

How Google Executives Get Sex: Married Sugar Daddies buy “Girlfriends”

Welcome to the New Prostitution Economy

A growing number of young people are selling their bodies online to pay student loans, make the rent, or afford designer labels. Is it just an unorthodox way to make ends meet or a new kind of exploitation? Nancy Jo Sales investigates.

- [Nancy Jo Sales](#)



DADDY DEAREST

“the girlfriend experience.”

Photograph by Mark Schäfer.

The waiter with the handlebar mustache encourages us to “participate in the small-plate culture.” Geraldine’s, the swank spot in Austin’s Hotel Van Zandt, is brimming with tech guys, some loudly talking about money. The college student at our table recommends the ribs—she’s been here before, on “dates” with her “daddies.” “There are a lot of tech guys,” she says. “They want the girlfriend experience, without having to deal with an actual girlfriend.”

“The girlfriend experience” is the term women in the sex trade use for a service involving more than just sex. “They want the perfect girlfriend—in their eyes,” says Miranda, the young woman at our table.* “She’s well groomed, cultured, classy, able to converse about anything—but not bringing into it any of her real-world problems or feelings.

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Miranda is 22 and has the wavy bobbed hair and clipped mid-Atlantic accent of a 1930s movie star; she grew up in a Texas suburb. “I’ve learned how to look like this, talk like this,” she says. “I work hard at being this,” meaning someone who can charge \$700 an hour for sex.

Her adventures in “sugaring” started three years ago when she got hit on by an older guy and rebuffed him, saying, “Look, I’m not interested, so unless you’re offering to pay my student loans,” and he said, “Well . . . ?” After that, “he paid for stuff. He gave me money to help out with my living expenses.”

It ended when she went on a school year abroad and started meeting men on Seeking Arrangement, the Web site and app which match “sugar daddies” with “sugar babies,” whose company the daddies pay for with “allowances.” Now, she says, she has a rotation of three regular “clients”—“a top Austin lawyer, a top architect, and another tech guy,” all of them married. She adds, “Their relationships are not my business.”

She confesses she isn’t physically attracted to any of these men, but “what I’m looking for in this transaction is not sexual satisfaction. Do you like everyone at your job? But you still work with them, right? That’s how it is with sex work—it’s a job. I get paid for it. I do it for the money.”

And not only the money. “I’m networking,” Miranda maintains, “learning things from older men who give me insights into the business world. I’ve learned how to do an elevator pitch. I’ve learned so many soft skills that will help me in my career.

“ALMOST ALL OF MY FRIENDS DO SOME SORT OF SEX WORK . . . IT’S ALMOST TRENDY TO SAY YOU DO IT—OR THAT YOU WOULD.”

“While in college,” she goes on, “I’ve had the ability to focus on developing myself because I’m not slaving away at a minimum-wage job. I reject it when people say I’m oppressed by the patriarchy. People who make seven dollars an hour are oppressed by the patriarchy.”

“She’s in control of the male gaze,” says another woman at the table, Erin, 22.

“I thought about doing it,” says Kristen, 21, tentatively. “I signed up for Seeking Arrangement when I couldn’t pay my rent. But I was held back because of the stigma if anyone finds out.”

“What right does anyone have to judge you for anything you do with your body?,” Miranda asks.

“Just Another Job”

The most surprising thing about Miranda’s story is how unsurprising it is to many of her peers. “Almost all of my friends do some sort of sex work,” says Katie, 23, a visual artist in New York. “It’s super-common. It’s almost trendy to say you do it—or that you would.”

“It’s become like a thing people say when they can’t make their rent,” says Jenna, 22, a New York video-game designer. “ ‘Well, I could always just get a sugar daddy,’ ‘I guess I could just start camming,’ ” or doing sexual performances in front of a Webcam for money on sites like Chaturbate. “And it’s kind of a joke, but it’s also not because you actually *could*. It’s not like you need a pimp anymore. You just need a computer.”

“Basically every gay dude I know is on Seeking Arrangement,” says Christopher, 23, a Los Angeles film editor. “And there are so many rent boys,” or young gay men who find sex-work opportunities on sites like RentBoy, which was busted and shut down in 2015 by Homeland Security for facilitating prostitution. “Now people just go on RentMen,” says Christopher.

As the debate over whether the United States should decriminalize sex work intensifies, prostitution has quietly gone mainstream among many young people, seen as a viable option in an impossible economy and legitimized by a wave of feminism that interprets sexualization as empowering. “People don’t call it ‘prostitution’ anymore,” says Caitlin, 20, a college student in Montreal. “That sounds like slut-shaming. Some girls get very rigid about it, like ‘This is a woman’s choice.’ ”

“Is Prostitution Just Another Job?” asked *New York* magazine in March; it seemed to be a rhetorical question, with accounts of young women who found their self-esteem “soaring” through sex work and whose “stresses seem not too different from any young person freelancing or starting a small business.” “Should Prostitution Be a Crime?” asked the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* in May—again apparently a rhetorical question, with an argument made for decriminalization that seemed to equate it with having “respect” for sex workers. (In broad terms, the drive for decriminalization says it will make the lives of sex workers safer, while the so-called abolitionist movement to end prostitution contends the opposite.)

The *Times Magazine* piece elicited an outcry from some feminists, who charged that it minimized the voices of women who have been trafficked, exploited, or abused. Liesl Gerntholtz, an executive director at Human Rights Watch, characterized the prostitution debate as “the most contentious and divisive issue in today’s women’s movement.” “There’s a lot of fear among feminists of being seen on the wrong side of this topic,” says Natasha Walter, the British feminist author. “I don’t understand how women standing up for legalizing sex work can’t see the ripple effect of taking this position will have on our idea of a woman’s place in the world.”

A ripple effect may already be in motion, but it looks more like a wave. A string of feminist-sex-worker narratives have been weaving through pop culture over the last few years, as typified by *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* (2007–11), the British ITV2 series based on the memoir by the pseudonymous Belle de Jour. Belle, played by the bubbly Billie Piper, is a savvy college grad who hates working at boring, low-paying office jobs, so she becomes a self-described “whore,” a lifestyle choice which always finds her in fashionable clothes. “I love my job,” Belle declares. “I’ve read every feminist book since Simone de Beauvoir and I still do what I do.” And then there is [*The Girlfriend Experience*](#) (2016–), the dramatic series on Starz, a darker take on a similarly glossy world of high-priced hotels and high-end shopping trips financed by wealthy johns. “I like it, O.K.?” snaps the main character, Christine, played by Riley Keough, when her disapproving sister asks why she’s working as an escort. Christine likes sex work so much she leaves law school to do it full-time. Both shows feature graphic sex scenes that sometimes look like porn.

“We talked a lot about agency” when conceiving *The Girlfriend Experience*, says producer Steven Soderbergh (who directed a movie of the same name in 2009), “and the idea that you have this young woman who is going into the workforce and ends up in the sex-work industry, where she feels she has more control and is respected more than she is at her day job,” at a law firm.



PRETTY WOMAN

“My friend who does it says, ‘I do it for the Chanel,’ ” a young woman told the author.

Photograph by Mark Schäfer.

Since Seeking Arrangement launched in 2006, practically a genre of sugar-baby confessionals has emerged. I WAS A REAL-LIFE “SUGAR BABY” FOR WEALTHY MEN, said a typical headline, in *Marie Claire*. The anonymous writer made clear, “I’d always had personal agency.”

Meanwhile, sugaring has its own extensive community online—also known as “the sugar bowl”—replete with Web sites and blogs. On Tumblr, babies exchange tips on the best sugaring sites and how much to charge. They post triumphant pictures of wads of cash, designer shoes, and bags. They ask for prayers: “Pray for me, this will be great to have two sugar daddies this summer since I quit my vanilla job! I’m trying to live free lol!”

On Facebook, there are private pages where babies find support for their endeavors as well. On one, members proudly call themselves “hos” (sometimes “heaux”) and post coquettish selfies, dressed up for “dates.” They offer information on how to avoid law enforcement and what they carry to protect themselves (knives, box cutters, pepper spray). They give advice on how to alleviate the pain of bruises from overzealous spanking and what to do when “scammers” refuse to pay. They ask questions: “How do you go about getting started in sex work? I’m honestly so broke.”

In interviews, young women and men involved in sex work—not professionals forced into the life, but amateurs, kids—in Austin, New York, and Los Angeles, talked mostly about needing money. They were squeezed by college tuition, crushed by student loans and the high cost of living. Many of their parents were middle- or upper-middle-class people who had nothing to spare for their children, derailed by the economic downturn themselves. And so they did “cake sitting”—a specialty service for a fetish that craves just what it says—or stripping or Webcamming or sugaring. Some beat people up in professional “dungeons”; others did “scat play,” involving sex with feces. They did what they felt they had to do to pay their bills. But was it feminism? And no, that isn’t a rhetorical question.

Landing a Whale

‘It just seemed so normal, like no big deal,’ says Alisa, 21, one night at Nobu in Los Angeles, a place she’s been with her daddies. She’s talking about how she started sugaring when she was 18. “People kept telling me and my friends, ‘There are rich daddies who will take care of you.’”

She had profiles on Seeking Millionaire and Date Billionaire when she landed a whale on Seeking Arrangement. He was a high-profile venture capitalist in San Francisco and founder of a major tech company—“the real deal.” (Friends confirm their connection.)

“THERE ARE A LOT OF TECH GUYS. THEY WANT THE GIRLFRIEND EXPERIENCE, WITHOUT HAVING TO DEAL WITH AN ACTUAL GIRLFRIEND.”

Soon after they met he flew her to New York and installed her in a chic hotel. Alisa says he was busy most of the time, but she and her friends ran up \$60,000 in room service and spa services while he worked. To make up for his absence, he took her shopping at Alexander McQueen, “my obsession.”

“Being in the L.A. atmosphere, and at the age of 16 or 17 going out in nightlife—it’s all very based on appearance,” Alisa says. “Out here, as long as you’re wearing Saint Laurent and the newest items, that’s all people care about, so my friends and I were obsessed with fashion. I think with our generation, Instagram also has a lot to do with it—people are constantly posting what they have.” She’s explaining that she became a sugar baby in order to buy luxury goods.

“My friend who does it says, ‘I do it for the Chanel,’ ” Alisa says wryly. “We both come from upper-middle-class families, but we never felt right asking our parents to buy us designer handbags or something, to put that burden on them financially. I was already working full-time,” at a clothing store, “and all my money was going towards helping my parents to pay for school.” So there was nothing left for shopping.

Her assignations with the billionaire went on for two years. “It was purely for financial purposes,” she says. “He was not my type whatsoever.” She’s reluctant at first to say whether they had sex, but finally admits their relationship was physical. “If anyone tells you they’re not sleeping with these guys, they’re lying, even if it’s just a blow job, because no one pays for all that without expecting something in return.”

It ended when he started dating a famous beauty; Alisa read about it on a celebrity blog. She had other daddies, during and after him, but then last year she stopped sugaring. “I haven’t done it in a really long time,” she says, “solely because of how it made me feel. Like it just makes you feel worthless ‘cause they don’t pay attention to your brain, they don’t care what you have to say. They just care that you’re attractive and you’re listening to them. I don’t want to ever have to look back and think, like, I made it to this point just because I used my body to get there.” A friend who got “envious” of her postings on Instagram also told Alisa’s parents what she was doing. She says, “She called me a prostitute.”

“It’s Transactional”

‘She’s a pro,’ murmurs the young guy at the bar at Vandal, the hot new restaurant on New York’s Lower East Side. “And so is she.” He’s cocking his head toward some women in the room who are drinking alone. “How do you know?,” I ask. “You know,” says the guy. “They let you know.”

“The thing is, nowadays,” says his friend (they both work in real estate), “there’s the hidden hos. Like they’re hos, but they pretend to be just some regular girl hitting you up on Tinder.”

“I hate that,” the first guy says. “The hidden hoochies.”

“The ho-ishness,” the second guy says, “is everywhere. I used to take girls out to dinner, but then I’d see they’d eat and bounce—they just want a free meal—so now it’s no more dinner, just drinks.”

“IF ANYONE TELLS YOU THEY’RE NOT SLEEPING WITH THESE GUYS,
THEY’RE LYING . . . NO ONE PAYS FOR ALL THAT WITHOUT . . . SOMETHING IN
RETURN.”

Their complaints are of a type commonly heard online, on social media and rampant threads: “All women are prostitutes”; women just want to use men to get money and things. The Internet holds a mirror to the misogyny doing a bro dance in the background of this issue.

I ask the guys why they think some men pay for sex, especially when dating apps have made casual hookups more common.

“It’s transactional,” the second guy says. “There’s no one blowing up your phone, demanding shit from you. You have control over what happens.”

I tell them how Seeking Arrangement promotes itself as feminist. (“Seeking Arrangement is modern feminism,” says founder Brandon Wade, 46, an M.I.T.-educated former software engineer, on the phone. His InfoStream Group includes a number of other dating services, such as Miss Travel, where a woman can find a traveling “companion” to “sponsor” her vacation.)

“Oh, come on,” the first guy says. “They call them ‘daddies.’ They call women ‘babies.’ ”

“You can’t tell who the hookers are anymore,” says another guy at the bar, a well-known D.J. in his 30s. “They’re not strippers, they’re not on the corner, there’s no more madam. They look like all the other club girls.”

He tells a story of a young woman he let stay in his hotel room one weekend while he was working in Las Vegas. “She met up with this other girl and all of a sudden they had all these men’s watches and wallets and cash. They were *working*.” He laughs, still amazed at the memory.

“It’s like hooking has just become like this weird, distorted extension of dating,” the D.J. says. “ ‘He took me to dinner. He throws me money for rent’—it’s just become so casual. I think it’s dating apps—when sex is so disposable, if it doesn’t mean anything, then why not get paid for it? But don’t call it prostitution—no, now it’s liberation.”

\$50 for the Powder Room

Jenna says that a friend of hers was sexually assaulted by a man she met on a sugaring site. “She didn’t want to report it,” she says, “because she didn’t want her parents to know what she was doing.” Women in sex work reportedly experience a high incidence of rape, as well as a “workplace homicide rate” 51 times higher than that of the next most dangerous job, working in a liquor store, according to the *American Journal of Epidemiology*.

“If prostitution is really just physical labor,” says the Canadian feminist writer and prostitution abolitionist, Meghan Murphy, on the phone, “if it’s no different than serving coffee or fixing a car, then why would we see rape as such a traumatic thing? If there’s nothing different about sex, then what’s so bad about rape?”

Jenna, the video-game designer, did Seeking Arrangement for two years, between the ages of 19 and 21. As with other young women I spoke to, the catalyst for her was when she couldn’t pay her rent: “I had like negative \$55 in the bank. My mom was guilt-tripping me about asking her for money.”

The night Jenna Googled “sugar daddies,” she says, she’d also just come home from a “very bad date” with “a guy who smelled.” “I was like, I can’t take this anymore, these guys are horrible. I just want someone who’s gonna have some manners, or at least some better hygiene.” It was a refrain I’d heard from others, including Miranda in Austin, who complained, “The dude bros are infantile, they’re rude.” “Wish you could send an invoice” to a “fuck boy that used you,” said a young woman on a sugaring page on Facebook.

“So I was like, If I’m gonna spend my time with some guy and have it be horrible,” Jenna says one night at a dark East Village bar, “then if I get some money at the end of the night, at least I get something.”

The guys she met on Seeking Arrangement weren’t horrible, she says, but some of them were “weird.” “Because I know a lot about video games I tend to attract, like, the nerdier [Brooklyn] tech guys. Like the ones who are looking for someone who can talk to them, like, ‘Oh, you’re into Harmony Korine? You like *Trash Humpers*?’

“They’re actually profoundly lonely guys,” she says, “and think this is the only way that they can meet women.”

There was the guy who just wanted to brush her hair, for hours, as she sat watching television in a hotel room. He brought his own brush. And there was the guy who was “fat—not like morbidly obese, but big.” He liked to take her out for long dinners.

She usually charged around \$400 for an encounter. “The guys don’t like talking about money, so they’ll just like leave money in your purse.” What Holly Golightly called “\$50 for the powder room” was discreetly offered, she says, “because then it can feel more like real dating to them.”



A model poses as a “sugar baby.”

Photograph by Mark Schäfer.

But it wasn't real dating, and after a while it began to bother her, as she realized the men, although “generally nice,” didn't actually respect her. “I think the sugar daddies just see the sugar babies as

whores,” she says. “They would never consider a monogamous relationship with someone who would need to do this to survive. It’s like a class thing. They see you as beneath them, desperate.

“Sometimes I think, Did I really have to resort to this?” she asks. “Or was I being validated in some way?” She was a “late bloomer,” she says, and wonders if part of her felt reassured of her attractiveness by having someone pay to have sex with her. “But that’s crazy.”

She stopped sugaring when she got into a serious relationship; now she lives with her boyfriend in an apartment with four others. “One day, one of our roommates was watching porn, and he says to me—he had no idea what I’d been doing—‘Do you think there are sex workers who are really into it?’ I think it’s, like, a male fantasy.”

Wish Lists

Interestingly, the young men I talked to who do sex work voiced few qualms about whether what they were doing was empowering or disempowering. One straight guy I spoke to who’s on Seeking Arrangement (the company claims to have more than 400,000 “mommies”) did say that he was sometimes uncomfortable with “not being in control of the situation.”

One night at Macri Park, a gay bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Derek is having a drink with friends. He’s 20 and an art student from New Jersey. “I do RentMen, I do dominating,” he says. “People want to be hit, beat up—mostly older guys. One’s a Broadway actor. I work for dungeons and I have private clients. I don’t have to have sex with them—just whip them with devices, or beat them with my hands. Or I do muscle worship”—where guys ogle and touch his body.

“If I do it two or three times a week,” he says, “I can make my rent, I can eat, I can make my art.”

Once upon a time, young artists and musicians came to New York looking to find a creative community where they could thrive, but now, as David Byrne noted in a piece in *The Guardian* in 2013, the city has become virtually unaffordable to all but the 1 percent, inhospitable to struggling artists. “One can put up with poverty for a while when one is young, but it will inevitably wear a person down,” wrote Byrne.

“Especially with the intern culture—like New York runs on interns—it’s impossible to get a decent job,” says Katie, the visual artist, at Macri Park. “I was sending out 20 e-mails a day for the first five months I lived here,” looking for jobs, “and I was like, This isn’t working.” Now she does Webcamming. She says she “feels O.K. about it,” and uses it to “fuel my art.” She dresses up as a Disney princess for men to explore “the effects of princess culture on my sexuality.” If a client turns out to be a “creep,” someone whose attitude she can’t abide, she’ll just “nuke them,” or turn the Webcam off.

“IF I DO IT TWO OR THREE TIMES A WEEK, I CAN MAKE MY RENT, I CAN EAT, I CAN MAKE MY ART.”

She and her friend Christopher start talking about the Amazon “Wish Lists” that sex workers set up for their clients. In lieu of money (which is sent through PayPal or Venmo), clients can pay with gifts. “I know guys who’ve gotten iPhones, laptops, a flat-screen TV,” says Christopher.

“A lot of people have the really practical ones—like ‘I want silverware, a blender,’ ” says Katie.

“I’ve seen people put furniture, even like shaving cream and razors,” Christopher says. He pulls up one of his friends’ Wish Lists on his phone. The young man wants a stuffed Pokémon doll.

Travis, 27, a porn actor from Virginia, has been a professional escort for years. He says he bemoans the way social media has made it so easy for anyone to do. “There’s a lot of people with day jobs now who are making good money and doing escorting on the side—you’d be surprised.” Why do they do it?, I ask. “ ‘Cause they’re greedy,” Travis says. “The market is flooded. I’m so over it.”

Benefactors

At the Seeking Arrangement Party 2016, a masquerade ball, babies and daddies crowd into Bardot, a lounge in the Avalon Hollywood nightclub, in Los Angeles. Exotic dancers writhe around on risers. General-admission tickets are \$100, the drinks aren’t free, and many babies aren’t drinking. Some seem antsy. Many have spent the day at the Seeking Arrangement Sugar Baby Summit, hearing how they should expect to be “spoiled” and have men pay for things. So they’ve gotten dressed up, put on *Eyes Wide Shut*-like masks, and come here to meet their potential “benefactors.”

“I’m just looking for someone to pay for my boob job,” says a small blonde woman who flew into town from Utah; she’s a Mormon. “I thought I must be doing something wrong because all the guys I’ve met on the site so far have been sending me dick pics and hairy-butt pics.”

The place is filled with guys who resemble John McCain. “My daughter’s 36,” I hear one saying to two rapt young women. He pulls out pictures from his wallet to show them—actual photo printouts.

There’s another type of guy here, the jumbo-size Danny DeVitos. “I thought they said these girls were gonna be 10s,” I hear one of them telling some other guys. “But this is like a buncha 5s and 6s. Maybe they’ll take an I.O.U.” The other men chuckle.

“Why do men pay for sex?,” I ask a young man, the handsomest in the room. “Sometimes in Vegas if you’re drunk,” he says with a shrug. I ask him why he’s here. “I work all the time, and I don’t have time for a girlfriend.” He says he works in tech. “But I like to flirt and have company, not just sex,” he goes on. So he does Seeking Arrangement. I ask him how much he pays the women. “Depends how much I like them.”

There are a lot of young black women here. “I’m kind of surprised,” says a young black woman named Nicole, 25, “but not really. They’re probably here for the same reason I am, which is there’s a lot of racism on the site, like guys will just openly say, ‘No black women,’ so maybe they thought they’d have a better chance in person.”

Nicole is lovely and has a job as an executive assistant. I ask her why she's seeking an arrangement. "I want to start a handbag line," she says. "I have all these great designs and ideas. And I just don't see how I could ever get together the capital. So an investor would really help."

She seems to truly believe the Seeking Arrangement marketing, that she might find that supportive, encouraging person here. We look around the room. There's a John McCain with his hand on the behind of a young black girl. Her smooth skin looks so young and fresh in the lamplight, next to his wizened face.

**The names of the young people in this story have been changed to protect their identities.*

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