with age. It is worth noting that this is similar to the narratives displayed by sugar dating applications: Young women have much to gain from entering a sugar relationship with older men because they are more mature, and sugar babies stand to learn from their wisdom.
4. ***The promise of benefits without much of the responsibilities of a traditional romantic relationship.*** An important selling point of a sugar relationship is that sugar babies can gain rewards akin to a traditional romantic relationship such as companionship and gifts without the responsibility to reciprocate these benefits to their parents. It has even been opined that the rewards derived from sugar relationships are superior to those from traditional romantic relationships either in terms of intensity or frequency – a situation that might be due to the resources at the disposal of sugar parents. This makes sugar relationships attractive even for those who are not looking for a romantic relationship.

B. How do sugar babies find parents?

It became apparent that the process of seeking sugar relationships is not limited to a single approach. There are different ways of interaction done through various platforms. Based on their individual preferences, sugar babies either utilize multiple methods simultaneously or rely on a single venue of interaction. In certain cases, participants did not actively seek out sugar relationships; rather, their exposure to such dynamics resulted from their interactions that eventually evolved into a sugar relationship.

1. ***Online platforms as a gateway to sugar relationships.*** Cyberspace significantly impacts the formation of various relationships. Interview results show that online platforms are the most common gateway to sugar relationships, formed through (1) multi-purpose social networking sites, (2) dating websites or apps, and (3) dedicated sugar dating websites or apps.

1.1. Multi-purpose Social Networking Sites. This pertains to the different social networking sites accessible and utilized by the general public for various purposes. Young Filipinos tend to make niche communities in these social networking sites where they can interact and express themselves. A notable example of this is the formation of the Alter community - a clandestine niche community where young Filipinos are free to express their sexuality (Iwayama, Piemonte & Quintos, 2020). This Alter community can be found predominantly on Twitter as long as a user knows the right accounts to follow or the right hashtags to search for. It is also often in these clandestine niche communities in social networking sites that potential sugar babies look for sugar patients. One participant explained that she posted a tweet just for fun stating “*I want a sugar daddy*” along with the relevant hashtags. This led to the participant receiving a direct message from an interested sugar parent.

1.2. Dating Websites or Applications. Dating portals such as Tinder, Bumble, OkCupid, Grindr, Planet Romeo, Blued, and Tag were employed as means of seeking potential sugarparents. Four participants actively utilized these platforms. These applications, while designed to act as a portal for interaction among people seeking some kind of intimate engagement, are not specifically designed for sugar babies and sugar parents. Participants who utilized these platforms, therefore, had to specifically indicate their interest in a sugar relationship within their profiles and incorporate relevant hashtags like #sugarbaby and #sugardaddy to attract prospective matches.

These dating portals also allow participants to adjust the age bracket and the location of their preferred engagements. These dating portals, despite being designed for other purposes, were the preferred portals for some participants despite the existence of websites/applications dedicated solely to sugar relationships. According to the participants, certain features are offered in these dating portals that make them preferable:

“I tried Seeking Arrangements (a sugar dating website), but it seemed easier to converse on Tinder because you can already see their profiles. In Seeking Arrangements, you have to ask the person for permission, and the conversations there tend to be more time-consuming. It is more convenient on Tinder since it’s a mobile app.”

1.3. Websites or Applications dedicated to Sugar Dating. Some online portals have been specifically designed to serve as a platform for sugar relationships. In their profiles, individuals can express their

preferences, describe the arrangements they desire, and specify the physical attributes they seek. These profile descriptions are used to attract potential sugar babies or sugar parents who align with the stated preferences and criteria. The profile descriptions also increase their chances of finding compatible sugar parents or sugar babies on the website. Users of these platforms also can report any misconduct by a sugar parent, leading to the blacklisting of the sugarparent's account on the platform. The inclusion of these features gave the participant a heightened sense of security thereby enhancing their confidence in utilizing the site.

It is also worth noting that these sugar dating platforms seem to recognize students as a very marketable kind of sugarbaby – some of these platforms encourage sugarbabies to register using their school-affiliated student email addresses. As a reward for registering as students, the platform automatically upgrades the account to a premium baby status, which is equipped with more benefits and tools such as the ability to browse more sugar parent profiles, send more messages in a given timeframe, and be featured more often in sugar baby search algorithms. This is evident in Nayar's (2017) study which characterizes sugar babies in Seeking Arrangement as "college attending or educated, young (between 21 and 27 years old), heterosexual, cis-gendered women".

2. **Middlemen.** An unexpected discovery in the study is the presence of middlemen in the process of forming sugar relationships. Similar to how "pimps", "mamasans", and "handlers" are found in other non-normative transactional relationships such as prostitution, middlemen in sugar relationships perform various functions that help in the pairing of sugar babies and sugarparents. According to a participant who has experienced being a sugar baby and then eventually transitioned into becoming a middleman, the role entails three primary functions: (1) scouting and recruitment, (2) evaluation and pairing, and (3) vouching.

- 2.1. Scouting and recruitment. Middlemen take on the task of looking for potential sugar babies. To this end, middlemen interact with people whom they believe have the potential to be sugar babies and introduce the idea of entering a sugar relationship. The opportunity to introduce this non-normative arrangement often presents itself when the potential sugar baby becomes comfortable enough during conversations with the middleman and confides to the latter about problems. The middleman can then capitalize on these problems as solvable through sugar relationships.

According to the middleman participant, middlemen who engage in scouting or recruiting prospective sugar babies often target specific locations or bars. In Manila, for example, scouting activities primarily take place in bars known for their spacious and quieter environments. These environments facilitate conversations with potential sugar babies while minimizing the risk of eavesdropping - an important consideration given the sensitive nature of sugar relationships. Middlemen seamlessly blend into the crowd and try to establish rapport with the bar crowd predominantly composed of young students. The middleman participant explained that they typically approach individuals who are alone.

- 2.2. Evaluating and Pairing. The sugar baby needs to undergo evaluation and approval by the middleman before they are recommended to potential sugar parents. In some cases where the sugar relationship involves sexual intimacy, the sugar baby must first engage in sexual intercourse with the middleman before being approved and paired with a sugar parent. The middleman participant explained that this is done to “check for sexual compatibility,” especially when the middleman was a former sugar baby of the sugar parent who has since retired and knows the sugar parent’s sexual preferences. It is important to note that the aforementioned sexual intercourse is not mandatory. The decision to engage in such actions rests at the discretion of the middleman or may be at the request of the sugar parent to assess the abilities of the sugar babies if the engagement involves sexual satisfaction. However, it is crucial that the middleman match the sugar parent with a sugarbaby that possesses the preferred characteristics of the former. Equally important is pairing the recruited sugar baby with a sugar parent who can fulfill the needs and limitations identified by the sugarbaby. These middlemen are rewarded either monetarily or in kind by the parents once the pairing is successful.
- 2.3. Vouching. Another important role of middlemen is their capability to filter bogus sugar babies and sugarparents. It is their job to attest to the authenticity of the parties involved. The previous discussions have already touched upon the ways by which middlemen check for the authenticity of sugar babies. Beyond this, they also need to make sure that sugar parents are seriously looking for sugar babies and are capable of providing the benefits sought after by sugarbabies. It is also part of their role to undertake the task of filtering out sugar parents who pose a potential risk or harm to the sugar babies. It is also worth mentioning that some middlemen may have firsthand experience as former sugar babies themselves, equipping them with valuable insights

into the dynamics of a sugar relationship. Participant who, during their experience as a sugar baby became a victim of sexual assault by a sugar parent, holds their new role as a middleman in high esteem:

“We did not become middlemen to deceive or trap people, but rather to make sure that others may not experience what we went through before. We became middlemen to ensure that people, who are in need, can be assured that they will not end up with individuals of bad character.”

- 3. Evolving relationships.** Not all sugar babies in the study initially sought to enter a sugar relationship. Some found themselves in such relationships as their interactions with eventual sugar parents evolved. One participant described his relationship with his sugar parent as a friendship based on their mutual love of online games. Eventually, the sugar parent began giving the participant gifts both in and outside the game. Initially hesitant, the participant eventually accepted these gifts and recognized that their relationship had evolved into a sugar relationship with romantic undertones.

The aforesaid evolution into a sugar relationship transpired between two consenting adults. However, this is not always the situation. In the case of one of the participants of the study, the relationship was between an adult woman and a female high school student below the age of majority. The relationship started as a simple bonding between strangers over a shared interest in Japanese animation and K-Pop idols. Their connection appeared innocent - revolving around shared interests - but gradually evolved into a sugar relationship. As the participant explained, she (the adult woman) was good at keeping conversations. Eventually, through their close and transparent interaction, the sugarparent became aware of the participant's financial need. This awareness prompted the sugarparent to offer the participant help in the form of allowances, gifts like gadgets, and a daily Uber ride to and from the participant's school. The participant admitted being flattered by the experience – especially since the amount of gifts was beyond the buying power of a typical Filipino high school student of her stature. This convinced her to continue with the relationship despite its changes from their original form of interaction.

What is common in these evolving relationships is that neither the sugarbaby nor the sugarparent initially intends for it to be a sugar relationship. In these situations, their platonic relationship served as a platform for both parties to assess their mutual interests. During this process, they find themselves engaging in actions that are already, to some extent, associated with the characteristics of a sugar relationship. It is noteworthy that both parties

explicitly acknowledge and label the relationship as a sugar relationship at a certain point in their evolving connection.

C. What are the desirable characteristics that sugar babies look for in sugar parents?

Sugarbabies exercise a measure of agency in the selection of their sugar parents. They often seek specific characteristics of sugar parents deemed essential for a sugar relationship to work. The interviews yielded the following desirable characteristics:

- 1. Diligent adherence to the mutually agreed arrangements of the sugar relationship.** When selecting sugar parents, a crucial characteristic deemed desirable by all participants is the perceived willingness of the sugar parent to adhere to the agreed-upon terms of the sugar relationship. Typically, agreements are formed through verbal or online communication, with only one participant mentioning the existence of a formal contract which is signed by both parties of the sugar relationship. This contract, even checked by a legal education student, explicitly outlines the expected responsibilities, duration of the relationship, frequency of meet-ups or dates, agreed-upon allowances, and even the desired level of affection expressed by the sugar baby. This finding is intriguing, drawing parallels to popular depictions of transactional relationships in media, such as the book and film series *Fifty Shades of Grey*, wherein the main characters have a formalized contract that outlines the rules of their engagement. Any violation of these terms can result in termination, thereby highlighting the transactional nature intrinsic to the relationship. However, an intriguing reason for terminating a sugar relationship was the development of romantic feelings by either party involved. This was also stated in the written contract of one of the participants, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining emotional detachment. As the contract stated,

“This short-term relationship aims to satisfy both parties’ intimate needs and for the sugar daddy to provide financial support to the sugar baby. As such, other emotions such as love, jealousy, infatuation, and other similar feelings are excluded.”

Arrangements differ based on the mutually agreed terms between the sugarbaby and sugarparent. Most participants emphasized that compensation, whether monetary or non-monetary, should always be present in all arrangements. Essentially, both parties should discuss the non-sexual and sexual services desired by the sugar parent, ensuring that these services are agreeable to the sugar baby. These services will be elaborated upon in the subsequent section of this paper.

- 2. Financially capable.** Sugarparents should possess the capacity to provide compensation, either in the form of monetary or non-monetary things. As narrated by the participants, these parents tend to have well-paying sources of income including business owners, managers, political leaders, and individuals in top or managerial roles. Some sugarparents even pay for the education of their sugarbabies and can even send them to private schools or schools in another country. Interestingly, some parents can be students who receive substantial monthly allowances. These sizable allowances enable them to financially support a sugar baby.
- 3. Common interest.** Most participants place importance on shared similarities or common interests. This allows sugar babies to initiate conversations more effortlessly. By finding common ground, sugar babies can establish a rapport with potential sugar parents, fostering a sense of comfort and ease in their interactions thus providing socio-emotional support for the sugar parent.
- 4. Positive record.** For one participant who has middleman connections, the focus is on identifying parents with a positive track record in past sugar relationships. As mentioned, these middlemen not only scout for potential sugar babies but also exert influence over sugar parents by serving as filters in the relationship. They conduct background checks to ensure the safety of all parties involved, ensuring that there are no underage sugar babies or records of abusive behavior by the sugar parent. Additionally, middlemen possess the authority to block further transactions with sugar parents who exhibit abusive behavior towards sugar babies. Given the extensive network of middlemen, being blacklisted by their network effectively restricts a sugar parent from engaging in further sugar relationships.
- 5. Age.** One of the prevailing perceptions surrounding this is that sugarparents tend to be older individuals, described as “3Ms” or “Matandang Malapit nang Mamatay” (elderly nearing death). However, the findings challenge this notion, showing that parents typically fall within the age range of mid-20s to 50s. These sugar parents, often in their late twenties or thirties, prefer sugar babies who are closer to them in age. This preference allows them to present their sugar baby as a companion in public without the risk of easily arousing suspicion about the nature of their relationship. As a result, the age gaps between sugar parents and sugar babies typically range from three to eight years. Notably, in some cases, the age difference may be even smaller, with certain sugar parents being nearly the same age as their sugar babies – especially in cases of student sugar parents. However, in online transactions, parents tend to be older. Three participants who engaged in the aforementioned online platforms conveyed a preference for older

parents, typically ranging from their 40s to 50s. Their rationale behind this preference was rooted in the belief that older sugar parents possess greater maturity and conversational skills while also having less interest in potential sexual elements of the relationship, rendering them more desirable to other sugar babies.

D. What are the role expectations from sugar babies in a sugar relationship?

As stated by all participants, sugar relationships are founded on mutually agreed-upon arrangements between sugar babies and sugar parents. The form that the arrangement takes depends on the preferences and mutual agreement of the sugar baby and sugar parent thus also stating the expectations in the sugar relationship. Notably, many of the reported parents in the study seek out these non-sexual elements of the relationship – contrary to the common presumption that sexual satiation is at the core of sugar relationships.

1. *Non-sexual services.* These services primarily revolve around fulfilling the sugar parent’s need for companionship and addressing their socio-emotional needs. It emphasizes emotional support, engaging conversations, and shared interests with the sugar parent. These non-sexual services are further categorized into three distinct types:

1.1. *Companionship.* Many parents seek companionship which centers on building connections through friendly conversations and engaging in various non-sexual activities. These interactions often mirror the dynamics of friendships or even simulate a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. In this service, the sugar baby is expected to demonstrate care and affection towards the sugar parent and create a sense of emotional closeness. Companionships within sugar relationships can be further divided into two kinds:

1.2. *Virtual companionship.* With the aid of technology, sugar babies can fulfill the expectations of parents without the need for face-to-face interaction. This service is especially used in long-distance sugar relationships, where physical distance poses a challenge for sugar parents and sugar babies to meet in person. This entails relying heavily on online platforms and websites for communication. However, this arrangement can also apply to sugar parents and sugar babies who are geographically close but opt for virtual interactions instead of physical meetings.

Virtual companionship encompasses online activities which include texting, online messaging, phone calls, video chats, and even watching

movies together virtually. Sugarbabies often provide constant attention to the sugar parent, serving as someone with whom the sugar parent can actively engage in discussions about their daily life. Further, the extent and depth of this service can be adjusted based on the preferences and agreements of the sugar parent and sugar baby. For instance, one participant mentioned that his sugar parent was comfortable with a predetermined number of hours for virtual conversations, indicating that the level of interaction can be tailored to suit the specific needs of the sugar parent and the boundaries of the sugar baby in the sugar relationship.

- 1.3. *Physical companionship*. This service involves face-to-face meetings where the sugarparent and sugarbaby spend time together in person and engage in activities such as dining out, attending events, traveling, or simply enjoying each other's company. Physical intimate acts such as holding hands, cuddling, hugging, and kissing, are expected forms of interaction in this service. The level of intimacy between the sugar baby and the sugar parent is limited; sexual activities or intercourse are not part of the expectation. In physical companionship, sugar babies must demonstrate an understanding of the sugar parent's lifestyle and the social circles they frequent. Drawing similarities with Scull's (2019) concept of Compensated Dating where the sugarbaby functions as a form of "arm candy", the sugarbaby must be presentable not only aesthetically but also conversationally for the sugarparent to comfortably appear in public with them as a companion.

Physical companionship can be further grouped into three services: (1) Meet-ups or casual dates involve in-person activities lasting no more than a day, where sugar parents and sugar babies engage in face-to-face interactions tailored to agreed preferences, ranging from intimate to platonic experiences. In some sugar relationships, these meetups may involve a deeper level of intimacy akin to a girlfriend or boyfriend experience (GFE or BFE), while others may opt for a strictly platonic interaction; (2) Events or parties entail accompanying the sugar parent to formal gatherings or recreational activities for specific occasions, with interactions typically limited to the event's duration; and (3) Vacations are another facet, where sugar parents seek companionship from sugar babies, covering all expenses, especially during peak "seasons" like summer, known as "Boracay season" or "Baguio season" for specific destinations.

1.4. *Doing mundane tasks*. Some sugar parents seek sugar babies to assist them with daily tasks, such as household chores, laundry, and grocery shopping. Moreover, sugar babies may shop for both the sugar parent and themselves using provided financial resources by the sugar parent. They may also request sugarbabies to oversee their property when they travel. In return, sugar babies may use the provided financial resources for personal shopping. These seemingly mundane tasks are also part of the expectation in certain sugar relationships.

1.5. *Showcasing the sugar parent's gifts*. Some sugar parents pamper sugar babies with luxurious items and expect evidence of their use. It is important to clarify that this does not necessarily entail publicly disclosing that these items were gifted by their parents. Instead, it involves discreetly sharing proof of appreciation. This may manifest in the form of sending the sugar parent pictures of themselves wearing or using the gifted items, using the items whenever they are together, or consistently expressing gratitude for these gestures. The primary aim is to demonstrate that the sugar baby values and appreciates the sugar parent's gifts. This kind of arrangement is adequately captured by the explanation of a middleman who said that "sometimes, a sugar parent has excess money and just wants to have someone whom they can spend for."

2. **Sexual Services**. This type of service is offered in both physical and online forms. It primarily revolves around fulfilling the sexual desires and satisfaction of the sugar parent. In certain instances, sugar babies may receive requests from sugar parents to fulfill particular fetishes or preferences. This can involve wearing specific outfits or engaging in role-play scenarios to cater to the unique kinks or fantasies of the sugar parent. However, it is crucial to emphasize that engaging in sexual services is not an obligatory component of sugar relationships. Whether or not such services are part of the arrangement depends entirely on the preferences and agreement between the sugar baby and the sugar parent.

2.1. *Online sexual services*. These services focus on fulfilling the sexual desires and fantasies of the sugar parent through the utilization of online platforms or online communication applications. These services can be further divided into three categories: (1) Sexting involves exchanging sexually explicit text messages, photos, and videos via smartphones and computers. These include simulating sexual activities through written and visual content, often initiated by the sugar parent unless otherwise agreed upon for regular initiation by the sugar baby; (2)

Phone sex resembles sexting but is conducted through voice calls which focuses on the auditory experience to satisfy the sugar parent's sexual desires; and (3) Cam Sex which involves the sugar parent watching the sugar baby engage in real-time sexual activities tailored to their preferences, akin to live cam shows in adult entertainment. It utilizes video streaming which gives the sugarparent a visual engagement of the sexual acts enacted by the sugarbaby that happens in real-time.

2.2. *Physical sexual services*. This particular service centers on the fulfillment of the sexual desires and needs of the sugar parent through physical engagements. These engagements involve intimate sexually explicit activities typically conducted in private settings often selected by the sugar parent. These interactions involve a spectrum of sexual activities ranging from teasing, penetrative and non-penetrative sex, and even special accommodations of certain fetishes requested by the sugar parent and consented to by the sugar baby. It is worth noting that the level of intimacy within these interactions may vary significantly depending upon the boundaries and preferences mutually defined within the sugar relationship. Importantly, participation in such services is not obligatory and the engagement is entirely contingent upon the explicit, informed, and ongoing consent and agreement of both the sugar parent and the sugar baby.

Although there are no permanent services required in a sugar relationship, there are still certain expectations that are consistently present in sugar relationships. Among these is the shared recognition of the paramount importance of preserving the privacy and confidentiality of the relationship. Both parties are expected to refrain from disclosing any details about the relationship or the other party. Further, consent is also crucial, requiring respectful boundaries and permissions before capturing or sharing any visual, auditory, or online content related to the relationship.

E. What are the risks encountered as a direct or indirect result of a sugar relationship?

Despite the recognition of sugar relationships as being based on consensual arrangements, participants still encounter various risks throughout their involvement in such dynamics. This section presents the risks experienced by individuals during and after their involvement in sugar relationships.

1. **Sexual Abuse**. Five participants in the study reported experiencing serious risks of sexual abuse within their sugar relationships. Some participants have

shared accounts of sugar parents perceiving sugar babies as objects akin to sex slaves who, because they are largely supported by the sugar parent, are also subject to the whims and disposal of the latter. As recounted by one participant regarding the experiences of a fellow sugar baby,

“They were sugar babies to a particular person in a position of authority or power, but they were treated as sex slaves. They were handed over to different people. They were borrowed by acquaintances.”

This kind of violation of trust in a sugar relationship will almost always lead to the termination of the sugar relationship, according to a participant. The participant further explained that the existence of middlemen in sugar relationships developed partly because of these kinds of sexual violations.

- 2. Grooming.** In cases wherein participants experienced a subtle transition into sugar relationships, participants reported feeling that they were “groomed” by their parents. Being groomed here pertains to the process whereby one party, often older and in a better position of power, establishes a relationship of trust and dependence with the other party with the intent of eventually using the said relationship of trust to manipulate and exploit the latter. This is particularly noticeable among participants whose first engagement in a sugar relationship was before reaching the age of majority, raising concerns regarding vulnerability to manipulation and coercion. One participant recounted how she, as a minor, was groomed by her sugar parent:

“There was a time when she asked about my age and I told her I was sixteen years old. Then she said, ‘Do you know that this is illegal? Don’t speak about this to anyone because it’s against the law,’ she said. I had no idea back then, so I just said, ‘Okay, no problem.’”

The groomed participant never met her sugar parent in person. All of their interactions were done online. She was frequently gifted with monetary and material gifts as a means to earn her trust. In return, she had to “talk dirty” with the sugar parent in their online chats and serve as an audience as the sugar parent masturbates. She further stated that,

“When a professor of mine in college mentioned the word “grooming” in one of his classes, I cried. It was during my third year [college] when I first heard the word grooming. I read its meaning and told my friend that it seemed like I was groomed when I was sixteen. I even had my first panic attack at that time. I didn’t know that a panic attack could feel like that - it was like a mix of laughing, crying, and feeling sorry for myself. They say that grooming involves manipulating your trust, and now I

think I was groomed since I was at a young age. They took my trust, and there were even death threats... and they also took advantage of me sexually. At my age back then, I guess I accepted it because I wasn't aware. But now, looking back, imagining I'm in the body of a sixteen-year-old, I would feel like I was taken advantage of. So now, I simply acknowledge that it happened because I used to be in denial before."

- 3. *Privacy Concerns and Leakage of Personal Information.*** Most participants were concerned about the potential leakage of personal information, especially when money transfers and gift-sending would require sugar babies to provide their real names, contact information, and addresses. Additionally, there were also concerns about the possibility of intimate pictures sent to the sugar parent being leaked. The often digital nature of sugar relationships and the exchange of sensitive content heightened the vulnerability of the individuals involved. The potential exposure of private information could lead to various forms of harm, including damage to reputation, emotional distress, and blackmail.
- 4. *Difficulty of ending the relationship.*** Despite the notion that both parties in a sugar relationship can terminate the relationship, there are situations where sugar parents refuse to recognize the sugar baby's decision to end the engagement. In certain cases, sugar parents resort to threats and coercion as a means to compel sugar babies to remain in the relationship. This is especially problematic when the sugar parent is aware of information that can help them trace the sugar baby's whereabouts. In one case, the difficulty of ending the relationship also extends to psychological violence. In one participant's experience, the sugar parent emotionally manipulated her by sending messages and pictures suggesting the sugar parent's intent to commit either suicide or homicide should the termination of the relationship continue:

"I told her that I needed to end this, but she refused. She said, 'Why do you even need to end it? I feel like she doesn't understand my situation. And then she had this lowkey aggressive tone, saying, 'You don't need to stop, do you? What do you need?' She started to flaunt the things she gave me, like paying for my tuition and giving me gift checks. Then suddenly, she sent a picture... She was holding a knife. She said, 'If you want to end this, I will stab everyone I see here in the dorm.' At that point, I started to panic... So I just said, 'Okay, let's not end. Just please don't do that.'"

This example was particularly concerning, as some participants had parents who held positions of authority, making it seemingly hopeless to pursue any recourse. As one participant aptly expressed:

“The unfortunate reality is that we are afraid. As victims of such situations, we are afraid to speak up because, first, there is no one to defend our rights. It is often said, “You wanted that to happen. Why did you trust them? Why did you get involved in such matters?” We are also afraid to disclose the identity of the sugar parents because they are people of power or authority. There is a sense of hopelessness when going against them.”

This is not to say that all sugar relationships end in a negative outcome. Three participants emphasized that they experienced no risks in their sugar relationships. This lack of risk could be because of factors such as the presence of intermediaries and contracts that mediate the relationship, sugar relationships evolving into romantic engagements, or both parties respecting the boundaries set in the engagement.

Most participants recognize the transactional nature of sugar relationships and the inherent risks involved. Some mitigate risks by using fake IDs or pseudonyms to protect their identity, while others opt for online-only arrangements to avoid in-person interactions and potential harm. While some hide their identities as sugar babies, two participants expressed their confidence and willingness to make their status as sugar babies public, arguing that it is not something they bother to keep a secret and they are proud of what they are doing. It has even been suggested that the sugar parent, who is typically more established, has more to lose if the nature of the engagement becomes public.

“If anybody sees me, in my opinion, I’m probably more okay with it than the sugar parent is. Maybe because I’m not that afraid if people figure out or see me with another person because it’s my own business, and at my age, even if they gossip about me, it won’t affect me because, at the end of the day, I still have a job and obligations.”

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study delved into the lived experiences of sugar babies to understand sugar relationships. Findings revealed various motivating factors, including financial concerns, curiosity influenced by peers and online information, attraction to more mature partners, and the appeal of a beneficial relationship without much of the responsibilities of a traditional romantic relationship. Searching for a sugarparent involved online and in-

person methods, with online platforms predominantly emerging as the prevailing mode of engagement. Further, an important finding is the influential and potent role played by middlemen which extends beyond their recruitment functions within sugar relationships. In selecting sugarparent, sugarbabies exercise a measure of agency as they actively sought specific attributes, they deemed necessary for the sugar relationship to work.

Moreover, each sugar relationship was characterized by its unique set of role expectations, forged through mutual agreements between sugarbabies and sugarparents. This challenged the notion that sexual gratification was a mandatory component within these relationships. Instead, sugar relationships could thrive on the foundations of companionship and emotional connection, transcending the sole pursuit of sexual satisfaction. However, even within the framework of mutually agreed-upon terms, there is still the potential presence of inherent risks within sugar relationships, encountered both during engagements and in the aftermath.

The existence of these risks, however, does not automatically mean that the most prudent societal response to the phenomenon is to prohibit its existence; but to consider another perspective: sugar relationship is a relatively safer alternative compared to other methods of engaging in transactional intimate relations that Filipinos are likely to consider engaging in as a response to systemic issues of poor access to resources such as streetwalking, establishment-based prostitution, or online prostitution. Therefore, considering the cost-benefit analysis, engaging in a sugar relationship may seem more appealing than other options, especially since sugar relationships are often conducted online, thereby involving fewer life-threatening risks. Furthermore, the study's findings highlight that sugar babies tend to possess greater autonomy and negotiating power. Sugar relationships offer a safer alternative compared to other transactional intimate relationships. However, they are not without risks. The findings underscore various potential dangers that may befall sugarbabies but it is evident that dating platforms and middlemen are implementing measures to mitigate these risks.

Further, the natures of sugar relationships are often based on supplication, where one party seeks material or economic support from the other. This creates power dynamics rooted in inducement, where favors, often of a romantic or sensual nature, are exchanged. While initially consensual, these relationships can become implicitly coercive as the sugar baby becomes dependent on the sugar parent. While these arrangements begin as consensual and voluntary, they have the potential to evolve into implicitly coercive situations as the sugar baby becomes overly dependent on the sugar parent. This growing dependency can lead the sugarbaby to become increasingly desperate to maintain the relationship. Whether intentional or unintentional, the sugar parent can exploit this desperation, deepening the sugar baby's dependence on rewards and support. Consequently, the sugar parent may threaten to terminate the arrangement unless the sugar baby consents to new stipulations or changes in the relationship, potentially exceeding their initial boundaries.

While the possibility of such an exploitative relationship is indeed concerning, it is by no means a new phenomenon. After all, relationships based on supplication is one of the major arrangements in Philippine society even outside of sugar relationships, albeit in a less explicit manner. Moreover, the potential for exploitation stemming from the dependence of the beneficiary is acknowledged even within normative relationships in Philippine society, classified as “economic abuse” under R.A. 9262 otherwise known as The Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004. To this end, legislative efforts to address the existence of sugar relationships should extend beyond a simplistic decision to ban or criminalize such relationships; doing so might instead push Filipinos towards riskier alternatives such as full-blown prostitution. From a sociological point of view, it becomes evident that a more effective approach involves leveraging the resources and authority of the State to rectify the underlying social conditions that may predispose Filipinos to engage in transactional relationships. This includes better employment opportunities and higher wages, and better chances for upward social mobility as a whole.

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