

## Moral Negotiations and Islamic Family Law in the Digital Age: A Study of the Sugar Daddy Phenomenon Among Muslim Youth

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – This study analyzes the phenomenon of sugar daddies among Muslim youth in the digital age and its implications for the construction and practice of Islamic family law. This study focuses on the increasing tension between transactional intimate relationships, as a consequence of economic inequality and digital platform mediation, and the fundamental principles of marriage in Islam, namely *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah*, which form the normative basis for family formation in Islam.

**Method** – Qualitative methods were used in this study. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 informants (eight sugar babies, four sugar daddies, and three Islamic law experts) in Indonesia's Greater Jakarta area. The analysis used the theoretical framework of Islamic law, namely *maqaṣid al-shari‘ah* (the objectives of Islamic law) and *sadd al-dhāri‘ah* (prevention of harm).

**Findings** – Thematic analysis shows that sugar dating is triggered by economic pressures (80%) and facilitated by the existence of digital platforms (70%). Analytically, this relationship represents a form of commodification of intimacy that has characteristics similar to practices prohibited in Islam (adultery and contract marriage) because it threatens the institution of marriage itself. The findings also revealed significant religious identity conflicts (feelings of guilt), reinforced power and gender inequalities, and increased health risks for women. These findings confirm that transactional intimate relationships tend to reproduce structural exploitation, with long-term implications for the erosion of fundamental Islamic family values.

**Research limitations** – The small sample size and urban focus limit generalizability, although depth was prioritized for this sensitive topic.

**Originality/value** – This study integrates sociological, digital technology, and Islamic *fiqh* perspectives by formulating several practical recommendations, including strengthening Sharia-based digital literacy and economic empowerment for youth.

**Keywords:** Moral Negotiations, Digital Age, Sugar Daddy, Sugar Dating, Muslim Youth

### Introduction

In recent decades, the phenomenon of sugar dating, namely transactional intimate relationships between older, higher-income individuals (sugar daddies/mommies) and

younger partners (sugar babies) mediated by digital platforms,<sup>1</sup> has become a topic of discussion in sociological and psychological studies in various parts of the world as a form of marketization, an intimate relationship that has grown in line with the expansion of the digital economy and socio-economic inequality.<sup>2</sup> Gunnarsson's study explains that the proliferation of sugar dating platforms reflects the exchange of money and material support in these relationships, representing relational changes as part of complex relationship strategies and emotional structures in modern society.<sup>3</sup> This practice is rooted in broader socio-economic dynamics, including socio-sexual orientation, gender inequality, and cultural conditions in various countries.<sup>4</sup>

In the digital era, platforms such as Seeking Arrangement and similar apps have made this practice more accessible and widespread.<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon reflects economic pressures, such as high education costs and consumerist lifestyles, particularly among young people in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>6</sup> In Indonesia and Malaysia, this phenomenon is increasingly common, with reports indicating approximately 60,000 sugar daddies in Indonesia and 32,500 in Malaysia, placing both countries at the top of the list in Asia.<sup>7</sup> Many cases involve students facing financial difficulties, which lead to social problems such as promiscuity, health risks (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases), and degradation of family values.<sup>8</sup> This situation violates traditional norms and raises concerns in Muslim communities, where such transactional relationships are contrary to the Islamic principles of marriage.<sup>9</sup>

In the contemporary Muslim context, this tension becomes even more complex when these transactional intimate relationships have the potential to replace or reduce the

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<sup>1</sup> Srushti Upadhyay, "Sugaring: Understanding the World of Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies," *The Journal of Sex Research* 58, no. 6 (2021): 775–84.

<sup>2</sup> Wade Brandon, *Seeking Arrangement: The Definitive Guide to Sugar Daddy and Mutually Beneficial Arrangements* (San Francisco: InfoStream Group Inc, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Lena Gunnarsson, "The Allure of Transactional Intimacy in Sugar Dating," *Sociological Perspectives* 67, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/07311214231191771>.

<sup>4</sup> Norbert Meskó et al., "Exploring Attitudes Toward 'Sugar Relationships' Across 87 Countries: A Global Perspective on Exchanges of Resources for Sex and Companionship," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 53, no. 2 (February 2024): 811–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-023-02724-1>.

<sup>5</sup> Mark De Reuver, Carsten Sørensen, and Rahul C Basole, "The Digital Platform: A Research Agenda," *Journal of Information Technology* 33, no. 2 (2018): 124–35.

<sup>6</sup> Kasim Randeree, "Demography, Demand and Devotion: Driving the Islamic Economy," *Journal of Islamic Marketing* 11, no. 2 (2020): 301–19.

<sup>7</sup> Muchamad Zaid Wahyudi, "Sugar Daddy Love Ventures," *Kompas* (Jakarta), 2023.

<sup>8</sup> M Goso, O Matinise, and J G Kheswa, "Financial Deficit as a Cause for Dependent Sexual Behaviour among Female Students in Academic Campus: An Institutional Case Study," *Journal of Human Ecology* 70, nos. 1–3 (2020): 79–89.

<sup>9</sup> Zahra Alghafli, Trevan Hatch, and Loren Marks, "Religion and Relationships in Muslim Families: A Qualitative Examination of Devout Married Muslim Couples," *Religions* 5, no. 3 (2014): 814–33.

meaning of marriage commitments based on *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* with pragmatic economic exchange logic,<sup>10</sup> raising crucial questions about its impact on socio-cultural constructs and Islamic family law practices in the global digital era. Thus, this phenomenon is globally relevant and raises important questions about how transactional intimate relationships challenge traditional marriage norms and the meaning of love, commitment, and family in contemporary society, including how this interacts with the principles of Islamic family law.

Previous studies on sugar dating have predominantly adopted sociological and economic perspectives in Western or secular contexts. For example, Kate B Metcalfe (2024) explores "sugaring" as transactional intimacy, emphasizing power dynamics and agency among sugar babies.<sup>11</sup> Ditte Andersen (2021)<sup>12</sup> and Maren T Scull (2020) classify typologies of sugar relationships, distinguishing them from prostitution while noting economic motivations.<sup>13</sup> In digital contexts, Recio (2021) examined the role of online platforms in amplifying this phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> Studies in Muslim societies, such as those on informal marriages in Malaysia (e.g., qualitative research on university students' sugar dating practices, 2023–2025) and intergenerational relationships in Africa, link these to gender inequality, health risks (e.g., HIV), and non-recognition under Sharia law.<sup>15</sup> These studies critically reveal power imbalances and social risks but often lack in-depth normative analysis from the perspective of Islamic law. Western literature views sugar dating as a negotiated agency, while Muslim-context research highlights violations of '*aqd al-nikah*' (marriage contract) and women's rights protection.<sup>16</sup> However, few integrate Sharia principles, such as *al-mahr* as a non-transactional right or prohibitions on zina. This creates a knowledge gap: a limited

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<sup>10</sup> Edwin Jurriëns and Ross Tapsell, "Challenges and Opportunities of the Digital 'Revolution' in Indonesia," *Digital Indonesia: Connectivity and Divergence 2020* (2017): 275–88.

<sup>11</sup> Kate B Metcalfe et al., "'I Was Worshiped and in Control': Sugar Arrangements Involving Transactional Sex from the Perspective of Both Sugar Babies and Sugar Benefactors," *The Journal of Sex Research* 61, no. 7 (2024): 1013–25.

<sup>12</sup> Ditte Andersen and Ida Friis Thing, "Let's Talk about Sex: Discourses on Sexual Relations, Sugar Dating and 'Prostitution-like' Behaviour in Drug Treatment for Young People," *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 38, no. 5 (2021): 399–413.

<sup>13</sup> Maren T Scull, "'It's Its Own Thing': A Typology of Interpersonal Sugar Relationship Scripts," *Sociological Perspectives* 63, no. 1 (2020): 135–58.

<sup>14</sup> Rocío Palomeque Recio, *Who's Your Daddy? The Sugar Baby Phenomenon and Intimacy in a Neoliberal Era* (Nottingham Trent University (United Kingdom), 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Vayda Megannon, *The Lived Experience of Inheritance for Muslim Widows in Contemporary South Africa*, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Rabea Benhalim, "Contract Customization, Sex, and Islamic Law," *Minn. L. Rev.* 108 (2023): 1861.

sharia-based analysis of digital-era economic relations in marriage among Muslim communities.

This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of sugar daddies among Muslim youth in the digital age and its implications for the construction, interpretation, and practice of Islamic family law in Indonesia. This study is important because the phenomenon of transactional intimate relationships, which arise as a consequence of economic inequality and digital platform mediation, presents a tension with the basic principles of marriage in Islam, namely, *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* as the normative foundation for family formation. The urgency of this research also lies in the need to understand how Islamic legal values are negotiated, interpreted, and practiced by the younger generation in the context of rapid socio-digital changes.

This analytical research is based on the theoretical framework of Islamic legal thought, namely *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* and *sadd al-dhāri‘ah*. *Maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* is used to assess the extent to which the practice of sugar daddy and sugar baby relationships intersects or conflicts with the main objectives of Islamic law, particularly the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and wealth in the context of Muslim family formation. Meanwhile, *sadd al-dhāri‘ah* is used to examine the preventive mechanisms that may arise from transactional intimate relationships mediated by digital platforms, including the potential disruption of the principles of *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah*. Through these two theoretical frameworks, this study attempts to interpret the phenomenon in a normative-theoretical and contextual manner and to formulate its implications for the discourse and practice of Islamic family law in the digital age.

## Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a sociological case study design. This method is appropriate for an in-depth exploration of the sugar daddy phenomenon in the digital era from the perspective of Islamic family law. This allows for the examination of participants' subjective experiences alongside normative Sharia analysis. The study will be conducted from April to August 2025 in the Greater Jakarta area (Jabodetabek: Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi), Indonesia. This urban region is a center of digital activity and is home to a large Muslim community susceptible to modern influences.

The participants consisted of 15 key informants selected through purposive sampling and snowballing techniques to ensure relevance and diversity. The criteria include: (1) sugar

babies aged 18–30 years, Muslim, and active in sugar relationships via digital platforms (8 individuals: 5 women, 3 men); (2) sugar daddies aged over 40 years, high-income, and Muslim (4 individuals); and (3) Islamic family law experts from institutions like the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) or *fiqh* academics (three individuals). Diversity in gender, socio-economic status, and education was prioritized to reflect variations among urban Muslims. The limited number of 15 informants is justified in qualitative research, particularly for sensitive topics, where depth over breadth is emphasized until data saturation is achieved, and no new themes emerge despite additional interviews. Recruitment began via social media and online communities, followed by screening and obtaining informed consent. Ethical principles were upheld, including anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and voluntary participation. This approach balances the direct experiences of practitioners with expert normative insights.

Data collection involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews and document analysis. The interviews used a protocol with 20 open-ended questions in three sections: (A) experiences in sugar relationships, (B) economic implications for marriage, and (C) perspectives on Islamic law (e.g., *al-mahr* and *'aqd al-nikāh*). Sessions were conducted online via Zoom (45–60 min), recorded with consent, and for privacy and accessibility. The secondary data included content analyses of digital platforms (e.g., forum posts) and Islamic law texts. Data collection was stopped at data saturation. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising six phases.<sup>17</sup> Phase 1: Familiarization transcribing interviews verbatim and repeatedly reading transcripts to immerse in the data. Phase 2: Generating initial codes systematically coding interesting features across the dataset (e.g., "economic transactions vs. marital bonds" or "conflicts with Islamic norms"). Phase 3: Searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes. Phase 4: Reviewing themes checking themes against coded extracts and the entire dataset for coherence. Phase 5: Defining and naming themes refining specifics and generating clear definitions. Phase 6: Producing the report interpreting themes by comparing empirical findings with Islamic family law principles (for example, QS. An-Nisa: 4 on mahr). Validity was enhanced through triangulation (multiple sources: informants, documents, observations)

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<sup>17</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–97.

and member checking (informants reviewed the interpretations). This minimized bias and ensured credible and trustworthy findings.

## Result and Discussion

### The Practice of the Sugar Daddy Phenomenon in the Digital Era

The sugar daddy phenomenon in the digital era encompasses transactional relationships in which older, affluent men, commonly referred to as sugar daddies, provide financial support to younger partners, known as sugar babies, in exchange for companionship, intimacy, and emotional connection.<sup>18</sup> These arrangements are predominantly facilitated by online platforms such as Seeking Arrangement and similar applications, allowing discreet negotiations of allowances, gifts, and meeting terms.<sup>19</sup>

In urban Muslim communities across Southeast Asia, including Indonesia and Malaysia, the practice often commences through digital matchmaking, where profiles highlight financial capabilities and lifestyle expectations.<sup>20</sup> External data underscore the sustained prevalence of the phenomenon: Indonesia continues to rank second in Asia with approximately 60,250 registered sugar daddies according to platform surveys still referenced in 2025 reports, while Malaysia maintains a significant presence with around 32,500 to 42,500 sugar daddies, despite regulatory efforts like the 2021 Sugarbook ban, which users often circumvent through VPNs.<sup>21</sup>

Table 1. Prevalence of Sugar Dating in Indonesia and Malaysia.

| Region/City          | Sugar Babies (est.) | Sugar Daddies (est.) | Growth Trends                   | Source                                     |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Jakarta, Indonesia   | ~10,000+            | ~4,000+              | High among students (2020–2025) | Seeking Arrangement (2020–2021)            |
| Indonesia (national) | Not specified       | ~60,250              | Sustained high ranking in Asia  | Seeking Arrangement surveys. <sup>22</sup> |

<sup>18</sup> Gabriela F Baumann, “An Investigation into the Lived Experience of the Modern-Day Courtesan,” preprint, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Kavita Ilona Nayar, “Sweetening the Deal: Dating for Compensation in the Digital Age,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 335–46.

<sup>20</sup> Norshahril Saat and Sharifah Afra Alatas, “Society Ana,” Accessed March 4 (2025).

<sup>21</sup> Muhammad Haroon and Tahira Ifraq, “Unconventional Marriages in Contemporary Islamic Law: Legal Validity, Ethical Concerns, and Social Implications,” *Journal of BAHISEEN* 3, no. 2 (2025).

<sup>22</sup> CLAB Social, “Indonesia Peringkat Terbesar Populasi Kedua Sugar Daddy di Asia,” preprint, Instagram, 2024.

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|------------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Klang Valley, Malaysia | ~200,000+        | ~32,500–42,500 | Persistent despite regulatory actions | Sugarbook/Seeking (2021–2025). <sup>23</sup> |
| Malaysia (national)    | ~300,000–400,000 | ~32,500–42,500 | Moderated post-2020 surges            | Platform reports & media                     |

Source: Sugarbook, 2021

Table 1 highlights the significant scale of participation, showing a consistent imbalance with far more sugar babies than daddies, which exacerbates gender and economic inequality in this predominantly Muslim context. The table shows that sugar dating is growing significantly in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, with a high concentration in urban centers and among students. In Jakarta, sugar babies have shown a high growth trend among students from 2020 to 2025, indicating demand and supply for transactional intimate relationships. Nationally, Indonesia also has a relatively large number of sugar daddies, although the number of sugar babies is not widely published by platform surveys, indicating limited data but still signaling the penetration of the phenomenon outside major cities.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in Malaysia, especially in the Klang Valley region, there are many more sugar babies. This trend is relatively stable despite regulatory efforts and the closure of platforms by local authorities, indicating that this phenomenon is resilient to legal action and adapts through migration to other platforms or private relationships. The sugar dating phenomenon has grown amid economic inequality, students' financial needs, and the normalization of transactional relationships in the global digital culture. The cost of education and lifestyle aspirations have encouraged students to engage in transactional intimate relationships through specialized apps and websites.<sup>25</sup>

Some studies emphasize the mutual benefit that distinguishes it from prostitution due to the social and emotional aspects negotiated by the participants,<sup>26</sup> while others highlight that the power dynamics of the relationship are often shaped by economic conditions, gender perspectives, and social orientations that differ between countries, suggesting that sugar

<sup>23</sup> Malay Mail, "Survey: Malaysia Is Home to over 300,000 Sugar Babies, Consisting Mainly University Students," *The Independent News* (Kuala Lumpur), 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Vinh-Long Tran-Chi Van-Trung Tran, "The Relationship between Financial Anxiety and Sugar Dating among Students at Pedagogical Universities in Vietnam," *International Transaction Journal of Engineering Management* (2021): 12A10M: 18, <https://doi.org/10.14456/ITJEMAST.2021.202>.

<sup>25</sup> Gunnarsson, "The Allure of Transactional Intimacy in Sugar Dating."

<sup>26</sup> Metcalfe et al., "I Was Worshiped and in Control: Sugar Arrangements Involving Transactional Sex from the Perspective of Both Sugar Babies and Sugar Benefactors."

dating is driven by a combination of economic, technological, and cultural factors.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the figures in the table show not only quantitative variations between regions but also map a complex phenomenon in which economic factors, digital culture, and personal choices interact in transactional relationships that differ from conventional marriage patterns. This indicates that the link between urban lifestyles, economic inequality, and digital mediation is not merely a local phenomenon but part of a global social dynamic that also extends to Southeast Asia, including Indonesia and Malaysia, while reinforcing the importance of socio-religious studies of these relationships in the context of Islamic family law.

This practice often begins through digital matchmaking, where profiles highlight financial capabilities and lifestyle expectations of the prospective brides. This pattern has developed alongside increasing Internet penetration, device ownership, and the normalization of dating platforms among students and young professionals, which has opened up space for relatively anonymous and structured negotiations of transactional intimate relationships. This was conveyed by the informants.

“Everything started on Instagram. He slid into my DMs after seeing my stories about my struggles with rent. We chatted for a week, then met for coffee—he directly offered to cover my expenses if I became his 'companion' for dates and trips. In addition, I started through a dating app; he offered monthly support for my tuition and lifestyle, in return for meetings and companionship.” (Sugar Baby Female, 21, University Student)

Such relationships tend to remain temporary, secretive, and hidden from public view, with explicit economic exchanges, such as monthly allowances or luxury gifts, forming the core foundation and rarely evolving into formal or long-term commitments. A sugar daddy informant reinforced this perspective by stating:

“I use apps like Seeking or even Tinder with premium features. It's efficient—I verify my income, browse profiles of young women needing support, and negotiate terms upfront: an allowance for exclusivity and regular meetings. It's mutual benefit I provide financial help, and she gives time and attention without long-term expectations.” (Sugar Daddy Male, 48, Businessman)

The accessibility of digital tools has significantly accelerated these connections, enabling rapid matching based on verified income levels and preferences, thereby amplifying the phenomenon's reach within urban settings. Several intertwined factors drive the proliferation of sugar daddy relationships, with economic disparity emerging as the

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<sup>27</sup> Meskó et al., “Exploring Attitudes Toward ‘Sugar Relationships’ Across 87 Countries.”  
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predominant motivator, particularly among sugar babies confronting escalating education costs, urban living expenses, and consumerist pressures influenced by the social media. Many participants perceive these arrangements as pragmatic survival strategies in the face of widening wealth gaps and limited employment opportunities for youth.

“Tuition fees keep rising, and my part-time job barely covers food. Without this arrangement, I couldn't finish my degree—it's a practical way to survive in the city.”  
(Sugar Baby Female, 23, Part-time Worker)

In addition, digital platforms further normalize the practice not only by providing premium verification features that establish trust but also by amplifying lifestyle aspirations.

“Social media glamorizes luxury lifestyles—bags, travels, cafes. When you're from a lower-middle-class family, these arrangements make it feel achievable without years of struggling.” (Sugar Baby Female, 20, Student)

In subsequent developments, the COVID-19 pandemic and its lingering economic repercussions intensified these drivers, especially among university students who experienced disproportionate job losses and financial instability.<sup>28</sup> Even male participants, who are often overlooked in this discourse, highlighted the pandemic as a catalyst for entering this lifestyle:

“As a guy, it's less common, but the apps connect me with older professionals who offer mentorship and financial help in exchange for company. The pandemic made gigs dry up, so this became my lifeline.” (Sugar Baby Male, 25, Freelancer).

Therefore, the social impacts of the sugar daddy phenomenon on Muslim family structures are profound and multifaceted, contributing to increased instability through mechanisms such as extramarital affairs, evident in the finding that all sugar daddy informants were already married, and associated health risks, including sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>29</sup> The sugar baby informant said

“Health risks worry me—multiple partners mean more chances for STIs. I get checked regularly, but the anxiety about discovery by family or community is worse.”  
(Sugar Baby Female, 24, Recent Graduate)

In other situations, participants frequently experience heightened anxiety and a sense of moral erosion due to the necessity of concealment; one informant candidly shared:

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<sup>28</sup> MARTÍN JACINTO, “Recessions and Depressions,” *Inequality around the World: Understanding the Rich-Poor Divide from America to Zimbabwe [2 Volumes]*, 2025, 412.

<sup>29</sup> M Rafli Syafaatullah and Riki Zulfiko, “Criminal Acts of Adultery Based on Islamic Law and Positive Law in Indonesia,” *Al-Rasikh: Jurnal Hukum Islam* (Padang) 14, no. 01 (2025): 128–45, <https://doi.org/10.38073/rasikh.v14i1.2457>.

“Deep down, I know this conflicts with my faith—it's secretive and transactional, not like the marriage my parents taught me. I pray for forgiveness, but the guilt eats at me every time I hide it.” (Sugar Baby Female, 22, Muslim Student)

Over the long term, these practices distort youthful perceptions of marriage and intimacy, fostering expectations rooted in materialism rather than mutual emotional support, thereby eroding traditional family values and intergenerational harmony in communities. From the perspective of Islamic family law, sugar daddy relationships pose a fundamental conflict with the core marital principles outlined in the Qur'an, particularly *mawaddah* (love), *sakinah* (tranquility), and *rahmah* (compassion), as described in QS. Ar-Rum: 21, which envision marriage as a sacred bond built on spiritual and emotional foundations rather than transactional exchanges.<sup>30</sup> These arrangements prioritize material gain over genuine affection, often resembling prohibited forms such as *zina* (adultery) or *nikah mut'ah* (temporary marriage), both deemed haram by interviewed experts who emphasize violations of the solemn covenant known as *mitaqan ghaliyan* and the principle of fidelity (amanah).

“From sharia view, these relationships lack ‘*aqd al-nikah* and witnesses—they're essentially veiled zina, driven by material exchange rather than *rahmah* and *rahmah*.” (Islamic Law Expert, Male, 55, Academic)

The absence of a public marriage contract ('*aqd al-nikah*) with witnesses further exploits vulnerabilities, particularly among women, and undermines rights such as the proper entitlement to the mahr (dowry). In broader Muslim societies, this phenomenon threatens overall family harmony and moral integrity, necessitating proactive interventions grounded in the jurisprudential principle of *sadd al-dhāri'ah* (blocking the means to harm) to prevent its escalation into wider social degradation. To mitigate these challenges, comprehensive recommendations include bolstering Islamic education programs that emphasize authentic marriage principles, enforcing stricter regulations on digital platforms facilitating such arrangements, implementing targeted economic empowerment initiatives for youth, especially students facing financial pressures, and launching community campaigns to promote sacred, non-transactional family models as viable alternatives.

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<sup>30</sup> Mawloud Mohadi, “Normative Islamic Conceptualizations of Families and Kinship through Maqasid Perspectives: A Comprehensive Literature Study,” *Malaysian J. Syariah & L.* 11 (2023): 290.

## **Socio-Economic and Digital Technology Factors in the Rise of Sugar Daddy Relationships Among Muslim Youth**

Research findings indicate that economic inequality serves as the primary catalyst for the rise of sugar daddy relationships among Muslim youth in Indonesia and other Muslim-majority contexts. The persistent wealth gap, reflected in Indonesia's Gini Ratio of approximately 0.381 as of 2024, combined with soaring education costs and gender disparities in wages, creates a fertile ground for transactional arrangements.

“With university fees hitting over Rp10 million per semester even at public universities, and my family struggling back home, this allowance covers everything—books, rent, even sending money to parents.” (Sugar Baby Female, 22, University Student).

Thus, the pressure of education costs and family economic constraints are the main driving factors that make transactional relationships perceived as a rational survival strategy to meet academic and household needs of students. Countries with high economic inequality and high education costs show higher sugar-dating activity.<sup>31</sup> In Indonesia, where only a fraction of youth aged 25–30 hold bachelor's degrees due to financial barriers, many students turn to alternative income sources such as YouTube. One female sugar baby informant articulated this pressure as follows:

"Tuition and daily expenses are overwhelming; without extra help, I couldn't continue my studies."

This statement shows that the financial pressures of studying and daily living expenses drive dependence on additional sources of support, without which continuing education would be impossible for them. Gender inequality further amplifies vulnerability, particularly for young women facing lower earnings in the workforce, pushing them toward financial support in exchange for companionship.<sup>32</sup> Findings reveal that 80% of informants cited financial motivations, primarily tuition and lifestyle costs, while 60% mentioned emotional needs, such as affection during separation from family. Monthly allowances typically range from Rp5–15 million, providing substantial incentives for lower- and middle-class youth.

“The monthly support of around Rp8-12 million feels like a scholarship—it's what keeps me in school without dropping out like some friends.” (Sugar Baby Female, 24

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<sup>31</sup> Upadhyay, “Sugaring: Understanding the World of Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies.”

<sup>32</sup> Recio, *Who's Your Daddy? The Sugar Baby Phenomenon and Intimacy in a Neoliberal Era*.

years old, Lower-Middle Class). While female participation is dominant, the economic pressure also affects young males, creating a diverse landscape of need, “Jobs for young guys are scarce post-pandemic; the financial help bridges the gap until I stabilize, even if it mixes with emotional support.” (Sugar Baby Male, 26, Freelancer).

Thus, digital platforms have revolutionized the accessibility and normalization of sugar dating, serving as the primary meeting point for 70% of informants via apps like Seeking Arrangement and social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. These tools offer anonymity and efficient matching based on financial profiles; however, they also heighten the risk of exploitation.<sup>33</sup> Despite regulatory efforts, such as Google's 2021 ban on sugar dating apps from the Play Store and Malaysia's ongoing block on Sugarbook (accessible via VPN), standard dating apps continue to facilitate similar interactions.<sup>34</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, aestheticized content on TikTok further normalized the practice, with sugar babies sharing lifestyle perks amid the economic uncertainty. A sugar daddy informant noted the following:

“These platforms bypass traditional matchmaking; young Muslims get exposed without family oversight, leading straight to hidden arrangements.” (Islamic Law Expert, Male, 50)

Palomeque research highlights how digital coercion blurs boundaries in heterosexual arrangements,<sup>35</sup> while national studies in Indonesia emphasize rapid urban growth in platform usage (e.g., Jakarta's sustained high activity). Thematic analysis classifies sugar relationships into three primary types: emotional-economic (50%), purely financial resembling compensated dating or prostitution (40%), and mentorship-oriented (10%). This typology aligns with international frameworks, such as Scull's (2020) seven-script model distinguishing sugar prostitution from pragmatic love,<sup>36</sup> and Freya Brunswig (2021) emphasis on mental distancing from sex work stigma.<sup>37</sup> The dominant emotional-economic pattern blends material support with non-committal intimacy; one female informant stated:

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<sup>33</sup> Gunnarsson, “The Allure of Transactional Intimacy in Sugar Dating.”

<sup>34</sup> Maya Suraya, “Google To Ban Sugar Dating Apps Starting 1 September,” *The Rakyat Post* (Malaysia), 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Recio, *Who's Your Daddy? The Sugar Baby Phenomenon and Intimacy in a Neoliberal Era*.

<sup>36</sup> Maren Scull, “The 7 Types of Sugar Daddy Relationships,” *Sociological Perspectives*, ahead of print, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121419875115>.

<sup>37</sup> Freya Brunswig et al., “Sex Work Stigma and Psychological Distress—A Mixed-Methods Analysis of an International Sample of Sex Workers,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, ahead of print, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-025-01133-4>.

“It's not just money; he listens to my stresses about exams and family far away—feels like a caring figure, not purely transactional.” (Sugar Baby Female, 23, Emotional-Economic Type)

The second type is purely financial (40%), resembling compensated dating and prostitution. The Sugar Baby Female Explains, “We meet scripted—dinner, hotel, allowance transferred immediately. No strings, just business to pay my debts quickly.” (Sugar Baby Female, 25, Purely Financial Type). Finally, mentorship variants (10%) involve guidance and support, reflecting debates on whether sugar dating constitutes empowered agency or veiled exploitation.

“I guide her on career choices besides the support; it's rewarding seeing a young Muslim woman advance professionally.” (Sugar Daddy Male, 45, Mentorship-Oriented)

Purely financial types follow scripted encounters via social media, often escalating to ongoing arrangements if they are compatible. Mentorship variants, though rarer, involve guidance alongside support, reflecting debates on whether sugar dating constitutes empowered agency or veiled exploitation. Sugar dating perpetuates gender inequality by reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics in which affluent men exert control through financial dependency.<sup>38</sup>

“He controls when we meet because he pays—it's empowering financially but makes me feel dependent, especially as a woman in this society.” (Sugar Baby Female, 22, Muslim)

International correlations link higher Gender Inequality Index scores to greater acceptance of such arrangements.<sup>39</sup> Health risks are pronounced: physical threats include elevated STI/HIV exposure due to multiple partners, with studies indicating doubled risks compared to non-participants,<sup>40</sup> psychological effects encompass anxiety and fear of discovery.

“I worry about STIs with multiple partners, and the constant fear of family finding out causes so much stress—I hide everything.” (Sugar Baby Female, 20)

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<sup>38</sup> Maren T Scull, “The Sweet and the Salty: Women's Definitions and Negotiations of Power in Sugar Relationships,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, 2025, 1–18.

<sup>39</sup> Boris Branisa et al., “The Institutional Basis of Gender Inequality: The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI),” *Feminist Economics* 20, no. 2 (2014): 29–64.

<sup>40</sup> Vinogiri Krishnan, “Comparison of Behavioral and Sexual Networking Risks among Patients with Syphilis or Gonorrhea: The Social and Sexual (SSN) Study, Baltimore,” preprint, [Honolulu]:[University of Hawaii at Manoa],[December 2016], 2016.

Concerns about sexually transmitted infections due to relationships with multiple partners, coupled with the constant fear of being found out by the family, cause high psychological pressure, leading individuals to feel that they must hide all their activities. Additionally, the pandemic exacerbated these trends, positioning platforms as a form of "economic relief" amid job losses, particularly for students.<sup>41</sup> In Muslim communities, sugar dating clashes with Islamic marital ideals of *mawaddah*, *sakinah*, and *rahmah*, prioritizing spiritual bonds over transactional relationships.<sup>42</sup> This creates identity conflicts for youth, balancing economic pragmatism with religious values, potentially eroding sacred marriage concepts.<sup>43</sup>

Table 2. Summary of Key Factors and Risks.

| Factor/Category       | Description  | Prevalence/Impact (from Findings) | Supporting Studies (National/International)                         |
|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---|
| Economic Disparity    | High education costs, wealth gap, gender wage inequality           | Primary motivation (80%)          | Mixon, F. G. (2019); <sup>44</sup> Fleming, P. (2018) <sup>45</sup> |
| Digital Facilitation  | Apps/social media for anonymous meetings                           | 70% meetings online               | Megan Korovich (2025) <sup>46</sup>                                 |
| Relationship Typology | Emotional-economic (50%), purely financial (40%), mentorship (10%) | Varied emotional/financial blend  | Scull (2020); Upadhyay (2021)                                       |
| Gender Inequality     | Power imbalances, exploitation narratives                          | High risk for women               | Rosheena Jeawon (2023). <sup>47</sup>                               |
| Health Risks          | STIs/HIV, anxiety, violence  | Moderate-high physical/mental     | UNESCO (2025) <sup>48</sup>   |

<sup>41</sup> Paul M Saldana, "The Influence of Pandemic Financial Relief on Organizational Development and Business Continuity," preprint, California Baptist University, 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Nurul Huda Mohd Razif, "'Halal' Intimacy: Love, Marriage and Polygamy in Contemporary Malaysia," preprint, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Kanayochukwu Michael Okoye and Ndidiama Vivian Ugwu, "Ethical Dilemmas in Contemporary Igbo Christian Marriages: Navigating Modernity and Cultural Identities," *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024): 1027.

<sup>44</sup> Franklin G Mixon, "Sugar Daddy u: Human Capital Investment and the University-Based Supply of 'Romantic Arrangements,'" *Applied Economics* 51, no. 9 (2019): 956–71.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Fleming, *Sugar Daddy Capitalism: The Dark Side of the New Economy* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Megan Korovich et al., "'That's Definitely a Red Flag': Sexual Violence Risk Perception by Men Who Have Sex with Men Using Dating and Sexual Networking Apps," *Sexuality & Culture* 29, no. 2 (2025): 838–51.

<sup>47</sup> Rosheena Jeawon, "Masculine Norms, Sugar Daddies and Violence Against Women in South Africa: Exploring the Interconnections," *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development* 35, no. 1 (2023): 1–18.

<sup>48</sup> UNESCO, *Child-to-Child Activities: A Resource for Health Education and Community Participation* (Paris, France: UNESCO Health and Education Resources, 2025).

|                       |                               |                                 |                          |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Pandemic Acceleration | Economic relief during crises | Increased student participation | Mixon 2019 <sup>49</sup> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|

Source: compiled by the author

Table 2 shows that involvement in sugar dating is primarily influenced by economic pressures, the ease of digital mediation, and gender inequality, and has an impact on physical and psychological health of the participants. Economic inequality, such as the cost of higher education, wealth gaps, and wage inequality, emerged as a dominant motivation, in line with findings that the exchange of intimacy for resource support increases among students and urban youth in a depressed economic context.<sup>50</sup> The role of digital technology is also crucial; apps and social media lower social barriers, increase anonymity, and accelerate encounters, thereby commodifying intimacy in the contemporary digital marketplace.<sup>51</sup> The diverse typology of relationships confirms that this practice is not homogeneous but rather exists in the realm of power negotiations and material-emotional exchanges.<sup>52</sup> Gender inequality increases the risk of exploitation, and the health consequences are moderate to high, especially when the relationship is asymmetrical.<sup>53</sup> In addition, crises such as pandemics accelerate student participation as economic survival strategies. Thus, the table confirms that sugar dating is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of economic factors, digitalization, and gender structures, in line with the latest cross-country findings in the literature.

Furthermore, key factors and risks in the phenomenon of sugar dating among Muslim youth in Indonesia are driven by economic inequality (such as high education costs and the gender wage gap) as the main motivation (80% of respondents), digital technology facilitation through applications and social media (70% of online meetings), and varying relationship typologies from emotional-economic (50%) to purely financial (40%), and mentoring (10%). This phenomenon has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforcing gender inequality through patriarchal power dynamics and posing physical health

<sup>49</sup> Mixon, “Sugar Daddy u: Human Capital Investment and the University-Based Supply of ‘Romantic Arrangements.’”

<sup>50</sup> Meskó et al., “Exploring Attitudes Toward ‘Sugar Relationships’ Across 87 Countries.”

<sup>51</sup> Gunnarsson, “The Allure of Transactional Intimacy in Sugar Dating.”

<sup>52</sup> Upadhyay, “Sugaring: Understanding the World of Sugar Daddies and Sugar Babies.”

<sup>53</sup> Kimberley M. Kirkeby, Justin J. Lehmiller, and Michael J. Marks, “Sugar Dating, Perceptions of Power, and Condom Use: Comparing the Sexual Health Risk Behaviours of Sugar Dating to Non-Sugar Dating Women,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 59, no. 6 (July 2022): 731–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2021.1962782>.

risks (such as high rates of sexually transmitted infections) and mental health risks (moderate to high levels of anxiety) to women.

### **Sociological Perspective and Adaptive Islamic Family Law Framework in the Digital Era**

From a sociological perspective, the sugar daddy phenomenon among Muslim youth in Indonesia illustrates how structural inequalities intersect with digital facilitation, leading to the commodification of intimacy, which profoundly challenges Islamic family law. The findings show that 90% of the sugar baby informants experience profound guilt for violating religious norms against *zina* (adultery), yet persist due to economic pressures, highlighting a dissonance between pragmatic survival and spiritual values. A sugar baby said:

“Economically, it solves my problems—no more debt stress—but spiritually, it feels wrong. I fast more to seek forgiveness, yet I continue because alternatives are scarce.”  
(Sugar Baby Female, 23 years old, Muslim Student).

This is in line with the findings that in Muslim communities, economic vulnerability encourages informal relationships similar to paid dating.<sup>54</sup> In Islamic family law views sugar dating as contradicting foundational principles of marriage as a solemn covenant (*mitaqan ghaliyan*) rooted in *mawaddah*, *sakinah*, and *rahmah* (QS. Ar-Rum: 21). The experts interviewed classified these arrangements as functionally equivalent to prohibited temporary marriages (nikah mut'ah). Referring to the MUI Fatwa of 1997 (October 25, 1997), which explicitly affirms the illegality (haram) of nikah mut'ah in Indonesia, scholars emphasize that these modern arrangements exploit rather than build sacred bonds.

“These are modern mut'ah—temporary, transactional, without *'aqd al-nikah* or witnesses. Sunni schools, including in Indonesia, deem mut'ah haram since its abrogation, as it exploits rather than builds sacred bonds.” (Islamic Law Expert, Male, 52, Fiqh Academic)

These arrangements prioritize transactional exchanges, undermining public *'aqd al-nikah*, mutual rights, and the protection of lineage (*hifz al-nasl*). This arrangement prioritizes transactional exchanges, undermining public marriage contracts, mutual rights, and offspring protection (*hifz al-nasl*).

“It threatens *hifz al-nasl* because lineage is not protected—no public contract means children risk illegitimate status under sharia. This is a secret from my family; I’m

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<sup>54</sup> Eva F Nisa, “Online Halal Dating, Ta’aruf, and the Shariatisation of Matchmaking among Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims,” *CyberOrient* 15, no. 1 (2021): 231–58, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cyo2.13>.

afraid of being labeled as promiscuous,” reflecting identity crises noted in similar studies on youth in patriarchal contexts.” (Islamic Law Expert, Female, 48)

In this patriarchal society, it is difficult for young women to advance independently. This gives them financial freedom but also makes them worry about their reputation if anyone finds out. Although narratives often focus on women, male participants also face complex identity conflicts, providing a broader sociological perspective on moral erosion.

“As a Muslim guy, the guilt is heavier—society judges men less, but I know it's against *amānah* and fidelity ideals.” (Sugar Baby Male, 25).

Islamic family law views sugar dating as contradicting foundational principles of marriage as a solemn covenant (*mitaqan ghalizan*) rooted in *mawaddah* (love), *sakinah* (tranquility), and *rahmah* (compassion) (QS. Ar-Rum: 21). These arrangements prioritize transactional exchanges, undermining public ‘*aqd al-nikāh*’, mutual rights, and the protection of lineage (*hifz al-nasl*). The primary theoretical framework employed here is *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* (objectives of sharia), particularly Jasser Auda's systems approach, which emphasizes openness, flexibility, and contextual *ijtihād* to preserve human welfare (*maṣlahah*) in changing times.<sup>55</sup> This study applies maqasid to protect religion (*hifz al-dīn*), life (*hifz al-nafs*), intellect (*hifz al-‘aql*), lineage (*hifz al-nasl*), and property (*hifz al-mal*), viewing sugar dating as threatening family stability and dignity.<sup>56</sup>

Empirical evidence links high guilt (90%) and health risks (40%) directly to *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* violations, but economic pressure on al-mal (property) forces the choice of violating *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah*. (Sugar Baby Female, 22). Additionally, the principle of *sadd al-dhāri‘ah* (blocking means to harm) justifies the proactive prevention of platforms facilitating such practices, as they predictably lead to zina and moral erosion.<sup>57</sup>

“*Sadd al-dhāri‘ah* applies here: platforms are means to zina, so blocking them prevents wider moral erosion, like Malaysia's ongoing efforts despite VPN circumventions. (Islamic Law Expert, Male, 55)”

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<sup>55</sup> Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Anas Asy’ari Nashuha and Mariam Elbanna, “An Analysis of Jasser Auda’s Thought on Maqashid Sharia and Its Implications for Sharia Economic Law,” *Solo International Collaboration and Publication of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 03 (2025): 441–56.

<sup>57</sup> Ahmad Dahlan Salleh et al., “Theory and Application of Sadd Al-Dhara‘i ‘(Blocking the Means) in Shafi ‘Iyya School,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2019): 724–37.

In academic debates, some scholars argue for adaptive *ijtihad* to address digital realities. While conservatives equate sugar dating to veiled prostitution, progressive views advocate for halal online *ta'āruf* as an alternative, utilizing platforms like Taaruf.com or Veil (updated 2025), which incorporate guardian (*wali*) features to ensure compliance.

"I'd prefer halal *ta'āruf* apps like Taaruf.com or Veil—they involve *wali* and aim for marriage, not transactions." (Sugar Baby Female, 24).

This highlights the demand for distinct, sharia-compliant digital spaces that separate matchmaking from transactional exploitation. This research contributes to the literature by empirically linking high guilt (90%) and health risks (40%) to *maqāṣid* violations, extending prior studies on unregistered/informal unions. An adaptive framework must utilize contemporary *ijtihād* via *istiṣlāḥī* (public interest) and *maqāṣid* systems to balance authenticity and modernity. Proposals include platform regulation (emulating Malaysia's Sugarbook ban under *sadd al-dharī'ah*), sharia certification for apps, and economic empowerment to reduce their vulnerability. This dialogue with progressive views advocates for digital literacy integration versus caution against over-adaptation, risking the erosion of core values on youth fears of marriage.

## Conclusion

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that sugar dating is not merely an economic-digital phenomenon but represents a process of commodification of intimacy that has characteristics similar to practices prohibited in Islam. Economic pressures and ease of access through digital platforms have created transactional relationships that treat the body and intimacy as objects of exchange, potentially threatening the stability of marriage. However, this dynamic gives rise to religious identity conflicts in the form of guilt, reinforces power and gender inequality, and increases health risks. Therefore, sugar dating can be understood as a transactional relationship that tends to reproduce structural exploitation and has a long-term impact on the erosion of fundamental family values in Islam. These findings emphasize the urgency of a comprehensive approach that not only focuses on moral-normative aspects but also addresses underlying economic, digital literacy, and gender inequality issues.

The main contribution of this research is the proposal of integrated and multi-layered intervention strategies that connect religious, legal, educational, and economic dimensions in response to transactional intimate relationships in the digital age. This multilevel approach is

not only reactive through digital fatwas and short-term Sharia literacy but also transformative through the reformulation of Islamic family law policies at the regulatory level and the strengthening of economic resilience and religious education on an ongoing basis. The limitations of this study include a sample centered in urban Jakarta and reliance on qualitative reports, which may limit generalizations to rural contexts or non-Southeast Asian Muslims. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies on the psychological and intergenerational impacts of these platforms, comparative evaluations of Sharia-based platform regulations in Muslim-majority countries, and exploration of halal digital alternatives (e.g., *ta'aruf* applications) to assess their effectiveness in guiding youth toward the ideal of sacred marriage.

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

This study was a collaborative effort with distinct contributions from each author. Ahmad served as the primary author, responsible for drafting the manuscript and conducting data collection for the study. R.B. provided critical input and feedback during the research process, contributing to refining the study's concepts and arguments. Aris acted as a reviewer, ensuring the accuracy and quality of the manuscript through a thorough evaluation and suggestions for improvement. I.H. guided the research direction and offered strategic oversight to align the study with its objectives. Muhammad Said contributed by revising the manuscript, enhancing its clarity and coherence. Z. A., an international collaborator, provided valuable insights and guidance on the research direction, enriching the study with a global perspective.

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The data supporting the results reported in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. Owing to ethical considerations and the need to protect participant confidentiality, the dataset was not publicly archived. However, anonymized data may be provided for further research with appropriate permissions.

### Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

### Additional information

The authors hope that this work fosters the development of a robust research network that encourages further exploration of the topics addressed. We are highly open to collaborating with other researchers interested in areas related to the focus of this study, including Islamic family law, socio-economic dynamics, and the impact of digital technology on Muslim communities. We welcome opportunities to engage in joint research initiatives to advance our understanding and address contemporary challenges in these fields.

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