

## Sweetening the deal: dating for compensation in the digital age

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the online ‘sugar dating’ phenomenon, the proliferation of websites that connect ‘sugar daddies’ and ‘sugar mamas’ with ‘sugar babies,’ in order to better understand the kinds of meanings informing and derived from the pursuit of openly commodified relationships. Qualitatively analyzing discourse on a popular ‘sugar dating’ blog, I argue that ‘sugar dating’ cultivates a disposition to and through paid intimacy that differs from both romantic love and more explicit forms of sex work. Discussed along economic and emotional dimensions, blog participants embrace the economic underpinnings of their instrumental uses of intimacy, but they also invoke romantic discourses of chemistry, connection, and personal choice and the morality of economic exchange, demonstrating a refusal to see their relations as work and solely driven by market logic. These differentiations help to buffer social stigma and represent the social acceptability of instrumental intimacy as a neoliberal strategy for coping with economic and social conditions, but also make it harder to identify the labour of ‘sugar dating’ and further disenfranchise sex workers as they reinforce social distinctions in order to legitimize these relations.

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## Introduction

In 2011, CNN Headline News correspondent and self-help expert Dr. Drew Pinsky hosted a panel of guests on his show to discuss the ‘sugar dating’ phenomenon: the proliferation of websites that allow women and men dubbed ‘sugar babies’ to explicitly request economic compensation from ‘sugar daddies’ or ‘sugar mamas,’ who make their needs for companionship and sexual intimacy equally known. Joining Pinsky was the founder of a leading ‘sugar dating’ website SeekingArrangement.com (SA), Brandon Wade, a lawyer, a journalist covering the story, and an unidentified woman who had used SA to find a ‘sugar daddy.’ Wade had recently come under attack by media outlets for taking on the role of ‘pimp,’ a middleman capitalizing on the sale of women’s bodies, after he launched a marketing campaign that brazenly depicted droves of female college students turning to ‘sugar dating’ in desperation to pay for their education and living expenses in the midst of a student debt crisis and an ongoing recession (Fairbanks, 2011). Pinsky asked his panelists a question on the minds of many: ‘How is this *not* like prostitution?’ (Dr. Drew).

While Pinsky accepted explanations from the lawyer, journalist, and Wade about the legal and cultural barriers circumvented by ‘sugar daters,’ he was less understanding when the woman spoke of her own experience as a ‘sugar baby.’ He commented: ‘you really thought this was a way to pay debt. It was a financial arrangement, and that’s what is disturbing us.’ The woman explained, ‘I disagree with you...

financial support is a benefit. It's not the goal for me. I always dated older men.' Unsatisfied, Pinsky continued his interrogation: 'Did you develop a close, intimate connection with another human being?' Defending her position, she clarified: 'Of course, that is what separates this from prostitution. I make a distinction there.' At this point, Pinsky concluded: 'my fear, honey, is that you *did* enter into an exploitative kind of an exchange. If you did not, God bless you. I hope you find happiness with this and with whoever the guy is you're with.'

Pinsky's dismissal of the woman's experience and insistence that economic transactions and intimate relations cannot peacefully commingle in 'sugar dating' exemplifies what economic sociologist Zelizer (2005) calls a 'hostile worlds' argument, which sees intimacy and the market as opposing forces, corrupting each other when combined. Challenging this position, Zelizer offers a 'connected lives' approach that highlights the ways in which 'across a wide range of intimate relations, people manage to integrate monetary transfers into larger webs of mutual obligations without destroying the social ties involved' (2005, p. 28). The 'sugar baby' seems to echo Zelizer's point that '[m]oney cohabits regularly with intimacy, and even sustains it' in her defence of the financial 'benefits' of her relationship. However, it is noteworthy that, despite their differences, both she and Pinsky take for granted the equivalence of 'prostitution' and 'exploitation,' the assumption that sex workers are victims or misguided participants in sexual commerce and in need of saving (Agustin, 2007). Therein lies the paradox of 'sugar dating.' Pinsky may have wondered, 'how is this *not* like prostitution?' I wonder, *why* is this not like prostitution? While there are clear legal reasons for claiming difference, social judgements also underlie these claims. But in an economic and cultural environment that encourages an ethos of individualism and entrepreneurialism, selling sex and intimacy makes sense. So, why the continued stigma?

Feminist scholars point out that sex and intimacy are still considered 'special' or sacred sites for authentic connection in an increasingly mediated and commercialized social world, which makes it difficult to accept sexual transactions as the norm, even when they have become more mainstream (Attwood, 2009; Brents & Sanders, 2010). Still, scholarship on sex work suggests that cultivating feelings of intimacy, connection, and romance are increasingly central features of sexual services such as 'the girlfriend experience,' which mimics the emotional intimacy of a loving relationship along with satisfying physical sexual needs (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders, 2008). 'Sugar dating,' in many ways, represents an intensification of the 'girlfriend experience.' It is more mobile and privatized, attracting those looking for a paid sexual encounter that is arguably more authentic, spontaneous, fluid and customized to individual needs and desires than other forms of sex work. As the lines between sex work and romantic relationships blur in practices like 'sugar dating,' are these interconnections resisted or embraced by participants?

Bearing this question in mind, this study examines how 'sugar daters' make sense of the relationships they seek. I am particularly interested in whether they articulate shared understandings about how 'sugar dating' compares to the late modern construction of romantic love and sexual commerce, and if their negotiation of intimate relations and economic exchanges reveals anything about transformations in social and cultural norms around women, in particular, asking for and accepting money as part of romantic experiences and relationships. In her work on 'intimate circuits,' Zelizer argues that providers of sexual services rely on 'highly differentiated and well-marked social ties' in order to avoid confusion and uncertainty about the meaning of their intimate relations (2011, p. 156). Importantly, people *work* to produce 'good matches,' in which they achieve an appropriate way to handle the economics of the relationship that allows it to thrive (2011, p. 153). The work of forming a 'good match' involves following distinct protocols for the process of exchanging money, shared understandings about what this exchange means, and ensuring others outside of the exchange accept these definitions. She argues that this work, critical to being able to engage in sexual services, often requires making 'impressively fine distinctions' between different activities that involve sexual and economic transactions. Rather than highlighting the similarities across varieties of sex work, she argues that '[s]ex workers care about differentiating what they do from the activities of other sex workers as well as from their nonprofessional

sexual relations' (2011, p. 155). It is possible, then, that the process of differentiation discourages a collective identity and affinity among sex workers in different industries from developing, especially when the meanings around a particular practice are yet to be fully established. Thus, I wonder, what kinds of differentiations do 'sugar daters' make in an effort to produce a good match, and at what or whose expense? Are 'sugar daters' even able to produce good matches? What are the implications of these differentiations?

Drawing on qualitative textual analysis of comments made by SA users on the website's publicly accessible blog, I argue that 'sugar dating' cultivates a disposition to and through paid intimacy that differs from both romantic love and more explicit forms of sex work. 'Sugar daters' openly embrace the economic underpinnings of their instrumental uses of intimacy, but they also invoke the romantic discourses of chemistry, connection, and personal choice and normative ideals that govern the process of economic exchange, demonstrating a refusal to see their relations as entirely defined according to market logic and a form of work. Thus, the instrumental intimacy of 'sugar dating' empowers some women (and men) to reap the economic and intimate benefits of these circumscribed exchanges whilst buffering the stigma associated with providing and soliciting sex work. While the instrumental intimacy of 'sugar dating' allows participants to shed some of this moral and legal baggage, it also problematizes and invisibilizes the *labour* of 'sugar dating', making it harder to identify and destabilizing its value, and further disenfranchises sex workers. Thus, 'sugar dating' represents the relative social acceptability of instrumental intimacy as a neoliberal strategy for coping with economic and social conditions, but also the ways in which it hinges on the reinforcement of social inequalities that allow those with more privilege to reframe capitalist relations of sexual exchange as egalitarian lifestyle choices and denounce forms of sex work and women that do not have this luxury.

## Late modern intimacies

### *The instrumentalization of romantic love and relationships*

Sociologists who study the social construction of intimacy often foreground the rise of modern individualism in their analysis of romantic love's historical emergence as a dominant narrative for a marriage between equal and uniquely connected partners (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997). Against a backdrop of declining social structures such as religion and the family, individuals develop a 'reflexive self' that constantly evaluates the environment and relations with others to make decisions about a course of action that is considered entirely self-determined. The reliance on a reflexive self to navigate the social world and generate individualized life strategies affects intimacy because the choice of a romantic partner is not as powerfully dictated by religion or kin, it is based on self-determined criteria such as mutual feelings of attraction, connection, or 'chemistry.' Courtship and the development and experience of romantic love and intimacy move out of the private sphere and into the public sphere of leisure and consumption. Sexuality is 'autonomized,' made a category in its own right, making 'sexiness' and sexual prowess relevant as forms of symbolic capital. Additionally, intimate relationships become key to projects of the self, expected to provide emotional, intellectual, and sexual fulfilment. There is a 'deliberative character' to intimacy as a 'functional tool' for managing 'in a world increasingly devoid of social supports' (Santore, 2008, p. 1208).

If the modern orientation to romantic love, sex, and intimacy has taken shape within a culture of consumption and individualism, scholars see these themes heightened in late modern societies and under neoliberal capitalism. Bernstein writes, 'the global restructuring of capitalist production and investment that has taken place since the 1970s has had consequences that are more profound and more intimate than most economic sociologists ever choose to consider' (2007, p. 4). Connecting macro-level political economy to the micro-level of intimacy and subject formation, scholars such as Brown (2005) and Rottenberg (2014) discuss the sharpening of individualism and market logics as a 'neoliberal rationality' becomes the norm and relationships are tracked for progress, manipulated for return on investments, and evaluated by cost-benefit ratios. A mode of governance, neoliberal intimacy orients

individuals to relate according to a market logic, valuing equitable and predictable exchanges between actors who are guided by their own self-interest and little social obligation. These 'egalitarian attitudes toward intimacy,' lend relationships 'an element of disposability... if they are not providing full satisfaction' (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 44). In a context of neoliberal intimacy, the laws of consumption prevail and morality is funnelled through a consumer mentality, which frames the 'choice' of 'lifestyle' or 'product' as a right of each individual and central to personal happiness and fulfilment (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 46). Despite academic and popular awareness of the transactional quality of romantic relationships formed by neoliberal subjects, there is still resistance to the idea that marriage and other normative partnerships might be driven by such individualistic motives and a taboo against openly discussing them using the terms of this framework.

### ***The normalization of sexual commerce***

Thus, scholars consistently find that people who seek the services of sex workers are often assuaged by the contractual nature of the intimacy (Bernstein, 2007; Brents & Sanders, 2010; Prasad, 1999; Sanders, 2008). 'Circuits of commerce,' Zelizer notes, provide particular contexts for intimacy that are bounded and defined by 'somewhat different understandings, practices, information, obligations, rights, symbols, and media of exchange' (2011, p. 315). These distinctions, carefully and continually negotiated, allow for productive relationships to form that involve economic and intimate exchanges. For instance, intimacy develops between a hairdresser and loyal client, a friendly bus driver and frequent passenger, and a therapist and patient. However, culturally negotiated understandings of each encounter as part of particular commercial circuits with prescribed ways of being delineate the kind of intimacy that develops and how economic transactions occur. For this reason, ongoing use of sexual services offers an attractive package of building sustained intimacy over time, whilst foregoing some of the baggage that comes with normative romantic relationships. In her ethnography of sex workers in San Francisco, Bernstein describes the postmodern desire for 'bounded authenticity,' a paid sexual exchange that includes an emotional intimacy that is experienced as genuine and mutual (2007, p. 155). Specifically, sex workers told Bernstein that customers did not like if they bent the rules or showed favouritism as these acts and gestures violated the terms of the contract. The transaction provided a helpful barrier that held the emotional and sexual intimacy in place, keeping it from spilling over into the uncertainty of normative love and relationships.

There is also a particular comfort provided by sexual services that more clearly follow the 'morality of the market' (Prasad, 1999, p. 182). Intimate relations pursued in the marketplace are 'marketed as uncomplicated' and 'free' (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 46). As the transactional nature of marriage becomes more salient, so too has a cynicism towards what is seen as a 'hypocritical' illusion of 'romantic love' (Prasad, 1999, p. 202). In her study of regular customers of sex workers, Prasad argues that patrons of sex work voiced complaints about the hidden exchange of money and sex in marriage, akin to critiques made by feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Carol Pateman, and 'valued prostitution for offering freedom from the social complications, obligations, and ambiguities' of idealized romantic love (1999, p. 204). They valued the honesty of commercial sexual encounters, which make 'clear and nondiscretionary the obligations of participants' (1999, p. 204). Her analysis suggests that, at least for some, the intimacy of 'neutral, more cleanly exchangeable pleasures of eroticism' is preferred over the complications of romantic love in a neoliberal context (1999, p. 206).

### ***The Persistence of Stigma in Sex Work***

At the same time that criticisms of romantic love depict it as a ruse to obscure the transactional nature of normative relationships, research indicates that the trappings of romantic love have in some ways become a central component of late modern sex work, which has become more emotionally intimate and less strictly about the physical act of sex in recent years (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders, 2008). In her study of male customers seeking what is known as 'the girlfriend experience,' Sanders draws out their desire for

genuine connection with, and mutual pleasure enjoyed by, a sex worker. Scholars characterize desires for a sex worker to mirror feelings of romantic yearning and passion as part of the 'normalization' of sex industries, a 'continuation, rather than a transformation, of middle-class cultural definitions of where a sexual relationship can legitimately come from, how it can be provided' (2008, p. 197). Bernstein (2007) connects the 'normalization' of sex work to its 'privatization' and 'gentrification' – its movement indoors and online as a result of public policy decisions into a diversified landscape of leisure, entertainment, and pleasure industries. The integration of sexual commerce with other service, tourist, and technology industries achieves a 'mainstreaming' effect, 'changes in marketing' or an 'upscaling' in order to move away from traditional working-class sexual codes' (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43).

Still, Brents and Sanders (2010) call for understanding the 'mainstreaming' of sex industries as an uneven process. While there is considerable pull from an economic perspective to make the sale of sex more mainstream, 'there is also considerable social ambivalence that results in strange policy implementation' when it comes to valuing and protecting its workers. Thus, the stigma so long attached to sex work remains, despite its changing profile in the mainstream economy. Even more problematic, 'upscaling' involves moving away from working-class women and towards middle-class women whose services are made more desirable by the notion that they choose to do this work out of free will and personal enjoyment rather than economic need (Brents & Sanders, 2010, p. 43). For instance, Berg problematizes the invocation of choice and professionalism in sex worker activism literature to grant certain (but not all) sex workers dignity by framing mainstreamed versions of sex work as a higher calling, a labour of love that reinforces a 'raced and classed division between nurturing and economic motivations for care work' (Berg, 2013, p. 705). She argues that while such activism may help to legitimize sex work as a profession chosen and performed amidst constraints like any other, it also does so through 'romanticized' ideas about what sex work means to women who are privileged enough to narrate it as free from need for economic resources and a product of 'unencumbered choice' (2013, p. 714). Rather than take issue with the sex in sex work, she highlights the dependence on *work* in sex work as a discourse of respectability adopted by activists that creates distinctions between work seemingly based on choice versus that which is based in need. Similarly, but with a different focus, Beloso critiques the ways in which feminist dismissal of sex work as inherently exploitative to its workers and women in general for their 'erasure of class' from the conversation (2012, p. 47). Beloso dubs the superiority with which feminists disavow sex work 'whoromyopia,' through which a preoccupation with the exploitation of sex work preserves 'the fantasy of an imaginary outside to capitalism' (2012, p. 66). She challenges anti-sex work feminism on the grounds that it avoids taking the exploitation of *all* workers under capitalism to task. Both Berg (2013) and Beloso (2012) lay bare the ways in which distinctions made to critique the exploitation of sex work, or particular categories of it, undermine the potential for collective organizing and action among all women under capitalism and especially the most vulnerable among us.

## Background and methods

A practice that has long thrived offline, 'sugar dating' finds cultural form and social substance on mass market dating websites such as SA, Sugardaddie.com, and Sugardaddyforme.com. As of 2015, there were roughly twenty sites available to sign up for 'sugar dating,' but SA is the most widely known and used (Cordero, 2015). Launched in 2006, SA boasts a membership of five million people across 139 countries and a four to one ratio for 'sugar babies' to 'sugar daddies/mommies.' The website, and media reports on the 'sugar dating' phenomenon, characterize 'sugar babies' as college attending or educated, young (between 21 and 27 years old), heterosexual, cis-gendered women, though anecdotal evidence suggests more diversity in gender and sexuality among 'sugar baby' users (Brodesse-Akner, 2015; Pardiwalla, 2016). While this stereotype works to invisibilize non-conventional users of the site, it is not misleading. As part of a marketing campaign called the 'Sugar Baby University,' which solicits young women to join the site for its economic and social incentives, SA has gathered statistics on the nearly 2 million women who have registered as 'sugar babies' using a .edu address (roughly half of all 'sugar babies'), which provides some indication about the sociodemographics of the 'sugar dating' world. According to

these data, 49% identify as Caucasian, 21% as Hispanic/Latin, 10% black, 1% middle eastern, and 10% other (categories chosen by SA). 35% come from upper-to-middle and high-income families (meaning 65% do not identify as part of these privileged groups). Most student members (82%) are earning an undergraduate degree, but some (18%) are enrolled in graduate programmes. According to the website, the average 'allowance,' the term used on the website to denote economic benefits expected by 'sugar babies,' is \$3000 per month (SeekingArrangement, 2016).

Drawing on a systematic sample of more than 5000 comments that comprised conversations begun in response to the blog post that produced the most comments for each year over a five-year period<sup>1</sup>, I used qualitative textual analysis and open coding to inductively analyse blog data, the categories for which were then refined using a constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I coded data according to five guiding themes: gender, intimacy, commodification, morality, and community. From the combination of these codes, a set of concepts and categories emerged. This analysis centres on two categories, emotional and economic distinctions made to define 'sugar dating' in relation to traditional dating and sex work.

### Emotional distinctions: The instrumental intimacy of sugar dating

According to SA users, 'sugar dating' involves an emotional disposition that differs from both traditional dating and sex work. On one hand, 'sugar daters' view *all* relationships as inherently transactional – everyone has intimate needs and desires they seek to satisfy and certain criteria they use to assess potential romantic partners. However, 'sugar daters' often refer to traditional relationships as 'drama,' filled with pretence, self-sacrificing behaviour, unrealistic expectations, heartbreak, and the chains that keep people from fulfilling their own needs and interests. People only stand to benefit, then, from being reflexive about what they offer each other and willing to openly negotiate an even trade of resources. As one user points out, 'No one wants a wishy-washy baby! So you should know what you want in a relationship/arrangement. His time is valuable & yours is too so why waste it? You should know what you're looking for and what you're willing to compromise [*sic*].' Along these lines, SA users frequently use marketplace metaphors to describe ideal behaviour and attitudes in 'sugar' dating and relationships. For instance, one user advises a 'sugar baby' to 'take a position on what you want. Make it loud and clear. Test it in the market of SD. Then adjust as you discover more about yourself.' Similarly, another 'sugar baby' encourages dating 'the highest bidder,' seeing this move as being a 'smart and true business woman.' Whether it is the money a 'sugar daddy' or 'mama' provides or the beauty, affection, and attention desired from a 'sugar baby,' forms of capital flow in both directions and should result in an equal exchange in this dating market.

Both partners make their objectives and limits known in the beginning to define the terms of a 'mutually beneficial arrangement.' Because 'sugar daters' frame the relationship as a kind of barter, honouring the terms of a transaction is a valued practice. Emotional involvement is encouraged, but should not exceed the stated goals of the 'sugar' relationship. Similar to arguments made by scholars that a culture of consumption inspires a morality informed by free market tenets (Brents & Sanders, 2010; Prasad, 1999), 'sugar daters' expect and appreciate an intimacy that develops under reliable and controlled conditions, which stand in contrast to the unpredictable nature and emotional demands of late modern romantic love. In fact, acknowledging another's – not to mention one's own – deepening emotions can often hinder an arrangement, souring this container of intimacy. Partners are expected to remain aware of each other's preferred boundaries throughout the duration of the relationship and may end the arrangement if either partner changes the stakes. The security 'sugar daters' articulate as provided by the contractual obligations, and the need to integrate yet restrain emotions to cultivate the intimate relations desired, mirror the 'bounded authenticity' Bernstein (2007) sees as a particular draw for certain customers of sex workers. However, the bounds of the transaction are purposely blurry in what is conceived as a relationship, and the sometimes elusive obligations 'sugar daters' pledge to fulfil can introduce a host of factors that could and do intervene in maintaining the terms of the agreement, far more than a traditional paid sexual encounter. For instance, one 'sugar daddy' cannot understand



partners who develop feelings for him or underplay their emotional investment in the relationship from the beginning:

[O]nce things progress, then each [sugar baby I've dated] wants something different-either more or less time than we agreed, more or less emotional commitment than what I said, etc. I feel like I am the only up-front one. Perhaps they agree to anything just to get to the money part of the arrangement. But really, SBs should think long-term. If they invest a little bit of time and thought at the onset, they will end up with many more than just one allowance payment.

Here, a 'sugar baby's' runaway emotions stands in the way of what this 'sugar daddy' assumes should be her bottom line: to keep the money flowing in her direction. Unlike romantic love, which suppresses discussion of these motives and may leave one or both partners feeling used, 'sugar' daters promote a vision of egalitarian intimacy that hinges on the application of market principles to counteract the imbalances of unpaid intimacies and attempts to value acts and affects that go beyond the standard province of sexual commerce.

Yet aspirations for a relationship to mimic the dynamics of commercial sex are complicated by an equally dominant discourse on the blog, in which 'sugar daters' discourage each other from engaging in ways that come across as *too* transactional. Though an economic exchange may serve as a girdle for the kinds of emotions allowed into the relationship, 'sugar daters' also apply criteria associated with late modern romantic love such as a shared sense of chemistry, attraction, and connection in their choice of potential partners. One 'sugar daddy' writes: 'I'm a real Sugar Daddy looking for a real Sugar Baby. As shocking as this may seem to some if there isn't chemistry I'm not interested in sleeping with you.' Scholars who study prostitution and stripping point out that customers commonly hope for similar feelings of mutual pleasure and affection from sex workers (Bernstein, 2007; Frank, 2002; Sanders, 2008). Still, 'sugar dating' intensifies these expectations because it is seen as a relationship, not a service, and *both* parties agree that mutuality and individual choice are defining features of arrangements that differentiate them from sex work. One 'sugar baby' explains, 'I look for someone who is well-rounded and wants to have a true connection and even be a mentor as well. I look for true gentlemen [*sic*].' Similarly, another 'sugar baby' states, 'I have to be attracted to my [sugar daddy], and mentally drawn in as well. I'm wayyy too honest not to be. I'll hurt someone's feelings... I umm, find it a bit too much like prostitution. Being with someone purely for the cash [*sic*].' As these comments illustrate, affective ties to 'sugar daddies' who are chosen based on romantic criteria, and the assumption that social obligations extend from and to *both* parties, serve to shield 'sugar babies' from recognizing similarities in their financial status and relationships to those of sex workers. While scholars often cite the illusion of shared affects as part of what sex workers do in fact sell, 'sugar dating' reformulates the social relations of labour and consumption under capitalism into an egalitarian romantic partnership. Therefore, 'sugar babies' either buy into a fantasy of mutuality to preserve this romantic ideal, or must work that much harder to create a convincing show of sexual and emotional intimacy while exercising a strategy of psychic detachment akin to the 'deep acting' Hochschild (1983) identifies in emotionally taxing service work. In this way, 'sugar dating' represents the culmination of what scholars identify as the 'commercialization of intimate life' (Hochschild, 2012) as work is further subsumed into the private sphere and the extension of a 'neoliberal rationality' that reformulates 'morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences' (Brown, 2005). The instrumental intimacy of 'sugar dating' represents the cultivation of a social tie designed precisely as an individualized strategy to meet immediate needs and nothing more or less.

### Economic distinctions: The romanticization of money in sugar dating

Despite agreeing on the transactional underpinning of arrangements, SA users debate the meanings and methods of appropriate economic exchange. On one level, users engage in explicit negotiations at the outset of an arrangement, freely discussing expectations for money – a conversation that is commonly thought of as awkward to initiate in romantic relationships – and its motivating role in facilitating the development of intimacy – an even more infrequent conversation. For instance, a conversation

between two users, a 'sugar baby' and 'sugar daddy,' illustrates agreement on this issue. The 'sugar baby' lays out two options: the first includes '[c]ash gifts, allowance, nice dinners, giftcards, sex, financial assistance and travel are all part of SD and SB dating,' while the second involves 'chemistry, mentoring, companionship, special moments, warmth, and compassion,' going on to ask: 'How many SB would be here if the first option was not offered?' In turn, the 'sugar daddy' confirms, 'it's a lot easier dealing with someone who blantly admits she wants Option1. It's easy to strike a \$\$ arrangement that way. Those SB's that claim they want Option2 are a real challenge [*sic*].' Allowing for honest communication of these desires is an attractive aspect of 'sugar dating' that users often describe as lacking in 'normal' romantic dating scripts and rituals. Shedding some of the hypocrisies of late modern romance, 'sugar daters' expect and encourage monetary negotiations because they are effective and seen as always already underlying relationships.

Still, 'sugar dating' allows for a range of economic and intimate practices under its umbrella, and users do not agree on where to draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate sexual bartering. For instance, when one 'sugar baby' remarks that she finds it sad, another participant asks, 'Why would it be sad that someone offers [a beautiful sugar baby] money to sleep with him? This is not a regular dating site ... Who are we to judge?' Another user echoes this reminder to those unaccustomed to the frankness about money and sex in 'sugar dating': 'You are on a non-traditional website, not e harmony [*sic*].' But there are social, not to mention legal, risks to approaching the relationship as a sexual service, and both 'sugar daddies' and 'sugar babies' make distinctions in the economic exchanges of 'sugar dating' and sex work.

For their part, 'sugar babies' insist they are not professional sex workers and complain about 'sugar daddies' who disregard the emotional norms discussed in the previous section, reducing the social tie to its base economic exchange. Getting paid for sexual intimacy, without much ornamentation, makes them feel 'escort-ish' or like 'a big huge whore.' One user laments this mischaracterization, hinting that it may cheapen the relationship: 'A lot of SDs think just throwing money at a girl for sex makes them an SD and unfortunately there are a lot of wanna be SBs that allow them to do that.' Another user echoes this desire to elevate even one-time sexual encounters in 'sugar dating,' known as 'pay for play,' from sex work:

If you want a situation that is 'cash for goods' then so be it, but personally, I feel it puts a stigma on the SD/SB relationship that belittles it. Just my opinion. It's not what I am looking for and I HOPE that it is not what this website is about.

This value judgement sometimes bumps up against the consensus that 'sugar daters' should be 'brutally honest' about their expectations and share a liberalized attitude toward intimacy. One 'sugar baby' articulates this tension in 'sugar dating' when she states, 'The first contacts I got were just the worst, the first one blatantly asked, 'how much to do certain things', when I responded that I wasn't a prostitute he proceeded to send several emails bashing me and my character and for being on the site if I didn't know what it was about.'

For their part, many 'sugar daddies' emphasize their preference for giving gifts or separating the exchange of money from a sexual encounter in order to avoid thinking of it as payment for a sexual service. One 'sugar daddy' articulates this difference when he states that he'd rather get a 'sugar baby' gifts since 'thought and romance can go behind a gift' and 'sending \$\$ is BORING.' 'I do that with Uncle SAM every pay period,' he reasons, 'I get no rush from that.' In this way, 'sugar dating' involves use of 'special monies' that differentiate how and what kind of money is exchanged in 'sugar dating' from other paid forms of intimacy (Zelizer, 2011, p. 93). In fact, 'sugar daddies' stress that they are not looking for escorts who are presumably only interested in money. They complain about feeling like a 'walking ATM' or being with women whose 'intent is PURELY to pay this month's bills.' After users express sympathy for a 'sugar daddy' who reported a bad first date, he replies, 'thanks for all the condolences... but just as well, I think she was an escort.' Another 'sugar daddy' laments over past experiences with 'very young women' who 'were also 'escorts' and neglected to mention it.' 'That did not make them bad people,' he reminds everyone, 'but it did explain their thirst for \$\$\$ every few minutes.' Thus, 'sugar daters' reveal a desire to frame this relationship, as based as it is on an exchange of money, as one not conceived out of perceived greed or desperation.



As a result, users tend to discourage 'sugar babies' from expressing any need, demand, or expectation of money, which skirts sex work but also introduces its own challenges. 'Sugar babies' accused of broaching the topic of money indelicately, for example demanding rather than politely asking for money to appear on a first date, are reprimanded in the community and called 'brats' for what is seen as displaying a sense of entitlement. The following comment illustrates the derision with which 'sugar babies' who are seen as too focused on money are met:

The concept of paying \$\$\$s just to impress a spoiled overindulged brat is ridiculous. Maybe there are guys out there who have enough \$ and need the ego boost to impress a sugar brat, but I don't think you will find a lot. Brat Babies are going to rule out many eligible men who cannot or will not pay a pot baby to have dinner or drinks.

Because users are not only invested in separating 'sugar dating' from sex work, but also believe in the morality of market exchange, they face backlash when these boundaries and the egalitarian philosophy of a contractual relationship are not preserved. Users reprimand those who exploit the relationship for their self-interest and undermine the supposed equity of the exchange such as 'sugar brats,' who expect money without delivering anything in return, and 'splenda' or 'salty daddies,' who overstate their ability to financially invest in the relationship, but initiate intimacy anyway. One 'sugar daddy' summarizes these offences:

My personal guess is that many men do use the site as a way to meet a 'market' of girls. Many are not true sd's. And many do not have all that much money. All that being said, it goes both ways. There are a lot of girls here that will use the site as a short term bandaid to fix their problems. Or worse, to try and scam men [*sic*].

A 'sugar baby' echoes this problem:

I think [sugar babies] are hoping to collect on the allowance simply b/c they are uninformed or feel they can pull it off. The balance is quite interesting. We get put off when men ask/imply pay for play; [sugar daddies] get caught up with beautiful young ladies that feel their time alone is worth an allowance.

Thus, for reasons given by *both* partners, money exchanges are routinely suppressed, hidden, and/or asynchronous, unlike what a sex worker might and should expect. For instance, one 'sugar daddy' argues:

The bottom line is –You are getting Sugar in return for providing– a relationship. If there is no agreement in place and the guy just wants to call on you as an escort, then he is not a SD –he's a John. A respectful Real Daddy will discretely deposit the Sugar in your purse. He will not throw it at you as he leaves.

In response, a 'sugar baby' argues for a monthly allowance and against purse deposits in order to clarify the cultural meaning of this economic exchange – specifically that she is *not* a sex worker:

[F]or some SBs sugar can only be justified if its given in a monthly allowance, because PTP CAN feel like being an escort, and it's not something a girl should have to just 'get over.' I realize at the end of the day it doesn't 'really' matter if sugar is given in installments or once/month, but it can certainly 'feel' different.

This comment illustrates the close connection 'sugar dating' bears to sex work, along with an aspiration to see 'sugar dating' as more than an impersonal transaction and distance the practice from the stigma attached to sex work. These relationships are transactional, yet still somehow 'nonwork.' This results, ironically, in what Berg identifies in sex worker activism literature as the preservation of dignity in thinking of sex work as a choice, not an economically driven need; a distinction that depends on excluding others from this privilege (2013, p. 714).

## Conclusion

This article analyses the emotional and economic distinctions SA users make to separate 'sugar dating' from both the stigma of sex work and the trappings of late modern romantic relationships. The emotional dimensions highlight the balance 'sugar daters' attempt to achieve between the unrestricted emotional environment of dating and relationships and the overly transactional and underwhelming passion assumed of sex work. 'Sugar dating' involves approaches to intimacy that draw, yet break away, from the norms and ideals of late modern romantic love, which frame the pursuit of a romantic partner as an individualized choice and unique experience based on often elusive emotional criteria (Illouz, 1997). Framing these choices in contrast to those made (or presumably not made) in sex work, 'sugar

daters' see their paid intimate relations as more egalitarian and mutually beneficial. Following the ethos of modern individualism, 'sugar daters' merge a sensibility of self-actualization and honest, self-reflexive communication seen in pseudo-therapeutic discourses of contemporary self-help culture and popular psychology with an instrumentalist approach to intimacy. Emotional availability is expected of both partners, but regarded as an unwieldy variable in need of taming, which is achieved through a verbal contract and the parameters of an arrangement. While scholars of sex work make similar arguments about how intimacy functions in sexual services, as they become more 'normalised' and integrated with mainstream industries (Sanders, 2008), 'sugar daters' define their paid intimacy as relationships, not services, suggesting a more insidious process in play under neoliberal capital as power relations of paid labour are submerged in egalitarian discourses and relations of work are even harder to distinguish from personal desire.

'Sugar dating' potentially disrupts contemporary understandings of what constitutes sexual empowerment, freedom, and equality for women in late modern societies. First, it emphasizes instrumentalist approaches to intimacy, encouraging women to not only reflect on and assess their own needs and desire, but also to put them before their partners'. While worth critiquing for potentially reinforcing an overly individualistic ethic of self-interest, it also subverts familiar narratives of self-sacrifice and the emotional management of others that typically shape women's experiences of traditional relationships. 'Sugar dating' encourages women to put a value on the energy they expend in intimate encounters and relationships and explicitly negotiate economic benefits, which reflects some of Marxist feminism's call to recognize women's labour-power and the value of social reproduction. The neoliberal framework of instrumental intimacy perhaps gives women grounds to communicate demands more clearly than they typically do in normative dating culture. In her historical analysis of intimacy in the early twentieth century, Clement notes that the disappearance of 'treating' after the Great Depression 'did young people a disservice, because it silenced discussions that had, under treating, spelled out the expectations of both parties. What had been spoken before was now hushed, and what had been negotiated was now assumed but often contested' (2006, p. 241). 'Sugar dating' potentially resurrects the spirit of openness that characterized treating.

Second, 'sugar dating' suggests sexiness, charm, wit, and other affective factors are legitimate and effective means by which women may access capital and achieve social mobility, subverting a traditional order that gives precedence to ascribed factors such as class and family standing and even achieved factors such as marriage. While this process is not new, it is also often shamed through the use of monikers like 'golddigger' and 'trophy wife' to discredit women whose pursuits of men for economic reasons are considered in bad taste or devoid of agency or reflexivity. While the moniker of 'sugar baby' may not be much better in popular culture, digital spaces where 'sugar dating' practices are able to flourish paint a more favourable picture of women's uses of erotic power to achieve personal goals. Not without its limitations, these allowances open up space for possibility and challenge traditional valuations of women who participate in and capitalize on commodified forms of intimacy.

Finally, 'sugar dating' challenges assumptions that the commercialization of sex is inherently exploitative or oppressive to women. 'Sugar daters' question the empowerment and fulfilment assumed of traditional relationships as well as the presumption that such intimacy is 'free' of economic and other demands. Since its emergence in the early twentieth century, dating has always been a commercial practice shaping, and shaped by, its relationship to the sexual intimacy characteristic of other commercial circuits (Clement, 2006). 'Sugar daters' make connections and distinctions between dating and sex work clear to each other through blog discourse, arguing for the productivity of intimacy as an instrumental yet authentic performance. In this way, women who advocate for the empowerment in their positions as 'sugar babies' reflect not a 'false consciousness' about their own subjugation, but perhaps a reflexive negotiation of their options in the current social and economic climate.

Still, the economic dimensions of these differentiations foreground the work users do to distance themselves and their activities from that of sex workers, namely escorts. While these comments may stem from a need to confirm the legality of their participation on such a website, they also reveal subtleties in how 'sugar daters' orient themselves to the process of exchanging money and the implications of

the distinctions they make. 'Sugar dating' creates space for reformulating productive uses of intimacy at the expense of women working in sex industries, particularly in escort services and street prostitution, reinforcing detrimental distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' sex (Miller-Young, 2014; Rubin, 1984). Moral distinctions between 'sugar dating' and sex work made by users obscure similarities in the economic conditions under which women turn to both as individualized strategies for survival and social mobility. Ultimately, the entrenchment of difference serves to further marginalize sex workers whose needs are systematically ignored or even disparaged by those who also benefit from legitimizing commodified forms of intimacy.

## Note

1. The sample includes the following blog posts: 2008's 'New sugar daddies, babies: Where's the love?' (744 responses); 2009's 'Happy Thanksgiving, sugars!' (2091 responses); 2010's 'Relangemanship' (1417 responses); 2011's 'Sugar Daddy dating: choices' (660 responses); and 2012's 'Fending off the 'Bad Apple' Sugar Daddies?' (948 responses). I examined the blog post with the most responses from each year in an effort to allow for analysis of as much conversation as possible. This sampling method was deemed most theoretically useful in that conversation ebbed and flowed in ways that eventually covered a variety of topics within one blog post that could not have been observed if posts with fewer responses were examined. Responses typically occur over the course of several days or even weeks after a post is published to the blog and even after a newer post has succeeded the original.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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