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The Self-perception of Sugar Relationship and Self-esteem among Young Adults: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Sugar relationship is a controversial issue in Asia countries. The sugar relationship trend has increasingly evident in Malaysia which made the community frowned upon this intergenerational relationship. As engaging in sugar relationship can affect self-esteem among sugar babies. Therefore, this research aims to explore the self-perception of sugar relationship and self-esteem among young adults who are in the relationship. To achieve the objectives of this study, a qualitative study with phenomenological approach was used. In total 10 young adults aged between 20 to 25 years old were selected and interviewed by utilizing semi-structured interview protocol. The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis to generate core themes. The current study discovered that young adults' perceptions of sugar relationships are shaped by four themes: conceptualization, factors that contribute to being a sugar baby, potential risks, and ideation to quit sugar relationships. These impressions ultimately impacted the sugar babies' self-esteem based on their self-awareness, associated sentiments, and personal experience. Sugar babies were compelled and perceived sugar relationship as unique. They also had awareness of potential risks and future plan for them resulting in having healthy self-esteem. Additionally, this study is expected to provide substantive knowledge and solutions to assist researchers, government officials, and sugar babies in dealing with social ethics and law enactment. This study would like to suggest that this topic can be conducted at different regions in Malaysia or other research methods to fill in the research gap.

Keywords: Self-Perception, Self-Esteem, Sugar Relationship, Young Adults, Qualitative Study.

Background

Sugar bowl is an internet slang term that alludes to the lifestyle of a sugar baby. It is also a financial relationship between a sugar baby and his or her sugar daddy or sugar mommy. Sugar baby is defined as an attractive individual who look to experience luxurious lifestyle and meet affluent or wealthy people (Daly, 2017). On the other hand, sugar daddy or mommy is an older and wealthier individual who provides materialistic goods to a younger partner (Birkas et al., 2020).

There is no concrete and a universal definition for sugar relationship until now as different researches provide different insight. This term 'sugar' is not well known in the early years. It was emerged due to the tale of two historical fictions in the early of 1900s. Subsequently, the term sugar relationship starts to emerge in the society and gain popularity in the modern society. According to Nayar (2017), there are approximately 20 websites that foster sugar relationship which includes SA, Sugarbook and Tinder. SA is the most widely known especially among young women due to numerous advertisements in Google (O'Donnell, 2018). On the other hand, Sugarbook is the popular website within Asia context. In conjunction, some factors influencing sugar relationship had been identified in this study. They are financial motivation, luxury lifestyle, peer pressure, trauma, failed marriage, pandemic related and social capital.

In the current society, the primary approach to engage with sugar relationship is via online platform. Malaysia also started to adopt and offer services of sugar relationship via online. So, Sugarbook is launched in year 2017. It is the most commonly known sugar dating platform in Malaysia. Currently, Malaysia has 300,000 active sugar babies and the highest number of sugar daddies (Sugarbook, 2021). It had shown a spike of 40% sign-ups on the website since early of year 2021. Majority of the sugar babies were reported to be university students.

The trend of sugar relationship has become more visible in Malaysia. Ever since then, this issue had been a taboo and remains controversial. This is because Islam is the religion of the Federal even though other religions may be practiced (Constitution, 2006). Sugar relationship is not recognized in Islamic law. So, sugar daddies and sugar babies may not break Malaysia's law. However, this sugar relationship had offended the sensibilities of a periodically conservative and moralistic Muslim country. Linked to the above issue, many communities had frowned upon this cross-generational relationship. Sugar relationship is often romanticized whereby sugar daddies are the 'white knights' as portrayed in the fairy tales (Zimmermann, 2015). It also causes to become fanaticized. Consequently, social discrimination happens. Besides, many sugar babies admitted that they look for sugar daddies for financial support, seeking mentorship and career guidance, and perceived them as networking source (Upadhyay, 2021). Nonetheless, this study is still less known and under-researched (DeSoto, 2018; Lenze, 2020). In scarce limited view of limited sources, more evidence-based studies are needed.

Previous studies had only focus on the self-perception of sugar relationship (Daly, 2017; Reed, 2015). In conjunction, there is no research that study about self-esteem. So, a new variable which is self-esteem will be anticipated in this study. This study will allow advancing the research development to better understand this issue as engaging in this type of relationship can affect self-esteem. This would benefits future researchers. Besides, the outcome of the study can help to provide insight on the uncertainty and non-concrete definition of sugar relationship. As a result, the result in this study as reference to enforce the existing law related to this type of relationship. Not to forget, this research can benefit sugar babies as they can reflect on their own worth and value. Hence, it is understood that there are many significant to this study.

The rationale of this study is due to the understanding of nature for sugar relationship within the society. Thus, the present study aims to explore the self-perception of young adults and self-esteem of young adults who are in sugar relationship. Specifically, the study aims to

explore on Malaysia young adults' understanding towards sugar relationship and to understand their overall opinion of themselves as they were engaged in sugar relationship.

Methodology

Method/Design

A qualitative study with phenomenological research design was used as it is suitable to identify and explore on participant's experience on particular event or phenomenon in detail (Hennink et al., 2020). By utilizing this research design, self-perception on sugar relationship among young adults in Malaysia was obtained. Besides, the self-esteem among young adults in Malaysia who engaged in sugar relationship was also revealed.

Sample/Location

A total of 10 young adults were selected using two techniques mainly based on criterion sampling technique and snowballing sampling technique. The pre-determined criteria for participants to join this study were: a) a Malaysian; b) university students; c) aged between 20 to 25 years (Aktu & İlhan, 2017); d) must be in sugar relationship. The main reason to select Malaysian participants as the study was aiming a collectivistic and moralistic society. In addition, the term university students helped to narrow down and focused on this research.

Procedure

A total of 28 questions were developed to collect data of self-perception of sugar relationship and self-esteem of young adults in Malaysia. The set of interview questions were divided in three parts. Section A consisted questions which focused on demographic background. Section B was used to design the interview questions regarding to the self-perception on sugar relationship. On the other hand, Section C was used to design the interview questions on self-esteem among young adults in Malaysia. All the interview questions were adopted and developed based on literature review, theories and reliable questionnaires. In addition to that, semi-structure interview protocol was utilized to collect data.

This study was carried out within local and private universities located at Klang Valley. The details of the study and inclusion criteria were broadcasted on social media which includes Sugarbook, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and more. There were participants who voluntarily contacted researcher and approached directly by researcher via messages. Each potential participant was asked a set of screening question in order to determine their eligibility prior to schedule an interview. The verified participants were then received information letter and consent form. They were required to sign the consent form and their data being collected. The interview session was conducted via online as there was social restriction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online interview session was conducted using Zoom platforms with participant's preferred time slot.

All data from participants were collected upon saturation reached. This is done to ensure there was no additional information to include. For example, questions were asked at the end of the interview session such as 'Is there anything else that you would like to share?'

Analysis

Interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses were coded in Atlas.ti, using the concept-driven coding, and analyzed thematically. In the analysis that follows first,

transcription was done after looking through the transcript and hearing the audio data repeatedly and pseudonyms were given to each participant. Concurrently, data were familiarized. Coding was then conducted in several rounds; first, based on recurrent and significant of words, and second, based on descriptions and explanations. The codes were then organized and shifted according to themes and suitable name to each theme was given. The themes were reviewed in multiple times so that to fit meaningfully within the data set. Finally, it was then ready to convey the results with justification and explanation of the analysis. The process of analysing data had enabled to ground interpretations in the perspectives and experiences of all participants.

Results

Self-perception of Sugar Relationship among Young Adults

Based on the results, young adult perceived sugar relationship based on (a) conceptualization of sugar relationship, (b) factors becoming a sugar baby, (c) possible risks in sugar relationship, and (d) ideation to quit sugar relationship.

Conceptualization of Sugar Relationship

There is indeed a common view on sugar relationship which stated it is a mutually beneficial relationship. However, definition is not enough to conceptualise sugar relationship, but it includes characteristics of sugar parent, what they provide and receive as well as who controls the relationship. Furthermore, one of the participant gave personalized comment as below.

“My definition is like I would say it's like mutually beneficial because it doesn't have those the sex. And then er I believe that although it is mutually beneficial but it also must have certain level of respect. Not like I pay you, so you are my slave. Not like I pay you, so you are my slave. That thing just doesn't exist in my dictionary.” (P1, female, age 22)

All participants expressed that sugar relationship was a mutually beneficial relationship between two persons. They also insisted that they found their sugar parents based on their choice and pre-determined criteria. In conjunction, all participants gave the same response in unison whereby they provide dating, companionship and intimacy to their sugar parents. In return, most of them got to experience to live a luxurious lifestyle. Lastly, majority of the sugar baby participants claimed that their sugar parent were the one who control the relationship.

Factors Becoming a Sugar Baby

When it comes to the factor of becoming a sugar baby, there were several identified factors. The factors including financial support, just want to try, accompany in-need and trauma from previous relationship. The participants made the following comment.

“For myself thinking la, I got family problem, with the family. So oh need to find financial support to pay my college fee.”(P7, female, age 24)

“Learn something new. Because I am still young, so want to try something new. Like to experience the culture.” (P6, male, age 23)

Therefore, it is understood that sugar baby participants had different experience in their life which led them to engage sugar relationship.

Possible Risks in Sugar Relationship

Notably, there were risks in sugar relationship that cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, different sugar baby participants had different perspective on the risks. The comments were shown as below.

"I think got risk la but, it's one of it. The risk of being found out by his wife, first one." (P5, female, age 25)

"Yea got risk from this arrangement. The risk is maybe sugar daddy is a scammer. He will promise you something but didn't do it with the meet up that time, the person you meet is different. Also, can get cheat by someone like more experience also." (P6, male, age 23)

"Just worry I might get pregnant during studying. Cause nobody knows I'm a SB." (P8, female, age 20)

Sugar baby participants believed that there were always risks in sugar relationship. This shows that they were aware of the risks. However, the risks seem not to stop them from engaging into sugar relationship.

Ideation to Quit Sugar Relationship

It can be observed that many sugar baby participants had many complications during the engagement in the relationship. So, the sugar baby participants shared a variety of responses on this theme. They mentioned that they will quit sugar relationship when they had secured a permanent job or ready to commit to normal relationship. However, a minority of them had no idea to quit. The participants share their views as below.

"Okay, it's been like 3 years. Maybe like 4 years more. I don't know, there's a long time more to go. But it depends la cause my boyfriend is only 21. He is young, so maybe when I was 27, or he is 25. Yea, 5 years 4 years maximum. Yeah, maybe like meeting lesser and lesser, cause you don't want to anger the daddies." (P3, female, age 23)

"Ya my answer is yes. Maybe after I have a job." (P6, male, age 23)

"No, I see it as a way to earn money. It can be my passive income." (P5, female, age 25)

The sugar baby participants expressed their point of view whether they would like to quit their current relationship. It was shown that majority of the sugar baby participants would want to quit but not at the moment.

In short, based on the data provided by the participants, there were four themes created in self-perception of sugar relationship. Thus, it is understood that the four themes had influenced the perception of sugar relationship among young adults.

Self-esteem of Young Adult in Sugar Relationship

Based on the results, there were four themes emerged from sugar baby participants to answer the second research question. There were: (a) self-disclosure to trustworthy people, (b) get to know own self-esteem, (c) feeling associated with self-esteem, and (d) overall experience.

Self-disclosure to Trustworthy People

Sugar baby participants in this study still sensed that sugar relationship remains stigmatized in Malaysia. As a result, they often keep their identity a secret. Nonetheless, sugar baby participants responded with only letting individuals who they trust know such as close friends or family members about their relationships.

"I told close friends personally because I really need someone to know where I go. And then of course some although they doesn't agree but they respect me but of course some of them like slashing me but I'm used to it already." (P1, female, age 22)

"Yes. My family. Like my father, mother, older brother and some close friends." (P4, female, age 22)

Therefore, it is understood that sugar baby participants only revealed their identity to someone they trusted a lot. The sugar baby participants let them know to seek for sense of security.

Get to Know Own Self-esteem

It seems like sugar babies were given an opportunity to do self-reflect whereby they were able to know their own self-esteem. So, this theme was emerged via knowing the importance as well as the difference between being single and in sugar relationship.

"Yes, because high self-esteem can allow me to feel good all the time and others wouldn't look down on me." (P8, female, age 20)

"Now and er previous one like I actually had someone out there that care for me and I feel really safe and protected when I meet up with them. And then last time I was like wow single and sad la (chuckled) very dry like that la." (P1, female, age 22)

This showed that majority of the sugar baby participants were aware of the importance of self-esteem and its impact.

Feeling Associated with Self-esteem

The feeling in sugar relationship, feeling towards sugar parent as well as feeling from sugar parent were categorised to create this theme.

"Young wealthy man who love his life a lot. He is very ego I can say that. So sometimes he will say something that upset me without him knowing but I

know that he did this to me for my own good la. So because of this, I kinda like him.” (P7, female, age 24)

However, there were other feelings expressed by sugar baby participants. The responses were as below.

“But when I'm about to see them, I do get nervous or worried because you can never tell who someone really is.” (P9, female, age 20)

It was shown that there were a variety of responses expressed by sugar baby participants. Majority of the sugar baby participants expressed positive feelings when associated with self-esteem.

Overall Experience

The sugar baby participants shared a variety of responses on this theme.

“Yes. I am satisfied because er I am glad to meet something who cares for me with all their heart from a website like Sugarbook which is I think it is not easy. Yea and er the fact that he can bring me a lot of knowledge before I even encounter any mistakes is a plus point. And his financial stability will be a stepping stone for me in my life. Ya.” (P2, female, age 24)

However, there were other responses shared by sugar baby participants. The responses were as below.

“Not really, maybe I will say 60%. The reason is very simple I feel like he don't have much time for me because we are not allow to text when he is at home. He will only find me when she is not around. And he is quite scared that we will be found out la. So on top of that so I don't really depend on him. I feel like I am still young. I have the looks, I can go find someone else.” (P5, female, age 25)

The sugar baby participants shared their overall experience in terms of support from sugar parent, protection from relationship and overall satisfaction. It was shown that majority of the sugar baby participants had good experience.

In short, based on the data provided by the participants, there were four themes created in self-esteem of young adults. Thus, it is understood that the four themes had explained the self-esteem of young adults who engaged in sugar relationship.

Discussion

Research on sugar relationships had been done in mainly Western and South Africa countries. However, sugar relationships in the Asia have largely been ignored by academics. Hence, the present study aims to explore on self-perception of sugar relationship among young adults and their self-esteem.

Generally, not all sugar relationships involve sex and therefore, it cannot be considered as prostitution. In fact, it was discovered that sugar relationship is unique whereby it is neither strictly intimate nor transactional but involve the symbiosis of money, intimacy and attention (Birkas et al., 2020; Rakic, 2020). This is the distinct feature of sugar relationship. In addition, this discovery further contradicts that sugar relationship cannot be classified as a type of prostitution. Besides, many sugar babies tend to find potential older sugar parents who possess positive traits such as respectful, considerate, successful, genuine and intelligent. This showed that sugar babies would want to avoid any elements of toxicity in the relationship. In conjunction, another result found in this study was sugar babies perceived their sugar parents were the one who control the relationship although there were minority who perceived there was an equal power distribution as well as sugar babies were the one in-control. These present findings had found to answer the limitation on power control as stated in the study of (Upadhyay, 2021). This could be due to the fact that sugar babies

Furthermore, it was found that the factors had showed that financial support to try were the most common reason among sugar babies to engage in sugar relationship. This result was consistent with the recent studies which revealed that financial support was the prominent factor among all (Reed, 2015; Kirkeby, 2019; Stice, 2021). This indicated that sugar babies who were a university student had financial burden such as expensive tuition fees to cope with. Conversely, trauma from previous relationship was the least distinct factor. This result echoed the sentiments of other researcher from a past literature on trauma and abuse experience (Stice, 2021). Trauma may be uncommon among sugar babies but it is still important to highlight that they should not be victimized by their sugar parent's behaviour. In addition, sugar babies also mentioned that they were in-need of seeking for an accompaniment. This result was in accord with the findings in previous research whereby they mentioned sugar babies can seek for emotional needs through sugaring (Stice, 2021). Additionally, a new factor was found which is just want to try in this study as it was not been found by any studies yet. So, this paradigm does not provide a wide enough scope to determine the reason for sugar babies to begin a relationship with sugar parents. However, there could be a possibility that young adults would like to experience a new type of relationship to satisfy their curiosity and to have fun.

On the other hand, sugar babies being caught in the relationship was identified as the most prominent risks that could happen, followed by the possibility of meeting a scammer. This was an unexpected finding, so it can further suggest on the coping strategies of sugar babies in sugar relationship. Additionally, unintended pregnancy can happen. Similarly, another finding which is possibility of disease transmission was discovered. This finding indeed make sense as sugar babies had failed to restraint themselves due to a lack of clear perception of the risks associated with such relationship. This result was in-line with previous research indicating that sugar babies who possess risk-taking behaviour such as having sexual intercourse increase the possibility of getting unintended pregnancy and disease transmission (Zulkifli et al., 2022; Reed, 2015). Although sugar babies protected themselves by requesting their sugar parents to use condoms, mishaps probably can still happen. However, this study did not further inquire whether unintended pregnancy happened to the sugar baby participants resulting in conclusion cannot be drawn. Besides, provided current research finding, sexual assault and unintended love were also mentioned by sugar baby participants. These findings indicated

that sugar babies did aware of the possible risk. However, these important findings on sexual assault and unintended love were yet to discover in details.

The present study also found that sugar babies had the idea to quit sugar relationship but not at the moment. Sugar babies will eventually stop one day after they had secured a job upon graduation or when they were ready to commit to a normal relationship. This paradigm on quitting indeed makes sense, however it was discovered as a new finding in regard to this topic. On the other hand, a small number of sugar babies had the opposite idea whereby they had no plan to quit. They can utilize sugar relationship to generate passive income. This result was shown in-line with sentiments of other researcher in the study of (Kirkeby, 2019). Overall, the findings demonstrated that sugar relationship had their own subcultural and unique.

Additionally, the self-esteem of sugar babies was discussed. They revealed that they only told their identity as a sugar baby to whom they trust. For example, their close friends and family members. This self-disclosure was an action by sugar babies to seek for a feeling of security and affirmation. However, they tend to make up excuses upon when they were being asked by someone whom they were not close to. So, on the condition that sugar babies get external validation from others, they might view themselves positively and leverage their sense of courage. Significantly, affirmation was indeed beneficial to the self-esteem in their coming out (Lim et al., 2022). In shorts, the finding about self-disclosure was newly discovered, so it is important to highlight as a new finding.

Besides, despite mustering the courage to reveal themselves as a sugar babies, in any case, sugar babies received criticism or disagreement. Nevertheless, sugar babies were found to know the importance of self-esteem. This result had mirrored those of the previous study that showed self-esteem can affect self-understanding and acceptance (Stice, 2021). Moreover, there is a difference for sugar babies on viewing themselves being single and in sugar relationship. Although no previous study focused specifically on the difference of status in terms of self-esteem, comparable finding was obtained in study which indicated that sugar babies were found to struggle with self-esteem by managing emotion (Palomeque Recio, 2021).

Meanwhile, the feelings involved in sugar relationship were relatively complex as it ranges from positive or negative feelings to mixed feelings. One of the possible explanation of having mixed and conflicting feelings in sugar relationship could be due to the personality or the mental health status of the sugar baby. Nonetheless, an unexpected finding was found on association of feelings and self-esteem which worth to discover further.

Lastly, in regard to the overall experience, the present finding indicated that there was a variety of response on the support from sugar parent, protection from relationship and overall satisfaction. This finding was most likely to indicate that every sugar baby experienced differently as they met different sugar parent ever since they started to venture sugar relationship. These results had corroborated to the findings on overall satisfaction in sugar relationship (Stice, 2021; Recio, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, sugar relationship was unique with their subcultural and differs from prostitution. Sugar relationship demonstrated that it was neither strictly intimate nor

transactional but involves the symbiosis of money, intimacy and attention. Meanwhile, sugar babies had various reasons to engage the relationship despite knowing the risks and complexity. Furthermore, sugar babies also viewed themselves being quit from the relationship after securing their needs. These perceptions had eventually affected the sugar babies' self-esteem. It was understood that the self-esteem was referring to self-disclosure to trustworthy people, get to know own self-esteem, feeling associated with self-esteem, and overall experience. Nevertheless, sugar babies can manage well in their sugar relationship.

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