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Engaging adolescent girls in transactional sex through compensated dating



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ABSTRACT

Transactional sex through so-called compensated dating in adolescent girls is a problem in need of public concern. Compensated dating typically involves the use of information communication technology to advertise, search, bargain, and eventually arrange for transactional sex. The technology enables the sexual partners to maintain privacy and secrecy in transactional sex. Such secrecy necessitates the girls' disclosure about their life experiences in order to address the concern. The disclosure is the focus of the present qualitative study of 27 girls practicing the dating in Hong Kong, China. Based on the disclosure, the study presents a grounded theory that epitomizes engagement in compensated dating by referential choice. Such a referential choice theory unravels that choice with reference to the family push and social norms sustains the engagement. Meanwhile, the choice rests on expectancy and reinforcement from experiential learning about compensated dating. The theory thus implies ways to undercut the engagement through diverting the referential choice of the dating.

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Understanding conditions engaging adolescent girls in transactional sex through compensated dating based on their life experiences is crucial to tackle the underage sex work (Song & Morash, 2016; Swader et al., 2013). Essentially, compensated dating is a kind of prostitution, known as semi-prostitution, which deserves the concern of public policy and social services (Swader & Vorobeva, 2015). The concerns are necessary, as compensated dating, particularly involving underage sex workers, is likely to be illegal, immoral, and socially harmful (Weitzer, 2010). To inform the concerns, adequate knowledge derived from the experiences of those practicing the dating is required. Such knowledge is deficient because compensated dating is relatively new, emerging with the popularization of information communication technology (Swader et al., 2013). The technology enhances the secrecy and privacy of compensated dating and thus the need for researching the dating through people practicing the dating. Hence, the present study seeks to understand the engagement of adolescent girls in compensated dating through personal interviews with the girls in Hong Kong, China.

The study about transactional sex through compensated dating specifically is necessary because of the particular features of the dating that make it different from other kinds of prostitution or sex work. In the first place, compensated dating is a euphemistic term for transactional sex and becomes popularly known in Asia (Ueno, 2003). It refers to one's getting a pay or gifts by providing sexual or intimate services to customers (Song & Morash, 2016). Thus, the dating is a commercialized or

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commodified service, as a kind of prostitution or sex work. The dating also represents a product of individualization for people to optimize their choices and avoid regulation (Swader & Vorobeve, 2015). This individualized practice is likely to bolster people's self-worth (Swader et al., 2013). Because of the personal choice and worth, one's experiences and feelings about compensated dating are essential for understanding the dating. This choice crucially differentiates compensated dating from prostitution. Accordingly, the practitioner of compensated dating initially touts dating and can freely choose to provide sexual services during the dating. This choice does not happen in traditional prostitution, which sells sexual services outright.

The individualized practice of compensated dating happens in the Chinese metropolis of Hong Kong, as well as other places such as the United States, Japan, Korea, Russia, and Australia (Li, 2015; Ueno, 2003; Song & Morash, 2016; Swader & Vorobeve, 2015; Weitzer, 2009). The sexual norm in Hong Kong is conservative and discouraging sex involving adolescents (Fok, 2004). The norm thus regards adolescents' compensated dating as deviant (Lee & Shek, 2013). Like other capitalistic places, Hong Kong highly capitalizes on the flow of money (Li, 2012). Therefore, money rather than gifts is the typical medium of transaction, including that in compensated dating. The emphasis on money echoes the high level of development in consumerism and commodification in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2015). Anyhow, compensated dating appears in Hong Kong, even though the prevalence is not very staggering (2.8% in Grade 8 students, Lee & Shek, 2013). The dating is of concern, as indicated by a currently screening movie about a real case of the slaughtering of a girl during her compensated dating. Essentially, Hong Kong can serve as a bridge between Eastern and Western worlds, through internationalization powered by information communication technology (Luk-Fong, 2006). Thus, knowledge about compensated dating in Hong Kong would be internationally informative.

Developmental concerns about compensated dating

Compensated dating is of concern to adolescents, because of its risk possibly increased by their attraction to dating, intimacy, and sex (Ho, 2003; Lee & Shek, 2013). The risk can arise from the aspects of law, morality, and health.

Health risk is an issue attributed to prostitution or compensated dating, as the risk threatens not only the practitioners but also their contacts (Yang, Wu, & Chen, 2002). Accordingly, the dating poses a risk to health, through its spread of infectious venereal disease (Song & Morash, 2016). A survey of 80 adolescent girls practicing compensated dating showed that three (3.6%) of them reported both venereal disease and bodily injury through the dating (Cheung, Lee, & Li, 2011). More specifically, they reported an average of 1.2 times in the injury during compensated dating in a year. Besides, compensated dating or prostitution can be a risk leading to suicide, sadism, and other forms of victimization (Hwang & Bedford, 2003; Kidd, 2003).

Moral risk is another problem with prostitution or compensated dating, which counts as wrong or bad to people and thus stigmatized (Weitzer, 2009; Wong, Ho, Li, Shin, & Tsai, 2011). The dating is morally problematic because of the commodification of the human body and thus the subversion of intrinsic human value, such as reasoning, realizing potentialities, and caring for others (Brooks-Gordon, 2006). Grounded in Chinese culture, the morals in Hong Kong safeguard virginity, chastity, and harmonious relationships from the inroads of prostitution (Lam, 2003). To maintain harmonious relationships, Chinese morals prescribe roles, propriety, and boundaries for each relationship (Hao, Guida, Morisky, & Liu, 2015). Notably, the morals proscribe intimate and sexual behavior between non-acquaintances to avoid disrupting the relationship and other relationships such as marriage as well. For them, propriety to show respect rather than erotic advances is crucially required to sustain the harmonious relationship (Curzer, 2012). Eventually, compensated dating or prostitution is a stigma in Hong Kong (Kong, 2006; Wong et al., 2011).

Compensated dating or prostitution would be illegal if it is detrimental to people or society. Thus, compensated dating is legally objectionable because it represents exploitation, oppression, and victimization of the practitioners of the dating, especially when they are underage persons (Weitzer, 2010). In Hong Kong, although an adult's prostitution is not legally chargeable, running a prostitution business such as hiring and profiting from a prostitute is illegal (Lam, 2003; Li, 2015). Additionally illegal is having sex or prostitution with underage (i.e., under 16 years) people. Adolescent prostitutes, once detected, are required to receive social services to discontinue their prostitution practice. Meanwhile, no legalized or regulated prostitution exists there to prevent the exploitation, oppression, and victimization. The unsafety and other problems of compensated dating thus call for pertinent knowledge about the dating to inform public policy and practice tackling the dating.

Existing knowledge about sex work

Existing knowledge about engagement in sex work in general may not be pertinent to compensated dating, and thus the engagement is in need of examination. The knowledge unfolds two themes of the examination. One theme of the factors treats sex work as deviance to identify factors, such as strain, oppression, and the subculture, that foment deviance (Aderinto & Samuel, 2008; Weitzer, 2009). Another theme emphasizes compensated dating or teen prostitution as a normal job that results from free choice and calculation (Harding & Hamilton, 2008; White, Klein, & Martin, 2015).

Extant knowledge about the theme of the deviance of sex work suggests that sex work springs from deviant or adverse social environments, which include peers, parents, and other people in the community (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011). The deviance or adversity consists in the problematic peers, poor family, and poor parenting characterized with drug abuse, violence, and sex work as well (Dalla, 2006; Flowers, 2001; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Plumridge & Thomson, 2003). These deviant or adverse characteristics are stressful, rejecting, seducing, or compelling to channel one to deviance (Cusick, 2002;

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