

When daddies and babies fight back:
The processes of stigmatization and destigmatization in online news coverage of Sugar Dating

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Founded in 2006 by Brandon Wade, CEO, SeekingArrangement.com currently claims over five million active members. It invites Internet users to take part in a new and efficient form of dating called an “arrangement” or a “Relationship on Your Terms.” The website criticizes traditional relationships for being too one-sided, and it claims that arrangements offer a more direct form of dating that “allows people to easily define what they need and want in a relationship.” On the site, each member creates a profile that clearly states what he or she is willing to give and expects to receive in a relationship. For the “individual seeking mentorship, financial support, or general companionship under the terms of an agreed-upon arrangement,” known as a Sugar Baby, her profile will typically include a desired monthly allowance that she hopes to receive from her Sugar Daddy (“What is a Sugar Baby”). She is typically expected to regulate her appearance, emotions, and availability in accordance with her Sugar Daddy’s desires in exchange for the pre-established financial reward. One common pattern in Sugar Daddy–Sugar Baby relationships is female college students partnering with older, financially well-off males. Though one-fourth of the website’s Sugar Daddies are looking for male Sugar Babies, and one percent of the members are Sugar Mommies, almost all relationships formed on the website conform to traditional gender roles where the person who is receiving financial compensation provides sex, emotional support, and social status (Padawer, 2009). Although SeekingArrangement explicitly bans “using the Website as an escort, or using the Service to solicit clients for an escort service” (“Terms”), media discourses remain highly critical of the website, claiming that Sugar Dating is nothing short of a euphemism for prostitution (Braunstein, 2014; BBC Newsnight, 2015).

With the exception of several studies conducted by legal and medical scholars (e.g. Miller, 2012; Motyl, 2012; Deeks, 2012; Barnett & Maticka-Tyndale, 2011; Moore, Biddlecom, & Zulu, 2007), there is very little research on Sugar Dating as a social practice. This research project attempts to fill the gap in the literature by examining Sugar Dating utilizing theoretical perspectives on stigma. I begin by asking whether there has been a change in online news coverage of Sugar Dating. Then I examine the framing of this coverage in order to explore possible trends in stigmatization or destigmatization.

Although there is a significant amount of research on the process of stigmatization, we still do not know how it relates to Sugar Dating. Three research questions will guide this study. First, is there an increase in the amount of online news coverage? According to the agenda-setting model, if the results of the study indicate that there has been an increase in coverage of Sugar Dating over time, then it is likely that the public has become increasingly aware of this new social phenomenon. Prior research on agenda-setting empirically documents the linkage between public awareness and attitude strength (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004). Therefore, I expect that as the public becomes more interested in Sugar Dating, increases in positive and negative attitudes about Sugar Dating will follow. Second, I also examine how news outlets frame Sugar Dating. Do the news media view Sugar Dating positively, neutrally, or negatively? This research question seeks to address whether or not Sugar Dating has become stigmatized over time. A growth in negative coverage of Sugar Dating would suggest an increase in stigma. The final research question asks how Sugar Daters respond to negative commentary. Do Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies engage in similar resistance strategies to confront negative coverage?

While the central concern of this paper is to understand whether Sugar Dating has become stigmatized over time, it also considers how cultural concerns with gender and sexuality

are embedded in this process. A great deal of research has demonstrated that women and men are stigmatized differently for a wide range of behaviors, but hardly any attention has been paid to the ways in which gender mediates individuals' responses to stigma. By situating this study of stigma and resistance within the domain of gender and sexuality, this paper furthers our understanding of how people may respond differently to discrimination on the basis of their gender identity.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda Setting

Research shows that information shapes public opinion (Bullock, 2011; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Page & Shapiro, 1992). Mass media can be used as a powerful tool to shape our ideas about what is normal, abnormal, important, or trivial. Research shows that news coverage of an issue or topic matters, both in terms of the size and the scope of reporting. In the 1970s, political-communication scholars introduced the notion of *agenda setting* to highlight the significant correlation between the amount of coverage that the mass media place on a particular issue and the amount of significance the public attributes to the issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This finding is important for the purposes of this thesis because it suggests that if there has been an increase in the amount of reporting on Sugar Dating over time, then it is likely that the public's awareness of and interest in Sugar Dating also increased. This becomes particularly interesting when one considers the ways in which news outlets frame Sugar Dating. As this paper will later show, more often than not, the coverage was overwhelmingly negative.

Most of the research on agenda-setting has focused on how media coverage affects an issue's salience, and scholars have tended to ignore attitude changes that are produced from intense media coverage. However, it seems plausible that as individuals become more interested in a topic their attitudes will invariably shift from neutral to either positive or negative views. In their study of the consequences of the agenda-setting process on public attitudes towards political candidates, Kioussis and McCombs (2004) demonstrate why increased media coverage leads to attitude polarization, or "attitudes that are highly positive or negative toward their referent objects – particularly those that are at the far ends of attitudinal scales" (p. 39) – among

constituents. Specifically, they found a strong positive correlation between the amount of attention paid to political candidates by the news media and the strength of public opinions about the political figures. In other words, individuals held more extreme views about political candidates as media coverage of these political figures increased. Therefore, in addition to increasing public awareness, media coverage may also reduce public indifference toward a particular topic.

Media Framing

One of the drawbacks of the agenda-setting model is that it does not account for how public opinion impacts how members of the media cover issues. Although a great deal of framing literature focuses on how commentary by the media shapes public opinion, there are also scholars who demonstrate how public opinion shapes the ways that journalists and authors cover a topic. Frames, therefore, are tools for shaping audience opinion and assessing underlying attitudes and beliefs among the audience.

In terms of influencing public opinion, framing helps us understand the processes of stigmatization and destigmatization because it is predicated on the notion that the way an issue is described or labeled by journalists significantly shapes the ways in which people think about it. As Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) point out, framing is distinct from agenda setting because it is predicated on the assumption that the way an issue is portrayed by the media can have a significant effect on how individuals interpret it.

On the other hand, framing is also a tool that the media use to report issues in ways that align with underlying schemas of their audience (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Similarly, Gitlin (1980, p. 7) writes, “media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world

both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports.” In this way, the findings of this study are indicative of more than whether or not Sugar Dating has become stigmatized over time because they also reveal broader social assumptions about sex and gender. Indeed, the media’s role in framing issues for the public is so significant that, according to Gurevitch and Levey (1985, p. 19), it is “a sight on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality.”

Research on agenda-setting and framing highlight the symbiotic relationship between the news media and the public. On one hand, agenda-setting theorization posits that media salience of a particular topic will increase the proportion of the public who view the topic as important. Some agenda-setting scholars also argue that increased media coverage will produce more polarized public attitudes. Although agenda-setting research documents empirical linkages between media coverage and public opinion, it does not account for the ways in which public opinion shapes the ways that the news media cover topics. Framing literature demonstrates why the schemas of the public shape the way the news media cover a particular topic. This theoretical approach posits that underlying attitudes and beliefs held by the public will invariably shape the way that the media cover issues. This, in turn, leads me to my first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Increased news coverage of Sugar Dating will stimulate stronger attitudes about Sugar Dating. These changes in public opinion will cause a decrease in the proportion of neutral media commentary on Sugar Dating.

Stigmatization

Goffman’s original theory of stigma (1963, p. 1) defines it as a mark “designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier.” Similar to gender distinctions that are perpetuated by the media, stigma-based differences are legitimated and reaffirmed by

social institutions. Defined by Corrigan and colleagues (2005, p. 557), *structural stigma* “is formed by sociopolitical forces and represents the policies of private and governmental institutions that restrict the opportunities of stigmatized groups.”

Scholars have emphasized that the socially constructed meanings attached to the stigma vary across historical and social contexts (Lamont & Mizrachi, 2012; Zajicek & Koski, 2003). Other writers emphasize that power relations shape these meanings (Link & Phelan, 2001). On this, Herek (2012, p. 66) writes, “compared to the nonstigmatized, individuals who inhabit a stigmatized role enjoy less access to valued resources, less influence over others, and less control over their own fate.” Despite the temporal and spatial variations in stigma, empirical research demonstrates that members of both subordinate and powerful groups generally agree that men and Whites occupy higher social positions than women and racial and ethnic minorities (Crocker & Major, 1989; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Stewart, Vassar, Sanchez & David, 2000). It is also well documented that women and men are stigmatized differently for their sexual activity. For example, Conley, Ziegler, and Moors (2012) tested the existence of the sexual double standard, and they found that women who engaged in casual sex were viewed as less intelligent, more promiscuous, and less mentally stable than men who engaged in casual sex. They also found that women who imagined that they engaged in casual sex believed that they would be viewed more negatively than men.

Gender Bias

From an early age, children are taught that men and women are inherently different. These cultural values are embedded in almost every aspect of social life and affirm the notion that women are emotionally intimate, concerned with their appearance, and dependent on men,

while men are assumed to be tough, competitive, and independent (Eder, 1985; Eder & Hallinan, 1978; Eder & Parker, 1987). In line with Banaszak and Ondercin (2016), this paper relies on the assumption that messages about appropriate gender roles for women pervade society (Lorber, 1994), and it will label them traditional gender roles:

These are readily available to all citizens because they are prevalent in all aspects of citizens' lives—in the clothes people wear, in the discussions among neighbors and friends, in implicit messages given in schools, and in books, magazines, and other media. Even those who disagree with these traditional gender roles know their characteristics (Banaszak & Ondercin, 2016, p. 363).

Research shows that the media play a dominant role in influencing beliefs about gender-appropriate behavior in several different ways.

First, the media can serve to reify preexisting understandings of appropriate behavior for women and men. Literature on the interaction of gender and news coverage of sports and politics highlights the ways in which social constructions of masculinity and femininity impact how issues are presented by the media (Duncan & Brummett, 1987; Harris & Clayton, 2002; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Kane & Parks, 1992; Kittilson, & Fridkin, 2008; Ross, Evans, Harrison, Shears & Wadia, 2013). The findings overwhelmingly indicate that traditional gender roles heavily shape journalists' portrayals of men and women. For example, Koivula (1999) examined differences in quantity and type of coverage that men and women athletes received; she found that women athletes not only received less than 10% of sports news time coverage, but also women in masculine-typed sports received less than 2% of sports news time coverage in Sweden. Similar patterns can be found in news coverage of politicians. In their study of television news coverage of the 1993 and 1997 elections in Canada, Gidengil and Everitt (2003) found that the three women leaders were subject to more skepticism and negative coverage than the men in government. Advertisements placed throughout televised and written

news coverage work to further embed gendered assumptions about appropriate behavior. Jean Kilbourne's (1999) research on the portrayal of women in advertising offers further proof that the media can influence opinions about women's bodies and gender roles. She argues that these advertising techniques systematically popularize the objectification of women.

The pervasive process of reaffirming gender roles and objectifying women through mass media becomes even more alarming when considering coverage of Sugar Dating. As this paper will show, Sugar Babies are the recipients of the majority of negative coverage, and most of the positive coverage is focused on Sugar Daddies. The growing concern with Sugar Dating combined with the heavily biased coverage of Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies has a series of implications about how we view women, sex, and romance in today's society.

Second, the media can directly combat feminist critiques of patriarchy. For example, Bonnie Dow (2003, pp. 128-129) examined mainstream media discourse about the Miss America pageant. She argues that the media's growing emphasis on the individual agency of beauty contestants (e.g., "if women claim that they freely choose to participate in the pageant and refuse to claim that they are being exploited, we should believe them") is a continuation of an argument that was used against first-wave feminism in the nineteenth century and has reemerged in contemporary discourse: "sexism must not exist if even one woman denies that it does." A similar strategy appears in media coverage of Sugar Dating. Much of the coverage focuses on Sugar Babies, which, in turn, ignores the role of Sugar Daddies. While these young women are often portrayed as gold-diggers who deliberately trade sex for money, the older men are often simply described in terms of their wealth. Rarely is any attention paid to the ways in which Sugar Dating is embedded in a patriarchal society that has constructed an ideal relationship that looks almost identical to the Sugar Daddy-Sugar Baby partnership. Goffman's work on sex and gender

(1977, pp. 320-321) supports this. Specifically, he writes that heterosexual relationships are “contexts in which myths concerning the differences between the sexes can be realized”: men are expected to be stronger and older than the women that they aggressively pursue as partners.

The media also influence beliefs about gender-appropriate behavior by normalizing the image of the ideal woman’s body. According to Talmadge Guy (2007, p. 18):

White female beauty, in particular, as a cultural standard is enacted through the media, as is evidenced by the popular fascination with attractive women from celebrities like Paris Hilton and the late Anna Nicole Smith to star athletes like Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharapova. Notions of physical beauty and desirability become visibly reinforced in the minds of adults and children.

In other words, the media promote an ideal body that women are encouraged to conform to. A woman’s attractiveness and desirability can easily be computed by comparing her body to images displayed by the media. Since Sugar Dating, as defined in this paper, is the practice of matching attractive young women with wealthy older men, it appears that the media not only play a significant role in the evaluation of Sugar Dating, but also in constructing the actual terms of Sugar Dating itself. Put simply, the media help to construct and reinforce public understandings of what it means to be a beautiful woman, and in doing so, it decides what it takes to be a Sugar Baby.

The consequences of these three roles played by the media – reaffirming gender stereotypes, combating feminist critiques of patriarchy, and normalizing the image of the ideal woman’s body – are illuminated in the case of Anna Nicole Smith. Smith, one of the most publicized gold-diggers in contemporary America, occupied a captivating position in popular culture. According to Jeffery Brown (2005), the former Southern fried-chicken waitress and stripper entered into the public eye as *Playboy*’s 1993 Playmate of the Year and *Guess* Jeans advertising campaign, and she remained in the spotlight as her image spiraled downward after

dramatic weight gain and marriage to the 89-year-old oil tycoon, J. Howard Marshall II. Tabloid coverage of Smith's surprise wedding to Marshall in 1994, explains Brown (p. 89), framed the marriage as a spectacle:

By stressing his wealth and infirmity, her flamboyant sexuality, and above all, the extreme age difference between them, the marriage was framed as a ludicrously obvious example of a sexpot taking advantage of a senile, but wealthy, old pervert.

Smith's legal battles over the \$450 million-dollar estate of J. Howard Marshall II certainly received the most public attention. Nevertheless, media scrutiny over her body and behaviors also reveal underlying assumptions about class and gender. The portrayal of Smith "as an uneducated, Southern, small-town, unwed mother whose only marketable skill is taking off her clothes" was a public declaration that she was "a symbol of all things undesirable or threatening to dominant norms" (Brown, 2005, p. 77).

Wealthy men have dated and married younger women throughout our society, but these couples have not been met with the same level of scrutiny as Smith and Marshall. The upfront and excessive nature of Smith and Marshall's relationship parallels the type of relationships formed between Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies. Sugar Daters, much like Smith and Marshall, explicitly challenge norms about appropriate sexual relationships and class in our society. This leads me to my second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The majority of online news coverage of Sugar Dating will be negative.

Despite the fact that Smith made up only one half of the relationship, Marshall was never subjected to the same amount of criticism. In the years following Marshall's death in 1994, a legal battle ensued over the legitimacy of his will. During this time, a federal judge once said that Smith's "actions leave very little doubt that money was the central facet of her relationship with J. Howard," and, "In sum, their lives with intertwined in need, driven by greed and lust" (Fisher,

2013). At first glance, it may appear that the judge thought very little of both parties. However, when one considers that men face significantly less recourse for their sexual behavior than women, it becomes clear that perceptions of Marshall's lust paled in comparison to how the public scrutinized Smith's greed. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is offered to test this line of reasoning:

Hypothesis 3: Sugar Babies will receive more negative coverage than Sugar Daddies or Sugar Dating.

Resisting Stigma

Throughout history women have been shamed for their (perceived or actual) sexual conduct, and recent scholarship has begun to examine how men respond to sexual stigma. While it is well documented that women and men are judged differently for the same sexual behavior, very few studies dealt specifically with the way that gender shapes individuals' assessments of themselves and others after engaging in similar sexual acts together. Fjær and colleagues (2015) studied the accounts of a group of adolescents who participated in a three-week "hookup" celebration. They found that young women often emphasized their concern for safety, agency, and self-control in order to morally position themselves above the stigmatize "hypothetical others" (p. 977). Meanwhile, young men who engaged in the sex celebration were able to draw on a wide range of moral positions in order to legitimate their behavior, and "none seemed to be in a position to force moral definitions onto others" (p. 976). These findings demonstrate that the sexual double standard shapes individuals' responses to criticisms against their sexual behavior and offer strong support for my argument that men and women will respond differently to media criticisms of Sugar Dating.

Hypothesis 4: Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies will respond to negative media commentary differently. Compared to Sugar Daddies, Sugar Babies will offer positive commentary that emphasizes their sexual autonomy and self-control.

Research Questions

The central issue I am concerned with in this paper is how the media have covered Sugar Dating over time, but as the highlighted literature demonstrates, public concerns about gender and sexuality often intersect with mass media commentary about women and men's sexual behavior. Therefore, three research questions will drive this study. First, has there been an increase in the amount of news coverage of Sugar Dating? The reviewed literature on agenda-setting suggests that as media coverage of Sugar Dating increases, the public will become more aware of Sugar Dating and their views will become more polarized. The second question asks how the media have covered Sugar Dating. Research on framing indicates that cultural understandings about gender and sexuality will impact the way that Sugar Dating is presented in the media. Central to the construction of Sugar Dating in the media is that men and women are evaluated differently for their (perceived or real) sexual conduct. As such, I expect that Sugar Babies will be judged more harshly than Sugar Daddies. Finally, it questions how Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies respond to negative media coverage. In addition to shaping public opinion about appropriate sexual behavior, gender stereotypes also shape individuals' responses to sexual stigma. Compared to women, men often enjoy more freedom to pursue sexual satisfaction and have greater flexibility when defending their sexual behavior. Therefore, I expect that efforts to resist negative stereotypes about Sugar Dating will vary between Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies.

CHAPTER III

DATA AND METHODS

Data and Sampling

The data were collected from online news articles published between 2005-2016. Potential online news sources for these articles were selected from a 2014 Pew Research Center study on Internet users' opinions on the trustworthiness of 36 popular online news outlets. The news outlets that were viewed as trustworthy – specifically, news sources that elicited either high levels of trust over distrust or equal levels of trust and distrust from both conservative and liberal, as gauged by answers to the Pew Research Center question about whether they trust each news source they've heard of – were initially considered for inclusion in this study (n of initial news sources = 29).

The final set of news sources included in the study were those that published articles that contained any of the following terms: “Sugar Dating,” “Sugar Daddy,” or “Sugar Baby” during 2005 in order to effectively analyze variation in coverage of Sugar Dating in these news sources across time. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to these three terms as the “key search terms.” The final set of news sources included 13 news outlets¹. Additional online news sources were found through snowball sampling. That is, if a news outlet from the initial sample cited another news outlet then the cited news source was included in the sample. Customized Google searches provided the opportunity to collect articles from each news source that mentioned any of the key terms by year. The initial sample included 1,008 articles from 33 online news sources.

¹ Please see the appendix for a full list of news outlets in the sample

Analytic Strategy

The analysis of news articles that follows aims to detect differences in the amount and type of online news coverage of Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating over time. Before describing the results, I present the codes I used and examples of coded content in Table 1. I begin the analysis by describing differences in the ways that online news outlets used the terms “Sugar Baby,” “Sugar Daddy,” and “Sugar Dating.” ATLAS.ti was used to perform a content analysis of online news coverage of Sugar Dating, and the unit of analysis was one news article. For most articles, the codes were easily identifiable through searches for the keyword “sugar” using ATLAS.ti. I found 363 articles that used the search terms to discuss business, politics, and sports, and they do not pertain to Sugar Dating as I’ve defined it. Therefore, the sample was reduced from 1,008 articles to 644 articles. These remaining articles fell into one of two categories. First, articles labeled as Sugar Babies/Daddies were those articles that simply described a person as a “Sugar Baby” or “Sugar Daddy,” but did not provide any commentary about Sugar Dating as a practice. Sugar Baby/Daddy labeled articles also include articles that describe a character in a play, novel, movie, or television series as a Sugar Baby or Sugar Daddy. Second, the Sugar Dating labeled articles refer to articles that contained text that described Sugar Dating as a deliberate decision or behavior by one or more individuals. These articles are distinct from Sugar Baby/Daddy articles because they pertain to intentional acts by individuals involved. Sugar Dating articles also included articles that described relationships formed on Sugar Dating websites (e.g. SeekingArrangement.com, SugarDaddieForMe.com).

Article Coding

Table 1 contains examples of different types of codes. I coded for the presence of negative, neutral, or positive commentary in each article. Negative commentary included statements that were critical of Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, or Sugar Dating. Neutral commentary included statements that were void of criticisms or praise. Positive commentary included discussions that were in favor Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, or Sugar Dating. While articles with neutral text did not contain positive or negative text, the majority of the articles contained both positive and negative text. As such, articles can be coded both positive and negative. I will go into positive statements in the final portion of the results, and aggregate the positive statements by type.

Next, I coded the negative, neutral, and positive commentary for the text's subject. This was a reiterative process because many of the articles contained negative and positive text about Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating. Rather than attempting to capture every instance of commentary about each group, the goal of this study was to code for the presence (or absence) of negative, neutral, and positive commentary about Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and/or Sugar Dating. For example, if an article contained negative commentary about Sugar Babies, then the article received two codes: negative and Sugar Baby. In other words, rather than coding every statement about Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating in each article, I looked for the existence of positive, neutral, and negative commentary on each of the three groups. Therefore, each article could receive up to six codes (articles with neutral text, by definition, did not contain positive or negative commentary), and these codes are outlined in the second half of Table 1.

TABLE 1
Explanation of Content Analysis Coding Scheme

Types online news coverage codes	Examples ²
Sugar Baby/Daddy	“Children with a generous Sugar Daddy — or mommy — might try the \$100 Volcano at the newly reopened FAO Schwarz (58th Street and Fifth Avenue).”
Sugar Dating	“Ricardo is one of scores of young men who contacted me when I joined a website which caters for wealthy men and women looking to flash their cash in mutually beneficial arrangements with younger members of the opposite sex, otherwise known as ‘Sugar Babies.’”
Negative, neutral, and positive codes	Examples
Negative Sugar Baby	“Twisted killer Sarah Williams preyed on four ‘Sugar Daddies’ with a combined age of 232, it can be revealed.”
Negative Sugar Daddy	“Enter the Sugar Daddy, Sugar Baby phenomenon. This particular dynamic preceded the economic meltdown, of course. Rich guys well past their prime have been plunking down money for thousands of years in search of a tryst or something more with women half their age”
Negative Sugar Dating	“Inside seedy world of Sugar Daddy websites where sex shame Dragon met 13-year-old girl: They might be legal and even acceptable to some, but these unregulated networks harbour a terrifying dark side”
Neutral Sugar Baby	“Achebe’s trademark compassionate irony - he respects his characters but at the same time is amused by them and expects the reader to be so, too - is less obvious in the collection’s second story, Sugar Baby, which is the best piece of fiction I have read about Biafra. It starts with the narrator watching his friend Cletus fling a handful of sugar out of the window.”
Neutral Sugar Daddy	“The two later switch between a vampire, an astronaut - which James refers himself as ‘Captain Sugar Daddy’ - and even a cow, with Niall slipping his frame into a jokey animal onesie.”
Neutral Sugar Dating	“It’s a phenomenon that exists both contractually and casually— men who provide financial support for women in exchange for their companionship. In the first installment of Lisa Ling’s new series, “This is Life” the award-winning journalist explores this chosen lifestyle from both sides.”
Positive Sugar Baby	““They’re very attractive, I enjoy their company, I enjoy teaching them, and I enjoy going out with them,” Geoffrey Edelsten told A Current Affair, insisting that money was only ‘a minor attraction’ for the women he sees.”

² All examples from news outlets are verbatim, including typos

Positive Sugar Daddy	“Men who engage in such relationships, many of whom are older and married, enjoy taking care of young women and assuming a mentor role in their lives, said Steven Pasternack, who launched Sugardaddie.com in 2002. ‘You have some guys who like to spoil and pamper their women by taking them out to nice dinners, buying them gifts. Some maybe help with the utility bills or take them on trips,’ Pasternack added. ‘And there are other guys that will have an ongoing relationship in which they’ll say, ‘OK, I’ll give you an allowance and you can put this toward whatever your needs are.’”
Positive Sugar Dating	“‘Seeking Arrangement is in no way a form of prostitution or escort service,’ said Bermudo, calling it instead a dating site. ‘We provide a quality platform for individuals who are successful and those who are looking for dating with a generous partner who can help them have a good quality of life.’”

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Trends in Amount and Type of Coverage

The results in Table 2 provide information about the trends in both the total amount and specific types of coverage of Sugar Dating over time. In terms of the changes in the amount of coverage over time, the results demonstrate that there has been an increase in coverage of Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating. In 2005, only 26 articles were coded as either Sugar Baby/Daddy or Sugar Dating, and by 2009, the total number of articles grew to 31. Moving further along in time, between 2010 ($n = 28$) and 2012 ($n = 68$), the number of articles more than doubles. Between 2013 ($n = 67$) and 2016 ($n = 168$) there is another dramatic increase in the total number of online news articles.

The results in Table 2 also indicate variation in the type of coverage of Sugar Dating over time. Eighty-one percent ($n = 21$) of articles published in 2005 contained commentary that described Sugar Babies and/or Sugar Daddies, and only 19% ($n = 5$) contained commentary on Sugar Dating. Between 2005-2011, Sugar Baby/Daddy articles made up more than half of the total number of articles each year. However, this changes in 2012. By 2012, Sugar Dating articles made up a bigger percentage of the articles ($n = 37$, 54%), and between 2012-2016, the majority of articles each year contained explicit commentary on Sugar Dating.

Figure 1 displays these results graphically. There is an increase in the total number of articles each year, and, after 2011, Sugar Dating articles make up a bigger percentage of the articles than Sugar Baby/Daddy articles each year.

TABLE 2

Trends in Online News Coverage of Sugar Dating Over Time

Numbers and percentages for each year are presented

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Sugar Baby/Daddy	21 81%	19 90%	13 72%	20 71%	25 81%	20 71%	27 64%	31 46%	26 39%	27 39%	30 39%	76 45%	335 52%
Sugar Dating	5 19%	2 10%	5 28%	8 29%	6 19%	8 29%	15 36%	37 54%	41 61%	43 61%	47 61%	92 55%	309 48%
Total	26	21	18	28	31	28	42	68	67	70	77	168	644

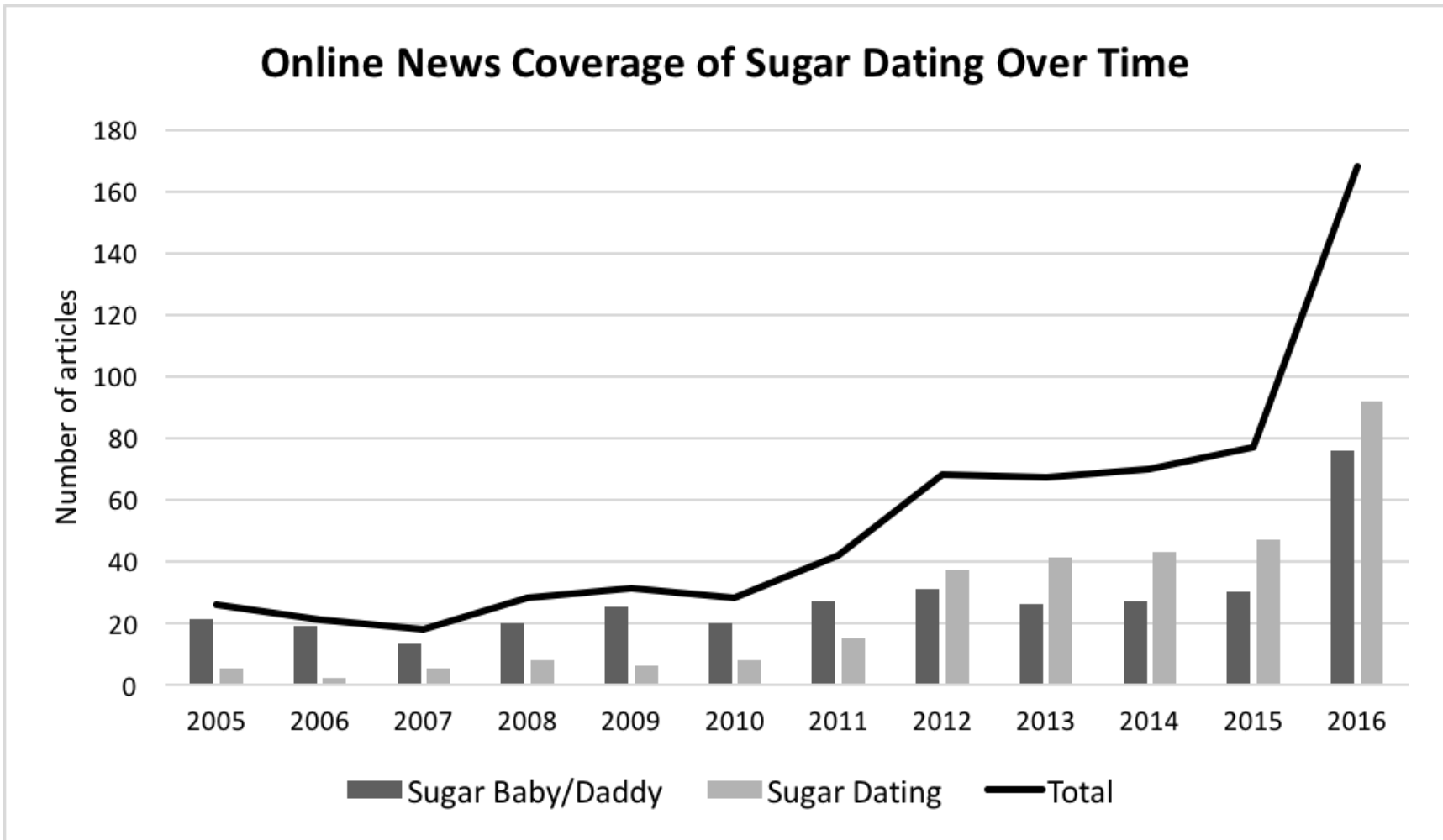


Figure 1. Online News Coverage of Sugar Dating Over Time

Negative, Neutral, and Positive Coverage Over Time

Articles were coded based on the presence of negative, neutral, and positive coverage of Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating. Recall that negative and positive codes were not mutually exclusive because an article could provide negative and positive commentary about all three groups. Indeed, this was the case for several articles that contained positive and negative commentary about Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating. The numbers and percentages in Table 3 (and Table 5) are based on the total number of articles in order to restrict the analysis to presence of types of statements in each article. Therefore, the percentages will add up to more than 100%.

Table 3 displays the results of the presence of negative, neutral, and positive commentary in every article each year. Overall, the majority of articles contained at least one negative statement ($n = 475$, 74%). Although there were slight variations between 2005-2016, there was never a year in which the percentage of articles containing neutral or positive commentary was greater than the percentage of negative commentary. Furthermore, it appears that only 38% of all articles in the sample contained at least one positive statement ($n = 242$).

On the other hand, only about 10% of all articles contained neutral commentary ($n = 65$). The findings indicate that while the raw number of articles with neutral commentary remained fairly stable over time, the percentage of articles with neutral commentary decreased between 2005-2016. In 2005, neutral articles made up about 27% ($n = 7$) of the total articles about Sugar Dating, and by 2016, only about 4% of the articles were neutral ($n = 6$). This makes sense for two reasons. First, the neutral code was mutually exclusive from negative and positive commentary. Therefore, there was simply more of an opportunity to code negative and positive commentary because neutral commentary was not coded in the negative and positive articles.

Second, while the number of articles containing neutral commentary remained relatively similar over time, there was a growth in the number of articles containing negative and positive commentary each year.

Taking a closer look at the results displayed in Table 3, it is clear that online news coverage has increasingly become more polarized into negative and positive constructions of Sugar Dating in recent years. Together, both negative and positive coverage makes up a greater percentage of the coverage as time goes on, while neutral coverage makes up a smaller percentage of coverage over time. Table 3 also highlights the overwhelming amount of negative coverage; more than half of all articles contain negative statements in every single year. As the following results will show, this coverage is primarily aimed at Sugar Babies.

TABLE 3

Articles Containing Negative, Neutral, and Positive Commentary Over Time

Numbers and percentages of articles containing types of commentary published each year are listed

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Negative	15	15	11	18	17	25	32	41	50	50	66	135	475
	58%	71%	61%	64%	55%	89%	76%	60%	75%	71%	86%	80%	74%
Neutral	7	4	2	5	9	2	5	11	6	4	4	6	65
	27%	19%	11%	18%	29%	7%	12%	16%	9%	6%	5%	4%	10%
Positive	9	2	7	9	13	5	15	32	30	29	26	65	242
	35%	10%	39%	32%	42%	18%	36%	47%	45%	41%	34%	39%	38%
Total articles	26	21	18	28	31	28	42	68	67	70	77	168	644

Subject of Online News Coverage of Sugar Dating

Recall that the codes for the subject matter were not mutually exclusive, and an article could contain commentary on Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating. Therefore, while there were only 644 articles in the sample, 969 statements were coded because an article could potentially contain up to six different codes. While many articles contained commentary on two or more of the groups, the results in Table 4 indicate that 61% of the articles in the sample contained commentary on Sugar Babies ($n = 391$), while 51% of the articles contained commentary on Sugar Daddies ($n = 331$), and only 27% of the articles provided commentary on Sugar Dating ($n = 173$). In other words, a greater number of the articles contained commentary on Sugar Babies than on Sugar Daddies and/or Sugar Dating.

TABLE 4
 Commentary on Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Daddies Present in Articles
Percentages based on total number of articles

	Sugar Babies	Sugar Daddies	Sugar Dating	Total number of articles
	391	331	173	644
	<i>61%</i>	<i>51%</i>	<i>27%</i>	<i>100%</i>

Subject of Negative, Neutral, and Positive Coverage

Now I will turn to the ways in which Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating were discussed in the articles. The results in Table 5 shows the distribution of negative, neutral, and positive coverage by the subject of the commentary; keep in mind that the negative and positive codes were not mutually exclusive. What stands out in these results is the sizeable percentage of negative commentary directed at Sugar Babies. Of the 391 articles containing commentary about Sugar Babies, 94% of articles ($n = 366$) contained negative statements about

Sugar Babies, 1% of the articles ($n = 5$) contained neutral commentary about Sugar Babies, and 13% of the articles ($n = 52$) provided positive commentary about Sugar Babies. On the other hand, of the 331 articles containing commentary on Sugar Daddies, only 33% of the articles ($n = 110$) contained negative statements about Sugar Daddies, 17% of articles ($n = 56$) contained neutral commentary, and 55% of articles ($n = 182$) contained positive commentary about Sugar Daddies. Similarly, of the 173 articles on Sugar Dating, 49% contained negative commentary ($n = 84$), 2% ($n = 4$) were neutral, and 65% ($n = 113$) of the articles contained positive commentary about Sugar Dating. In brief, the data in Table 5 indicate that Sugar Babies receive most of the coverage and the coverage is overwhelmingly negative.

TABLE 5
 Distribution of Negative, Neutral, and Positive Commentary Present in Articles
Percentages based on total amount of commentary for each group

	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total articles
Sugar Babies	364 93%	5 1%	52 13%	391 61%
Sugar Daddies	110 33%	56 17%	182 55%	331 51%
Sugar Dating	84 49%	4 2%	113 65%	173 27%
Total articles	475 74%	65 10%	242 38%	644

The titles of two *Daily Mail* articles provide a glimpse into how many news outlets negatively portray Sugar Babies: “EXCLUSIVE: ‘I’m disgusted... she’s a gold-digger’: Geoffrey Edelsten hits out at estranged wife Gabi Grecko after she joins a Sugar Daddy website ‘looking for company’” and “Students lure online Sugar Daddies into paying their tuition fees: How young women are using the internet to find rich men who will give them cash in exchange for relationships.” These young women are often depicted as intentionally selling their bodies to older men. The following *Huffington Post* article (Fairbanks, 2011) is a more illustrative example of how the media frame Sugar Babies’ behavior. Like many articles, this one constructs an image of a Sugar Baby as a struggling college student who hopes to sell her physical assets to older, wealthier men in order to quickly turn a profit.

Saddled with piles of student debt and a job-scarce, lackluster economy, current college students and recent graduates are selling themselves to pursue a diploma or pay down their loans. An increasing number, according to the owners of websites that broker such hook-ups, have taken to the web in search of online suitors or wealthy benefactors who, in exchange for sex, companionship, or both, might help with the bills.

However, negative coverage is not limited to depictions that draw parallels between Sugar Babies and sex workers. According to some news articles, Sugar Babies are not only choosing to sell their bodies and their time to older men in order to pay off their debt – they are also dangerous. A 2015 *New York Times* article titled “New York teen convicted of robbing 84-year-old after a date” explains to readers how two young women tied up and robbed an old man after he “had taken the sisters on a date to an expensive Midtown restaurant”

The juxtaposition between the benevolent Sugar Daddy and the predatory Sugar Baby was quite common. The positive coverage of Sugar Daddies tended to portray these older men as wealthy but generous, powerful but benevolent, or unsuspecting victims caught in the crosshairs of a gold-digging Sugar Baby. There were rare instances when an article would attempt to place

at least some responsibility on Sugar Daddies. Below is an example of this type negative commentary published in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2011:

Enter the Sugar Daddy, Sugar Baby phenomenon. This particular dynamic preceded the economic meltdown, of course. Rich guys well past their prime have been plunking down money for thousands of years in search of a tryst or something more with women half their age — and women, willingly or not, have made themselves available. With the whole process going digital, women passing through a system of higher education that fosters indebtedness are using the anonymity of the web to sell their wares and pay down their college loans.

This text criticizes Sugar Daddies for paying significantly younger women to go on dates with them. It is interesting to note that even when an article acknowledges the negative role played by Sugar Daddies, and even when an article admits that there are instances in which young women may not be willing participants in the relationship, Sugar Babies are still, more often than not, individuals who deliberately auction themselves off to Sugar Daddies.

Resisting Negative Coverage

Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies not only differed in the amount of positive coverage they received, but they also differed in terms of who came to their defense. The following charts illustrate the distribution of positive coverage of Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies by the person or group providing the positive commentary. According to the results displayed in Figure 2, Sugar Babies often came to their own defense. Sixty-seven percent of the positive comments about Sugar Babies were made by Sugar Babies themselves. Meanwhile, Sugar Daddies provided about 12% of the positive comments, and SeekingArrangement spokespersons made about 21% of the comments.

Sugar Babies appeared to provide the majority of positive commentary about Sugar Daddies as well. However, while journalists and news commentators did not defend Sugar

Babies, I found that they often came to Sugar Daddies' defense. Unlike Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies were routinely described in terms of their wealth, intelligence, and benevolence by members of the media. Figure 3 indicates that Sugar Babies and media commentators offered Sugar Daddies nearly the same amount of praise. Sugar Babies made about 41% of positive comments about Sugar Daddies, and members of the media (e.g., journalists and news commentators) made about 37% of the comments. On the other hand, Sugar Daddies provided about 14% of the positive commentary about themselves, and SeekingArrangement spokespersons made about 8% of the commentary.

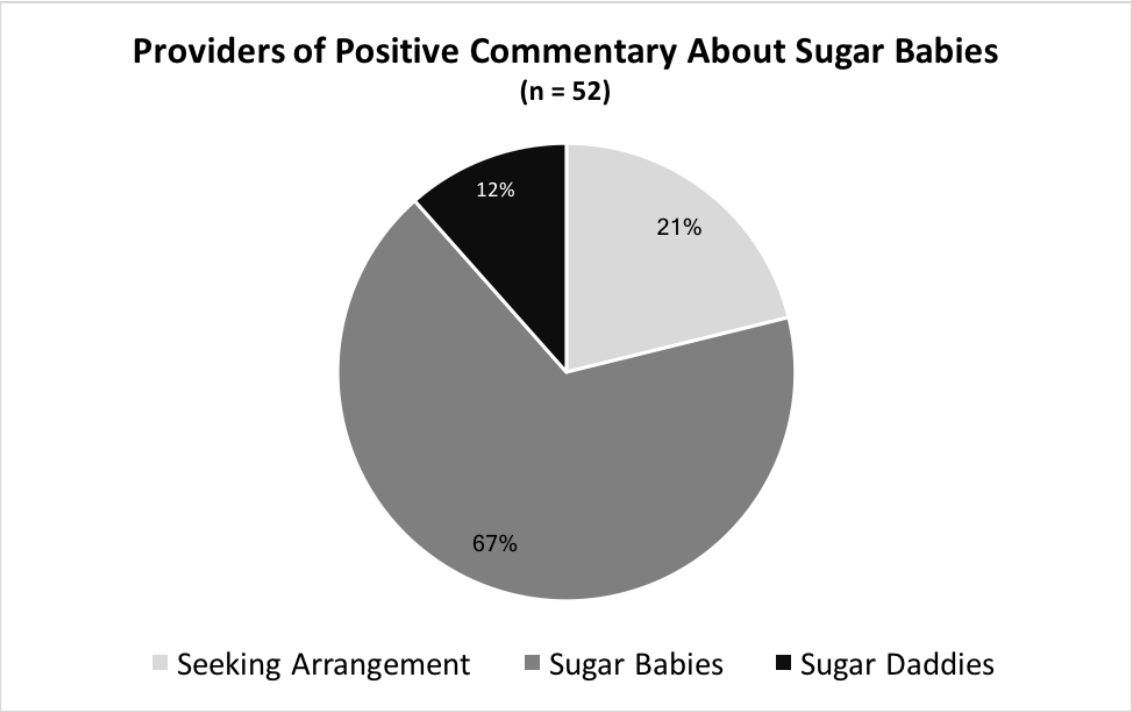


Figure 2. Providers of Positive Commentary on Sugar Babies

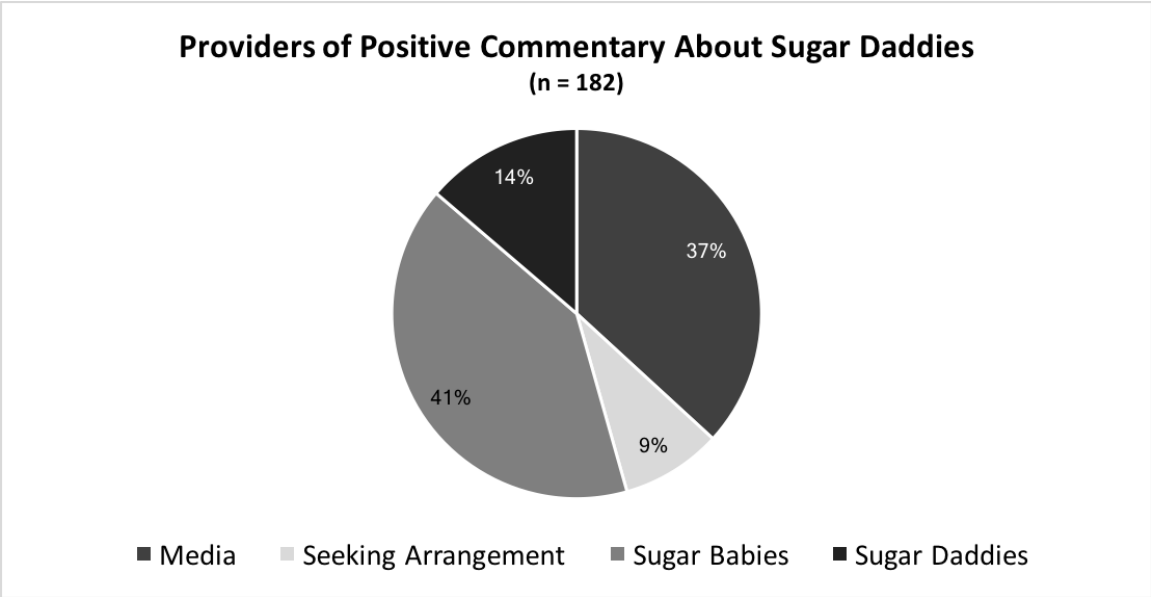


Figure 3. Providers of Positive Commentary on Sugar Daddies

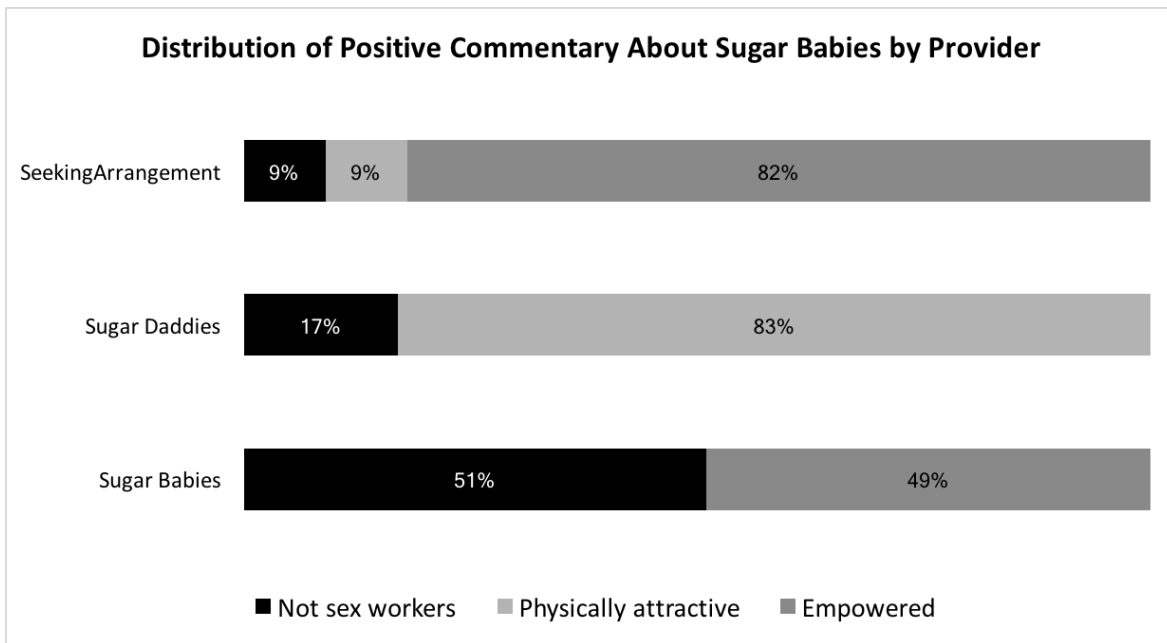
Defending Sugar Babies

The remainder of the results are exploratory. Although these statements are taken from the commentary that was coded, these statements are indicative of a broader pattern because they are sampled from 644 articles about Sugar Dating. Positive comments made in defense of Sugar Babies fell into one of three mutually exclusive categories. Table 6 describes the types of positive comments made by Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and SeekingArrangement spokespersons. A little over half of all commentary by Sugar Babies mentioned how they were not sex workers ($n = 18, 51\%$), and the remainder involved commentary on how being a Sugar Baby made them feel empowered ($n = 17, 49\%$). On the other hand, most of the positive commentary by Sugar Daddies included references to Sugar Babies' physical attractiveness ($n = 5, 83\%$). However, there was one instance when a Sugar Daddy discussed how Sugar Babies were not sex workers. Positive commentary by SeekingArrangement spokespersons fell into all three categories. The majority of their comments were centered on how being a Sugar Baby helped young women feel empowered ($n = 9$), but they also complemented on Sugar Babies' on their physical beauty ($n = 1$) and discussed how Sugar Babies were distinct from sex workers ($n = 1$).

TABLE 6

Distribution of Positive Comments About Sugar Babies by Provider

Types of positive comments	Sugar Babies		Sugar Daddies		Seeking Arrangement	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not sex workers	18	51%	1	17%	1	9%
Physically attractive	0	--	5	83%	1	9%
Empowered	17	49%	0	--	9	82%

**Figure 4. Distribution of Positive Commentary About Sugar Babies by Provider**

The data in Figure 4 suggest a disconnect between Sugar Babies' defense of themselves and Sugar Daddies' praise. The cases presented below offer an in-depth look at how the positive commentary about Sugar Babies differ between the three groups that defended these young women. In a *Daily Mail* article (Hodgkin, 2016) Nina Peterson explains why Sugar Babies are not sex workers. According to Peterson:

Sugar Babies don't necessarily need to have sex, my Sugar Daddy and I have sex but he had already invested nearly \$30,000 in me before we did – he had a hard job. A Sugar Daddy invests in a woman that he feels has the potential to be an asset in his life, a prostitute is not an asset.

In other words, Sugar relationships do not always involve physical companionship, and when Peterson had sex with her Sugar Daddy, it was after he had “invested nearly \$30,000.” Her comments not only highlight her sexual autonomy, but they also suggest that there is more to the Sugar relationship than intercourse. Peterson explains this further:

I have to work hard and sacrifice my personal needs because if your daddy expects something you have to deliver. I incorporate myself into his lifestyle so if he has to travel for anything I manage it, I manage his home and make sure we hire the right staff – I'm basically his personal assistant.

Indeed, many Sugar Babies point out that they perform a significant amount of emotional labor. According to one Sugar Baby, Jennifer, the emotional aspect is what distinguishes a Sugar Baby from sex work. She explains to *Huffington Post* (Fairbanks, 2011):

My situation is different in a number of different ways. First of all, I don't engage with a high volume of people, instead choosing one or two men I actually like spending time with and have decided to develop a friendship with them. And while sex is involved, the focus is on providing friendship. It's not only about getting paid.

Like Peterson, Jennifer emphasizes her ability to choose who she shares her time and body with, and she prides herself on her ability to provide Sugar Daddies with genuine emotional companionship. Similarly, Marina, a Sugar Baby who advertises herself on Sugar Dating

websites in Moscow, explained to the *Daily Mail* (Stewart, 2016), ““I consider myself to be a valuable part of my man’s portfolio, as I provide him with high-quality relations, including sex, and never cause him trouble.” Indeed, the majority of Sugar Babies seem to view themselves as performing an invaluable service that may include sex but always involves emotional labor. They do not become involved with men simply because they want money; for many Sugar Babies, the emotional connection is equally as important as the financial support.

Sugar Babies do not deny that they have sex with Sugar Daddies. In fact, some Sugar Babies are quite open about their sexuality and call into question the media’s concern with what they are doing with their bodies. On this, Sydney Leathers (2013) writes, “I enjoy my sexuality, and it doesn’t make me anything other than what I am: a young woman who’s enjoying her life to the fullest and going on plenty of adventures with willing partners.” Nevertheless, these young women feel as though they offer Sugar Daddies more than physical support, and that makes all the difference. For Sugar Babies like Nina Jennifer, the emotional labor sets them apart from sex workers. For others, like Marina, their beauty and intelligence are commodities that they choose to exchange for monthly allowances that average around \$2,200 (“Sugar Dating Heat Map,” 2016). The highlighted examples illustrate how self-definitions enable Sugar Babies to use their autonomy to resist negative evaluations.

A Sugar Daddy who went by the pseudonym “Scrooge” explained to a *GQ* reporter why he prefers Sugar Dating websites over traditional dating websites (Brodesser-Akner, 2015): “There are certain things that I enjoy about sex, certain things, and it’s difficult to tell the typical date about those things, so I never get past the first date.” Scrooge has found that Sugar Babies are more understanding because they are not evaluating his moral character, but rather, they are assessing a potential arrangement. However, the fact that he feels comfortable discussing his

sexual preferences with Sugar Babies does not mean that he considers them sex workers. In line with the defense offered by many Sugar Babies, Scrooge views Sugar Babies' emotional responsiveness as indicative of something more than purely sex work. The laughter, kisses, and conversations he has with Sugar Babies make it so that "it's almost like a real person who actually loves you."

While many Sugar Daddies attempted to distinguish Sugar Babies from sex workers, they did so while simultaneously reducing Sugar Babies to their physical attributes. When *CNN* journalist, Lisa Ling (2014b), asks Mark, a self-proclaimed Sugar Daddy, how he feels when others see him with an intelligent and attractive young woman, he responds, "Of course, it makes you feel good. There's always the fantasy of, you know, being successful if you are having a super model for a girlfriend. If you have money, you have, you know, an attractive person that goes around and does stuff with you." Sugar Daddy, Tommy, made a similar statement about Sugar Babies in an interview with *ABC*. According to Tommy, "When you walk into a room, and you have a beautiful woman with you, it's a compliment to you, as a male. It's like pulling up in a really nice car or something. I hate to compare it that way, but it is" (Perez & Soichet, 2012). Both examples reflect an unwillingness by some Sugar Daddies to positively evaluate Sugar Babies beyond their physicality. They also indicate that Sugar Babies' bodies merely reflect Sugar Daddies' level of financial success.

SeekingArrangement spokespersons seemed to offer defenses that were more in line with Sugar Babies' self-definitions. SeekingArrangement founder and CEO, Brandon Wade, rejects the notion that Sugar Dating is prostitution. In an op-ed for *CNN*, Wade (2014) argues, "Seeking Arrangement is a dating site, which means most of the men here are eventually hoping to have sex. Isn't that the point of dating? But this is not prostitution. Regardless of whether a man has

money or not, when two people are dating, sex will inevitably be a part of the equation” He also insists that Sugar Dating empowers young women because it provides them with the opportunity to date successful men: “They [Sugar Babies] shouldn’t be afraid of using the resources and assets given to them to find what they truly deserve from a relationship. Why would anyone choose to date someone who is subtracting from, instead of adding to, their life?” In a similar vein, SeekingArrangement spokesperson, Angela Bermudo, contends, “Being a Sugar Baby not only gets you money, but it can also give you a leg up. A lot of these Sugar Daddies are successful businessmen and they can provide mentoring, or even a graduate job” (Buckley, 2015). The revealing thing about Sugar Daddies’ and SeekingArrangement’s defense of Sugar Babies is that their praise is often contingent upon the financial success of Sugar Daddies. A Sugar Baby’s attractiveness is merely a reflection of her Sugar Daddy’s wealth. Her decision to become a Sugar Baby is only as wise as the economic and social gains conferred to her by her Sugar Daddy.

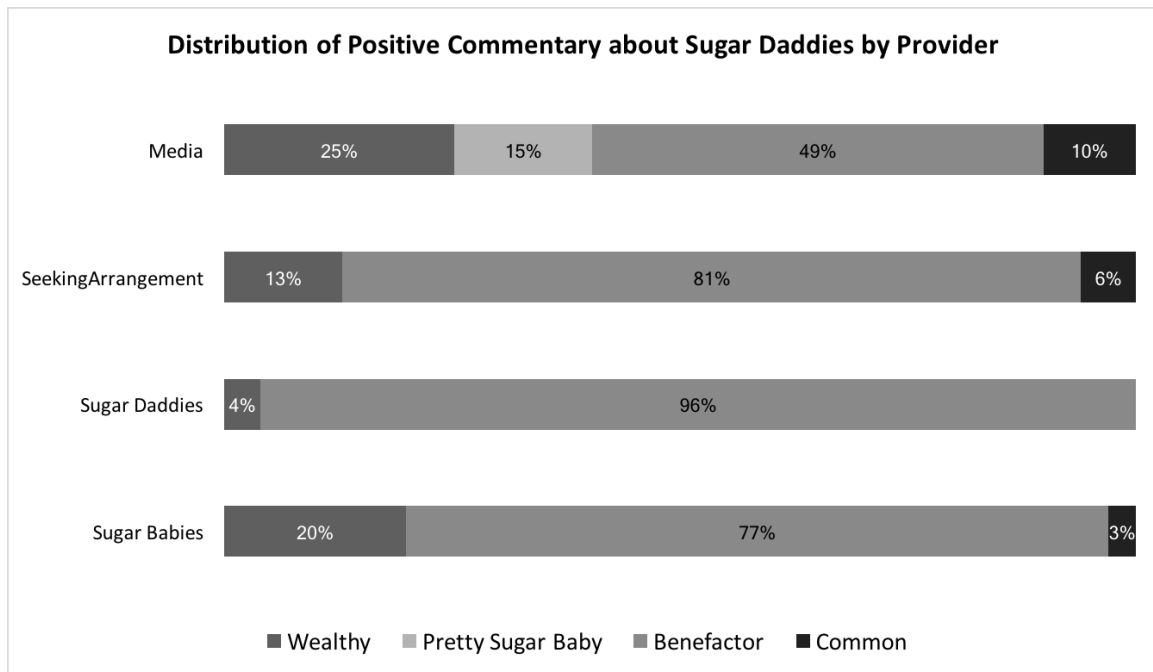
Defending Sugar Daddies

Table 7 examines the defenses of Sugar Daddies provided by Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, SeekingArrangement spokespersons, and members of the media. “Wealthy” comments refer to statements that praise Sugar Daddies for their financial success. “Pretty Sugar Baby” comments include praise for Sugar Daddies for their ability to date physically attractive Sugar Babies. “Benefactor” statements include comments that describe Sugar Daddies as benevolent figures who enjoy helping Sugar Babies in a number of ways – from financial support to mentorship. Finally, comments coded as “Common” included statements that defended Sugar Daddies’ behavior as ordinary and unexceptional.

TABLE 7

Distribution of Positive Comments About Sugar Daddies by Provider

Types of positive comments	Sugar Babies		Sugar Daddies		Seeking Arrangement		Media	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Wealthy	15	20%	1	4%	2	13%	17	25%
Pretty Sugar Baby	0	--	0	--	0	--	10	15%
Benefactor	57	77%	24	96%	13	81%	33	49%
Common	2	3%	0	--	1	6%	7	10%

**Figure 5. Distribution of Positive Commentary About Sugar Daddies by Provider**

Turning to the data presented in Table 7 that show how each group defended Sugar Daddies, it appears that the majority of Sugar Babies' positive statements included commentary on how Sugar Daddies were benefactors ($n = 57, 77\%$) 77% ($n = 57$). Meanwhile, 20% ($n = 15$) of Sugar Babies' comments focused on Sugar Daddies' wealth, and 3% ($n = 2$) of their comments were about how Sugar Daddies were common. While the majority of Sugar Daddies' defended themselves as generous benefactors ($n = 24, 96\%$), there was one instance in which a Sugar Daddy described himself simply in terms of his financial wealth. SeekingArrangement spokespersons also defended Sugar Daddies by describing them as benefactors ($n = 13, 81\%$) and mentioning their financial success ($n = 2, 13\%$). There was also one case in which a spokesperson described Sugar Daddies as quite common in society. Finally, Table 7 indicates that members of the news media relied on all four types of positive comments in order to defend Sugar Daddies. In addition to describing Sugar Daddies as benefactors ($n = 33, 49\%$), wealthy ($n = 17, 25\%$) and common ($n = 7, 10\%$), they also praised Sugar Daddies for their ability to form arrangements with attractive Sugar Babies ($n = 10, 15\%$). Taking a look at Figure 5, there is clear agreement among all four groups about how to defend Sugar Daddies. Most of the praise offered by each group mentioned how Sugar Daddies were generous benefactors who enjoyed helping Sugar Babies in the form of financial assistance or mentorship.

The cases below offer an in-depth look at how all four groups defend Sugar Daddies as benefactors since this type of commentary made up the majority of positive statements. When asked what Sugar Daddies have given her, a 22-year old Sugar Baby told *CBS* interviewer Jorge Estevez (2012):

The lesson here... ask and you shall receive. They have given me cars, trips, jewelry. These guys will take you out and they will court you... They support you financially... They have money they want to help you. They see you struggling, they want to help you.

In this excerpt, the Sugar Baby emphasizes how Sugar Daddies are not only wealthy but also how they *want* to help Sugar Babies. In an online article for *Cosmopolitan*, Sara Bailey Nagorski (2016) offers a first-hand account of her time spent as a Sugar Baby while attending college at The University of Texas at Austin. In the article, Nagorski writes, “While he [my Sugar Daddy] paid for everything we did together, what I valued more was his patience, his perspective on life, his help on my essays, as well as his instruction on how to properly shoot vodka and the coffee he made me in the morning.” Similarly, for 21-year old Sugar Baby, Monte, having a 63-year old Sugar Daddy who provides her with a \$5,000 monthly allowance has not only alleviated her financial struggles, but the arrangement has also provided her with valuable life experiences (Perez & Soichet, 2012). In an interview with *ABC*, Monte explains, “[My Sugar Daddy] taught me how to golf, cook, be a classy woman... He’s just transformed me back to something I’ve always wanted to become.” Comments by Nina Peterson support the notion that Sugar Daddies are upstanding men who genuinely want to offer more than financial support to their Sugar Babies. According to Peterson, “They’re gentlemen and they know how to treat a lady... They are sophisticated and intelligent and they know how to conduct themselves in relationships” (Hodgkin, 2016). These examples are interesting because they reveal how Sugar Babies’ defense of Sugar Daddies as benefactors may also function as a way to legitimate the Sugar relationship. They challenge the assumption that there is a simple and direct exchange of money for physical companionship by detailing the additional benefits that they gain from being in an arrangement with Sugar Daddies.

Many Sugar Daddies are aware of how they contribute to their Sugar Babies’ lives. As one Sugar Daddy explains, “I enjoy being a Sugar Daddy. I have been blessed with more than enough to make a difference in someone else’s life” (James, 2015). Similarly, 70-year-old Sugar

Daddy, Jack, considers himself a “humanitarian” who enjoys helping women in need of financial assistance (Fairbanks, 2011). Indeed, it seems as though many Sugar Daddies rely on the notion that they are helping a less fortunate young woman in order to overcome the stigma that they are simply paying young women for their companionship.

However, the exchange of money appears to complicate the nature of the Sugar relationship. In an interview with *The New York Times*, 40-year old finance executive and Sugar Daddy, B.K., makes clear that while he feels good about helping his new Sugar Baby by encouraging her to do well in school, paying part of her tuition, and taking her out on romantic dates, he still questions the authenticity of the relationship. In his own words, B.K. explains (Padawer, 2009):

It’s very clear with this site that she’s getting something out of this, hopefully emotional support and mentoring advice and fun in bed, but also something financial, so don’t come back to me and say that you were used or that I left you high and dry... I like that aspect of it, but on the other hand, it would be nice not to have the money involved, because you always wonder: would she still want to be with me even without the money? Does the money make me more attractive than I really am?

B.K.’s comments signify that Sugar Daddies’ wealth plays a dual-role in the Sugar Baby-Daddy relationship. On one hand, financial capital complicates the notion that Sugar relationships are based on genuine affection for the other person. B.K.’s comments suggest that Sugar Babies remain suspected of using older men for their wealth regardless of how well they perform their Sugar Baby role. On the other hand, B.K. acknowledges that Sugar Daddies are defined by their financial success – without it, they are, by definition, no longer Sugar Daddies. Comments by journalists support this. In an op-ed for *The Guardian*, Stella Grey (2014) discusses the difficulty of online dating for many middle-aged women while offering insight into how society views Sugar Daddies:

Men are convinced that if they become bachelors again, that's the kind of sex life they'll get. Young women, big tits, flat stomachs, a tight fit where it matters. There are loads of gorgeous young things here who'd be happy with a 50-year-old Sugar Daddy. You can't compete with that.

Grey's comments are interesting for several reasons. First, they demonstrate the double-standard that middle-age women and men face. While women in their 50s find it difficult to find romantic partners online, successful men who are the same age are able to choose from an abundance of young beautiful women to date. Second, her comments defend Sugar Daddies as men to admire. According to Grey, there is a desire among men to have the kind of sex life available to Sugar Daddies. Finally, her comments underscore how common Sugar Daddies are. Grey doesn't need to define what a Sugar Daddy is because we already know. Sugar Daddies are older single men who attract younger women, and *CNN* journalist, Lisa Ling (2014a), explains why younger women gravitate to Sugar Daddies:

We all know what Sugar Daddies are: Wealthy older men have throughout history sought out much younger women – “Sugar Babies” – to date, even marry and take care of. Despite the women's liberation movement, our culture is always reminding us of gender roles. Today, websites like *SeekingArrangement.com* are making it that much easier for men and women to connect by waving the carrot of support and financial security to attract youth and beauty.

Tellingly, Ling praises Sugar Daddies for taking care of young women while she simultaneously draws a parallel between Sugar Babies and horses who are simply guided by a carrot of wealth. Her comments also underscore the broader pattern of online news coverage of Sugar Dating. The findings presented in Table 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 make it clear that there has been a growth in online news coverage of Sugar Dating, and this coverage has been overwhelmingly negative and directed towards Sugar Babies. Meanwhile, most of the positive coverage has been about Sugar Daddies.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this research is in line with agenda-setting and framing theory. According to the agenda-setting model, increased news coverage of a particular topic will cause the public to hold more extreme views about the topic. Meanwhile, framing theory holds that reporters will try to align their commentary with the underlying schemas of their audience. The findings of this study offer support for hypothesis 1, which holds that increased news coverage of Sugar Dating will stimulate stronger attitudes about Sugar Dating, and these changes in public opinion will result in less neutral commentary about Sugar Dating over time. The results in Table 2 and Figure 1 show that there has been an increase in the amount of Sugar Dating over time. In addition, the findings in Table 3 suggest that this coverage has become increasingly polarized between negative and positive commentary. One limitation of this study is that reporters and public attitudes toward Sugar Dating were not measured directly. As such, future research should directly measure changes in public opinion about Sugar Dating and compare them to changes in media coverage. The potential for theory building when connecting mass media coverage and public opinion is important for agenda-setting and framing. If it is the case that the amount of media coverage impacts attitudinal strength and public attitudes shape how issues are frame, there is a potential to develop a new model that encompasses both of these processes.

Prior research also demonstrates that traditional sexual scripts influence media coverage. Because the traditional sexual script casts men as economic providers, and women as financially dependent (Laner & Ventrone, 2000), a Sugar Dating relationship based on a woman's financial reliance upon a man does not pose a threat to traditional courtship norms. However, changes in women's employment and education have produced changes in relationship dynamics, and over

the past few decades, women and men have begun to create relationships that challenge traditional gendered divisions of labor within the home (Lamont, 2013). Literature on contemporary dating demonstrates that women today are encouraged to reject financial inequality in the home and strive for personal achievement outside of the domestic sphere (Graf & Schwartz, 2011). Therefore, Sugar Dating is a direct affront to the egalitarian ideal because it is based on direct exchange of financial assistance for emotional – and sometimes physical – companionship. Indeed, the results of this study provide strong support for the second hypothesis, that the majority of news coverage would be negative (see Table 3).

The findings also suggest that negative coverage is distributed differently along gender lines. In her study of the persistence of traditional courtship norms, Ellen Lamont (2013) demonstrates that gendered assumptions continue to influence dating beliefs and behaviors despite the shift towards more egalitarian relationships. Indeed, the notion that traditional sexual scripts shape contemporary beliefs about how people should behave in sexual interactions make clear why Sugar Babies received the bulk of negative coverage. These scripts, according to Sandra Bryers (1999, p. 9), cast men as sexual initiators and women as the recipients of sexual advances:

... because of their supposed large sexual appetites, men are expected to initiate and vigorously pursue dates with women, all sexual interactions, and increasingly intimate sexual activities within any given sexual interaction. Women are expected to adopt a passive, defensive stance in order to protect their perceived worth. They are expected to be prepared for and to respond cautiously to these initiations.

Therefore, the idea that a Sugar Daddy would pay a young woman to fulfill his emotional and/or sexual desires is not nearly as subversive as the idea that a young woman would ask for money in exchange for emotional or sexual intimacy. In addition, women are expected to be caring and selfless, while men are expected to be apathetic and self-centered (Bryers, 1999). Again, the behavior of Sugar Daddies remains in line with traditional sexual scripts. They are free to place

their needs before Sugar Babies and remain emotionally detached. On the other hand, Sugar Babies' willingness to be sensitive and nurturing only to the extent that they will receive financial compensation is in conflict with the aspect of the traditional sexual script that calls for women to place their needs beneath those of their men partners. In other words, the self-serving and unconventional actions of Sugar Babies makes them easy targets for public condemnation, despite the fact that Sugar Daddies are engaged in nearly identical behaviors.

While these findings offer support for hypothesis 3, that Sugar Babies will receive more negative coverage than Sugar Daddies (see Table 5), the analytic strategy does not allow for a complete picture of how these groups are portrayed differently by the media. I only coded for the presence of negative, neutral, and positive commentary about Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating, and as a result, these results do not tap into the underlying rationalities leading to differences in types of coverage between the three groups. In order to build on these findings, future research should further examine reasons why Sugar Babies are treated more harshly than Sugar Daddies.

The sexual double standard that likely impacted the uneven distribution of negative and positive coverage between Sugar Babies and Sugar Daddies may also help to explain variations in the way both groups responded to media criticisms. Sugar Babies often defended their behavior by asserting their sexual agency and safety. Sugar Daddies, on the other hand, praised Sugar Babies for being physically attractive. In addition, defenses of Sugar Daddies never attempted to distinguish Sugar Daddies from men who purchased sex. Most of the praise centered on how Sugar Daddies kindly helped financially strapped women in college. These findings offer support for hypothesis 4, and they also point to the need for a closer look at the relationship between group stigma and gender. A great deal of research indicates that responses

to stigma appear to vary among high- and low-status groups (Branscombe, 1998; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz & Owen, 2002). There is no known published work, however, that examines why, in heterosexual relationships, men are reluctant to offer support for their partners while women are willing to defend men. Future research should take a closer look at why Sugar Daddies did not provide Sugar Babies with the same amount of support that Sugar Babies gave them.

A key limitation of this study is that it coded for the presence of negative, neutral, and positive commentary about Sugar Babies, Sugar Daddies, and Sugar Dating. Because I did not code every instance of positive, negative, and neutral commentary, the results may under- or over-estimate the types of coverage each group received. Nevertheless, this study provides evidence of gender bias in media coverage of Sugar Dating; more articles provide negative coverage on Sugar Babies than any other group.

The media's presentation of Sugar Dating over the past decade provides evidence that women continue to face barriers to equality. Increased efforts to commit to egalitarian relationships has made it easy to condemn Sugar Dating for promoting a relationship that is predicated on women's financial dependence upon men. However, traditional sexual scripts clearly still play a role in determining where the blame for Sugar Dating gets placed.

If we truly are a society that values equality between genders, then Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies should be held equally responsible for participating in this unconventional arrangement. However, the results of this study demonstrate that this is not the case. Subsequent to the high level of media attention and scrutiny surrounding Sugar Babies, these young women functioned as the primary mode of resistance for Sugar Daters; they offered the majority of positive commentary about themselves and Sugar Daddies. The telling thing about the positive

remarks of Sugar Babies toward Sugar Daddies is that most are in line with the dominant defense provided by Sugar Daddies – these men are often described as benevolent caregivers.

Revealingly, most Sugar Daddies offer a defense of Sugar Babies that is strikingly different from the women's own self-definitions. While many Sugar Babies emphasized their autonomy when they attempted to distance themselves from sex workers, Sugar Daddies defended Sugar Babies by emphasizing their physical attractiveness. One has to wonder why more people appear to agree on how to defend Sugar Daddies but not Sugar Babies. Why do more people seem to think that Sugar Babies are more deserving of negative coverage than Sugar Daddies? There's a saying that goes, "women have to work twice as hard for half as much," and this seems to describe Sugar Babies' current situation in society quite accurately. These young women offer more praise and receive more criticism than Sugar Daddies, and even when they are complemented by Sugar Daddies they are often reduced to their physical attributes.

APPENDIX

Original Online News Websites

CNN – Breaking News, Latest News and Videos. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/>

Daily Kos. Retrieved from <http://www.dailykos.com/>

Daily Mail Online. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/ushome/index.html>

Mother Jones. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/ushome/index.html>

NBC News - Breaking News & Top Stories - Latest World, US & Local News. Retrieved from <http://www.nbcnews.com/>

NPR: National Public Radio. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/>

Slate Magazine - Politics, Business, Technology, and the Arts. Retrieved from <http://www.slate.com/>

The Economist – World News, Politics, Economics, Business & Finance. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/>

The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us>

The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/>

The Wall Street Journal & Breaking News, Business, Financial & Economic News, World News & Video. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/>

USA TODAY: Latest world and US News. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/>

Washington Post: Breaking News, World, US, DC News & Analysis. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>

Snowball Websites

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