



## **An overview of commercial sex work associated with social media in South Africa and its related victimization**

Mandlenkosi Richard Mphatheni<sup>1</sup>

Khanyisile Berlinda Majola<sup>2</sup>

Bongoletu Diko<sup>3</sup>

Sazelo Mkhize<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Sciences Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice University of Limpopo

Polokwane South Africa doc.mandlenkosi@gmail.com <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6792-5305>

<sup>2,3</sup> School of Applied Human Sciences, Department of Criminology and Forensic, Studies

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

<sup>4</sup> School of Criminal Justice, Department of Criminology and Security Science

University of South Africa, mkizsm@unisa.ac.za

### **Abstract**

The rise of social media in South Africa has resulted in several risks linked with its use and exposure. A new type of commercial sex labour camouflaged behind the blesser-blessee notions grew so popular in 2016 that it thrived, thanks to exposure from social media platforms such as X, formerly known as Twitter and Instagram. Previous research has focused on the rationale for the existence of this new commercial sex activity disguised as blesser-blessee. This current study focuses on the commercial sex work associated with social media in South Africa and concomitant victimisation. The qualitative content literature study method and qualitative content analyses were used to analyse the data gathered by reviewing previous studies. The study found that the blesser-blessee relationship violates social morals and exposes the recipient to health risks and unplanned pregnancy. The study recommends improvement of economic participation by young adult females; this will give them economic power and allow them to safeguard themselves from sexual exploitation because they wish to attain a flashy lifestyle.

*Keywords: Blesser-blessee, commercial sex work, Onlyfans, social media, transactional sex*

### **Introduction**

Social media influencing has developed much attention for South Africans (SA) since the inception of Instagram under the *blesser/ blessee* phenomenon. In 2016, the “blesser and blessee” phenomenon gained prominence in the SA media (Mampane, 2018, p.1; Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019). The *blesser/blessee* refers to a form of transactional sex whereby affluent older men, who are referred to as “blessers,” use advantage of their wealth to entice women, referred to as “blesses,” who are at a young age (Palfreman, 2020; Zawu, 2020). These older men/*blessers* take advantage of these young women/*blessee* by indulging them with expensive gifts and money while expecting sexual favours in return (Mampane, 2018; Zawu, 2020).

The young women are, therefore, compelled to agree to any sexual advancement these old men make. The young women's sexual participation is seen as some form of payment for the expensive gifts and the money received from the old men (Palfreman, 2020). This kind of transactional sex sparked some debate on whether it should be viewed as prostitution or sex work. Regardless of how this transactional relationship between the *blesser-lessee* is viewed, health risk and victimisation are ultimately involved (Palfreman, 2020). Blesser's financial power over the *lessee* reduces the ability to say no to any health risk behaviour the *blesser* could indulge in. The risk and victimisation involved in this kind of relationship as it exposed young college girls gained momentum in the social media arena.

Since then, *blesser-lessee* influence has spread to the media arena of Onlyfans. Influencing has promoted the lifestyle concept all over the world. Much of it has been received by vulnerable unemployed graduates who only hope to afford their lavish lives (Zawu, 2020). Social media typically presents sex workers as having steady salaries, confidence, and a continuous source of revenue, this could be seen as an innovation per Merton's typology of modes of adaptation to strain. Social media has been an enabling platform where the initial courting stage will most likely occur through various attractions provided or displayed within social media.

Commercial sex work has been closely linked to social media impact. According to Morris (2018), from webcam performances to sugar dating, social media platforms have created new opportunities for both professionals and amateurs to sell sex, giving them more control and protection, sometimes without clearly defined legal restrictions. Grov and Smith (2014) argue that as the quantity of social media platforms has grown, so have places for sex work, enhancing the convenience, safety, and enjoyment of purchasing and selling sexual services. Therefore, this study is a qualitative literature review aimed at providing an overview of the commercial sex work associated with social media in SA as well as its related victimisation. Qualitative content analysis is used to analyse the literature search and review data. This study investigates the *Blesser-Blessee* phenomenon further but looks more extensively at the dangers associated with the lifestyle related to the phenomenon.

## Method

The study used non-empirical methodologies, therefore a review of the literature on commercial sex work connected to social media in SA and its related victimisation was conducted. This is consistent with Dan's (2017) claim that researchers who favour non-empirical techniques appreciate alternative approaches such as reflection on previous work or specific areas of social life. The study used a literature review, which involved the researchers reviewing and examining articles about the present study's issue. The study employed qualitative content analyses, meaning researchers examined data while continually searching for data. Researchers evaluated each fresh discovery of data as it arrived or was discovered. New sources were reviewed and evaluated during the process of writing.

## Literature review

Some members of the society dub the *blesser-lessee* relation as an indirect form of prostitution. News24 (2016) wrote that one of the most common assumptions is that the *blesser-lessee* partnership (BBP) reveals indirect prostitution that transpires between the *lessee* and the *blesser*. Masango (2019) argued that the *lessees* are usually women of no ambition and are usually referred to as 'gold-diggers' or 'slay queens' who want to live a luxurious life by dating wealthy men. In some cases, these old men or *blessers* are married, engaging with the young women/*blesses* in secret extramarital affairs (Mampane, 2018; Frieslaar, 2019). Furthermore, Thobejane, Tshilidzi Patrecia Mulaudzi, and Rally Zitha (2017) asserted that the social construction behind the BBP reveals an economic side of sexual and romantic relationships that have been disregarded in public discourse. This became a viral trend in SA, and many posed questions about how these beautiful young women funded their lifestyles, considering the plummeting state of the country's economy. At that point, scholars and authors took to the ground and studied the phenomenon.

## Conceptualising the *blesser-lessee* phenomenon

The inception of the concept '*blesser/lessee*' stemmed from an Instagram post by users who captioned their photo of lavish living with the term "blessed". The captioning alluded to acknowledgment of the blessing of being able to "afford" an expensive lifestyle (Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019) which was to be able to live a lifestyle showcasing expensive overseas, wearing elite designer brands and cash (Zawu, 2020). The term *Blesser-Blessee* became popular as a description of an intergenerational and transactional relationship (Palfreman, 2020). In some ways, it supplanted the terms "sugar daddy" and "sugar mommy" (Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019, p.21). Similarly, Stice (2021) says that a major amount of existing research on the sugar lifestyle originates from SA and pertains to what is called "blesser" and "blessed" (p.11). With the difference in spending, the spending power of 'sugar daddies' is limited or less than that of the *blessers*; thus, those who are at the receiving end *lessee* feel blessed

by the huge spending of the *blersers*. Moodley and Ebrahim (2019) further note that sugar relationships are based on age differences and sexual incentives, while *blesser/blessee* partnerships are based purely on a *blesser's* financial value.

The BBP is between affluent men who, in some cases, possess political powers or influence; this new phenomenon of BBP has overshadowed the 'sugar daddy' relation, which was more common before (Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019). Usually, the *blesser* is an affluent individual who possesses power within the political or business affiliation (Makhoba, 2016). Their affiliation in business and politics places them at an admirably high status quo. Yende (2021) argues that the advantage of BBP over 'sugar daddy' is that the BBP is not only based on sexual engagement with young women, but they also seek companionship, which sometimes results in emotional attachment.

The differentiation of a *blesser* over a *sugar daddy* is that *blersers* can be men from a younger demographic between ages 19 and 39. Some may be gay, lesbian, and sometimes transgender. The power imbalance plays a significant role in the outcome of the relationship between the *blesser* and the *blessee* (Frieslaar, 2019; Palfreman, 2020). The *blessee* is often noted to feel that they are unable to negotiate the practice of safe intercourse making them vulnerable to the risk of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies together with HIV. The fear is reported to stem from partners being violent, and to some extent, these women feel that by agreeing to the relationship, they sign away their autonomy at the expense of material gain (Frieslaar & Masango, 2021).

Different from the "*sugar daddy*" *blersers* are ranked in levels from level one to four (Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019). The level one *blesser* is known and identified by the sponsorship of small lifestyle amenities such as airtime and internet data. Level two, sponsors with clothing, make-up, and expensive premium wigs and hair. Level three is generous enough to sponsor iPhone, Mac Books, and property. Finally, level four, this type is a lot more extravagant in what they offer; their offers may include expensive houses or high-profile facilities like business contacts (Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019). Prior to the advent of the BBP, the then KwaZulu-Natal Health MEC, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, had run a campaign against the *Sugar daddies*.

In January 2012, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, the then-KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Health, announced the launch of a comprehensive 'Sugar daddies' campaign. According to a campaign news release, the purpose of the endeavour was to set a taboo against cross-generational sex, encourage healthy living, give oppositional language, and model and support acceptable behaviour for community members (Maxon, 2012). Nevertheless, the advent of BBP revived a new form of sugar daddy relations, with the difference that this new form was more affluent and bigger on their spending as opposed to the sugar daddy relations (Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019). The BBP provides flashy trips overseas, all paid for with shopping allowances in preparation for the trip to booking accommodation and flights (Thobejane et al., 2017).

Although there has been no specified link to sex work, it can be deduced to be a form of commercial sex work due to its inferential similarity, as there is a trade of service for material gain. Sex work is being treated in a variety of theoretical and legal approaches (Halley, Kotiswaran, Shamir & Thomas, 2006). Feminist methods, by definition, advocate for women's rights to achieve gender parity. However, beliefs about what defines 'rights,' 'equality,' 'agency,' and 'power' vary greatly between feminist perspectives (Mohajan, 2022). Radical feminist researchers, for example, often argue for the elimination of sex work because they perceive it as exploitative, intrinsically physically and emotionally destructive, and leading to greater oppression of women under patriarchy (Henry, & Farvid, 2017). The aspect of oppression is one which may be reasoned as true because of how being a sex worker places the individual in a vulnerable state.

However, when curtailed with consent and intentional knowledge of the position they may have placed themselves under, the point in question becomes one more complex than one might view at first glance. In these contexts, the term 'sex worker' is almost exclusively employed, with Marxist feminists emphasizing the 'job' side and liberal feminists criticizing the passive, servile implications of 'victim'. Some liberal feminists, for example, have been chastised for stating that the 'empowerment' of sex workers is attainable via the autonomous decision to portray sex work as joyful and pleasurable (Bateman, 2021). This is one way of conceptualizing 'the personal is political' regarding patriarchal exploitation. However, it is very much in line with neoliberal ideology (Henry & Farvid, 2017).

### Graduates influenced

University is a place where an adolescent develops into an adult. Individuals can be shaped by their home teachings as well as how they interact with campus culture. Many students leave home with the aim of strengthening their talents and, in most cases, are unfamiliar with the type of culture they will encounter at university, but their lifestyle choices can also influence how they assimilate into the campus community. Taking into consideration that SA has been at war with poverty and unemployment adamantly, however, this fight has

been one which has been difficult to overcome. Unemployment has also had lasting effects on the country's economy.

With rampant inflation in fuel prices, increased interest rates, hikes in food prices, and the increases in electricity tariff hikes and low income, many SA homes are unable to make ends meet, and the demand for tuition payments. As a result, students consistently explore creative ways to support themselves without their parents. According to Thobejane et al., (2017), *blessers* or being blessed plays an essential role in helping young women's financial needs by providing money for tuition, housing, and food. Some may take on part-time employment as waiters and waitresses (hostesses) at clubs, and some search for other possible avenues.

Waitressing and hostessing are one of the many entry-level introductions to the "blessed lifestyle". Research has proven that some females who work at nightclubs end up following a directive from club owners (Worke, Koricha, & Debelew, 2021). This directive usually encompasses these hostesses to pimp out their friends under the guise of free drinks and a good time. Girls have been found to introduce their friends to wealthy men for a fee, and sometimes it is never really for a place but done as a "hook-up," which the friend believes will benefit their friend (Phamotse, 2017; 2018; Mears, 2020). In some instances, girls who are recruited as hostesses at nightclubs are tasked with the responsibility of luring affluent men who are renowned spenders (Mears, 2020; Dart, 2022). Doing so generates revenue for clubs as these men spend exuberant amounts on drinks. Once hooked on high rolling and desperate for financial escapism, they become open to trading their bodies to continue living large. Research has revealed that the opulent lifestyles provided by these blessers are transient tastes for the opulent life. The sustainability of this lifestyle is rather questionable as these men usually replace these young women and sometimes men with the next best women they come across (Phamotse, 2017).

The increase in the rate of inter-generational sex has been reported as creating havoc in SA society, with young women the most at risk of new HIV infections- with teenage pregnancies also increasing. South African former Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi (2016) announced a three-year campaign including measures to protect young girls from these imbalanced relationships. Motsoaledi told the BBC that girls between 15 and 24 from poorer backgrounds are at most risk of being targeted and exploited by *blessers*, especially those who have lost a parent to the national HIV/AIDS epidemic (Thobajane, Mulaudzi & Zitha, 2017).

Being a Promoter of any brand is another entry point into commercial sex work that many have used. Typically, brand owners seek out gorgeous young women from universities. In most situations, when promoters are doing their job, they will meet with high-profile persons who are rich and only interested in sexual relationships. Most commercial sex promoters receive money or goods in exchange for consensual sexual services or erotic performances, either on a regular or irregular basis (Davis, 2014). Some in the Blesser-Blessee relationship argue that "money is always a factor in relationships," This is simply a straightforward and honest approach to dating in the modern era (Thobajane, Mulaudzi & Zitha, 2017, p.8726).

### Influencing

Influencers are everyday Internet users who build a sizable following through blogs and social media by textually and visually narrating their personal lives and lifestyles, engaging with their followers in digital and physical spaces, and monetising their following by incorporating "advertorials" into their blogs or social media posts (Abidin, 2015). The capacity of influencers to convince customers originates from their ability to form close relationships with their audiences (Abidin & Thompson, 2012). Influencers cultivate relationships by generating social media content centered on a specific issue. One of the most common methods to get recruited into this phenomenon, as discovered above, is through *buddy* association and the nightclub culture.

However, social networking platforms have been notoriously linked to the way young women are enticed into this lifestyle. There are numerous media channels, such as applications and internet websites, that function with the idea of enticing young ladies. Through influencing, electronic commerce innovations have transformed the sex business by digitising the market for purchasing and selling sexual services (Sanders, Brents, & Wakefield, 2020). Furthermore, the digital commercial sex industry has grown beyond sex workers advertising their in-person services to customers on the Internet; now, sex workers may give sexual services without ever engaging in potentially risky physical contact (Cunningham, Sanders, Scoular, Campbell, Pitcher, Hill & Hamer, 2018). Scholars have developed the phrase "technology-mediated indirect services," which encompasses instant messaging, phone sex, and webcamming (Sanchez, 2022). Some do it directly, while others are determined by how they use the platforms through word of mouth. For this study, the researchers will refer to Blesser Finder, TikTok, and Onlyfans as platforms that have been used for influencing and commercial sex work.

### Social media platforms

The below subsections give an overview of different social media platforms used to promote the bl esser- bl ess ee relationships.

#### Bless er finder

This is an online website founded in 2016 after a 22-year-old woman was shamed on social media for dating an older businessman. The website acts as an agency that hooks up *bl essers* and *bl ess ees*. It is set up through the Facebook platform where the bl ess ee wishing to find a companion sends them a message through their official Facebook platform, sending a profile which has a description of who they are, the amount they wish to be imbursed, and includes a photo of themselves. The site admin then posts the profile with pictures on their Facebook timeline. The bl ess er interested then sends a formal email to the administrator with the specification of the profile referred to from the timeline (Makhoba, 2016). Unfortunately, however, the bl ess er is not obligated to reveal their identification. This has the potential of being dangerous to these women as no background checks can even be offered to ensure that these women are indeed being set up with who these “bl ess er” says they are. Furthermore, it makes it difficult to trace the match in circumstances where the worst could occur.

#### Tiktok

The "TikTok" APP, originally known as A.me, is a music creative short video social program that was launched in September 2016. The "Tik Tok" was widely promoted after the name change in the second quarter of 2017, making the "Tik Tok" sound short in 2018. The video comes in eighth place. From the commencement of the online "letting worship from here" to March 19, 2018, the tagline of "TikTok" was changed to "record a good life" (iResearch, 2017). The app has taken South Africa by storm, with much of the country's culture making its mark within the platform. The popularity of video creation and sharing on social media has grown from short looping films to live-streaming (Anderson, 2017).

TikTok can be downloaded through the Apple, Android, and Amazon app stores. While there is a means to watch movies and a button to upload your own, there is no search tool, and many of the functions appear to be limited. The app can be seen and searched without requiring an account, but like with all social media apps, an account is required for full interaction. Following the creation of an account, the user will be prompted to select their interests from a selection that includes animals, humour, travel, food, sports, beauty and style, art, gaming, and science and education (Anderson, 2017). With such efficiency, the variation of information one can access can only be limited by the number of creators willing to create content on certain topics.

The bl ess er/bl ess ee phenomenon is also a search away. By creating a search such as “#findabl ess er”, one can instantly discover an array of information related to that tag. Some videos will immediately pop onto the app's main timeline, which is determined by the app's algorithm, specifically according to the type of interests you regularly engage with (Klug, Qin, Evans & Kaufman, 2021). Some creators have used the platform as an avenue to entice and recruit other young women. The creator will compile videos that exhibit them buying luxurious high-end designer shoes and bags, taking expensive vacations overseas, and driving expensive cars, which they admit to having through the blessed “lifestyle”. The recruitment will also be in the form of a video inviting young girls (usually between the ages of 19-26) to all expenses paid trips to anywhere within the country. The creator makes a specified brief of what will be expected and provides their email for further communication.

#### Onlyfans

OnlyFans is said to be a popular way used by social media to create their online content (Litam, Speciale & Balkin, 2022). OnlyFans was founded in 2016 by Fenix International Ltd., which was eventually acquired by MyFreeCams' owner. Timothy Stokley, the company's CEO, is currently based in London. OnlyFans is a "peer-to-peer subscription app" that grew in popularity during the CoronaVirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic as many producers joined to supplement or replace lost income—the site recorded a "75 percent increase in model sign-ups in early April" (López, 2020). Following the huge inflow of Sexually Explicit Material (SEM) creators during the commencement of the COVID-19 epidemic, mainstream viewers have gradually grown to perceive OnlyFans as the dominant sexual content site (Litam, Speciale & Balkin, 2022).

OnlyFans, a subscription-based, direct-to-consumer network, now has over 100 million registered members and has paid over \$3 billion to content providers (Litam, Speciale & Balkin, 2022). OnlyFans represents a new platform for people to buy, sell, and access SEM from an entirely online environment (Cunningham, Sanders, Scoular, Campbell, Pitcher & Hamer, 2018). A study by Halvorsen (2022) found that most of the informants responded to the question of motivation for using the OnlyFans digital platform; the answer was economic gains. Halvorsen (2022) cited that one of the female informants alluded that she used to have a “regular job; she now



worked part-time as a nurse” (p.43). The informant further indicated that the money she received from using OnlyFan was good and could not receive it as a nurse.

### **Twitter**

The sites stated above are not the only sites where sex workers promote their services; Twitter is also one of the platforms utilized by sex workers to attract sex buyers. Sex workers looking for clients can use Twitter to upload their sexually explicit photographs and videos, revealing their sex moves and positions to the public. Most of the above-mentioned social networks do not provide a good platform for commercial sex workers to advertise their businesses due to restrictions imposed by the founders of those social networks; however, Twitter does not have any restrictions when it comes to publishing sexually graphic photographs. Note that twitter is now currently known as X.

### **Risk associated with commercial sex work**

Commercial sex work involves different forms of risk, and some of the risks involved are highlighted.

#### **Cyberbullying and cyber-harassment**

Most people who work as commercial sex workers are likely to become victims of cyberbullying and cyber-harassment. According to Whittaker and Kowalski, (2015), cyberbullying is an act of hostility meant to cause the victim harm or distress. It happens when two people have a power imbalance in their relationship (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Commercial sex workers are cyber-victimised because of revenge pornography disseminated by ex-lovers or sex customers.

When ex-partners and clients who trade commercial sex decide to discontinue their relationship or trade, they may opt to share intimate photographs of each other. In many circumstances, such photographs are openly shared on social media platforms. This is considered revenge pornography. Without the commercial sex worker's permission and to cause them anguish or shame, the ex-partner may release sexually explicit photographs and videos of their ex-lovers.

The victim's personal information, such as contact information and home address, may also be disclosed. The victim's safety may be jeopardised if his or her personal information is disclosed. Most males who engage in revenge porn do it to demonstrate to their female victims that they're always subordinate and that men will always have more power. Revenge porn does not only cause anguish to victims, but it can also cause psychological damage and suicidal thoughts. Poly-victimisation is another form of victimisation that commercial sex workers may suffer.

#### **Poly-victimisation**

Cyber victimisation is not the only form of victimisation that commercial sex workers experience. Some commercial sex workers have been subjected to poly-victimisation because of gender-based violence and femicide. Poly-victimisation, as defined by Coetzee, Gray, and Jewkes (2017), is the experience of numerous sorts of victimisation, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and bullying.

Though the world is founded on human rights and equality, it is still failing or struggling to shield women from barbaric killings. Commercial sex workers are subjected to a high rate of Gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide at the hands of their clients. Because of how society has stigmatised prostitution, most men have little respect for sex sellers. Many people, particularly those with conservative religious beliefs, consider prostitution to be immoral since it includes sex for money, and they see it as a reflection of society's moral deterioration (Chon, 2015).

Some men lack an emotional connection to sex workers, making it easier for males to demonstrate their masculinity and patriarchal ideals. Because sex buyers do not respect sex workers, it is easier for sex buyers to use sex workers as sex objects or sexually abuse them. Most of the violence done by sex buyers to their victims remains unreported because most sex workers are afraid of losing potential buyers. Furthermore, some sex workers may not disclose violence because they are afraid of being victimised by police officials. Prostitution or commercial sex work in South Africa is still illegal, and there is no explicit constitution that instructs South African Police Service employees on how to handle cases of GBV encountered by any form of sex work since it is criminal as the country's government has not yet decriminalised it. Another risk commercial sex workers are exposed to is infectious diseases. There is a correlation between commercial sex work and HIV/AIDS infection.

### **HIV and aids**

Gender-based power inequalities contribute to HIV risk by limiting women's ability to negotiate condom use for fear of violence (Ulibarri, Strathdee, Lozada, Magis-Rodriguez, Amaro, Campo, & Patterson, 2010). Some sex workers have distinct categories of sex, for example, a sex seller may charge a different price for safe sex versus risky sex. Some sex workers may demand different fees for unsafe sex, which may be advantageous to some men because most men dislike the thought of using a condom due to the stereotypes that they have about safe sex. Sex workers in South Africa are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection due to the large number of clients they have (Bekker, Johnson, Cowan, Overs, Besada, Hillier, & Cates, 2015). Sex workers are not only exposed to infectious diseases, but they are also at risk of human trafficking.

### **Human trafficking**

Some commercial sex workers may attract sex traffickers or pimps. This is because most sex traffickers or human traffickers utilize social media to recruit their victims. Most commercial sex workers advertise their services on social media, increasing their chances of becoming victims of sex trafficking. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2005 describes sex trafficking as a kind of modern-day slavery in which women, men, or children are forced into sexual exploitation via the use of force, fraud, or coercion (Odell, 2022). To attract commercial sex, pimps typically use bogus information to hide their identities, as well as make false promises.

### **Theoretical framework**

The commercial sex worker's behaviour could be explained through social learning theory. The learning theory proposes that changes in behaviour, cognition, or emotional state result from observing someone else's behaviour or the consequences of that behaviour (Suryoputro, Ford & Shaluhayah, 2007).

Most people who join the commercial sex work industry learn the behaviour first through the media platform when it is portrayed by a highly admired person, which could be a celebrity or a person who is admired in society. Effective modelling, according to Bandura, necessitates motivation, which is the final factor in learning a behaviour (Bandura, 1977). This study defines motivation as the process by which an individual develops a valid cause to copy what he or she sees in the media.

Similarly, Cherry (2023) described motivation as the notion that defines why people do things the way they do and stated that it is the driving force behind human behaviours. In summary, she defines motivation as the process that begins, leads, and sustains goal-oriented actions. Unemployment and poverty are frequent reasons why individuals become sex workers or vendors. The incentive that propels people into commercial sex work areas has its own set of effects, including victimisation. The victimisation of commercial sex workers includes cyberbullying and cyber-harassment.

### **Discussion of themes extracted from the previously published scholarly work**

The literature review discovered that the two phrases *blesser-blessee* became more common in 2016. These two concepts have been discovered to provide a form of protection against the stigma, shame, and misconceptions associated with commercial sex work in South Africa. The study showed no significant difference between commercial sex work and the *blesser-blessee* relationship, concluding that the *blesser-blessee* relationship was a form of commercial sex work. The study discovered that commercial sex work is a symbiotic relationship between a wealthy person who has earned the title of a *blesser* and a female person who aspires to a meaty lifestyle complete with expensive accessories and trips abroad that they cannot afford on their own. As a result of this symbiotic relationship, they were able to achieve their desired lifestyle.

This study, consistent with the strain theory of Robert K Merton developed in 1938 (Robert, (2018), discovered the *blessee's* dealing with economic and materialistic success stalemate. According to Merton, the United States was exceptional in that it not only placed an extraordinary premium on economic achievement, but this value was passed down to all of its residents, wealthy and poor (Lilly et al., 2007, p.55). Similarly, present socioeconomic achievement is stressed in South Africa. As a result, similar to Merton's time in the United States, the poorest residents in South Africa are taught not to be happy with their predicament but to strive for success since anybody may become wealthy if they work hard enough.

Strain Theory argues that this is not always true because some people are so far behind in terms of opportunities or lack of ability that it is impossible for them to reach their goals without some measures of assistance or luck (Lilly et al., 2007). The *blesser-blessee* relationship affords the *blessee* the opportunity to achieve success. The *blessee* realise that they cannot attain the materialistic and social status success that they desire, thus, getting involved in the relationship with the affluent people. This symbiotic relationship clashes with social acceptance ways and goes against South African social moral fabrics. In line with Merton's typology of modes of

adaptation to strain the blessee could be referred to as the innovators since they accept the cultural goal that is economic success while rejecting the institutional means of attaining them.

Nevertheless, the blesser-blessee relations besides going against social moral fabrics, there are some forms of victimisation involved. The economic deprivation of the blessee put them in a vulnerable position where the blesser's economic means give the blesser powers to control the autonomy of the blessee. The blessee loses their autonomy to refuse any sexual advancement the blesser may wish to engage in. The blessee found themselves unable to negotiate the safe practice during intercourse, and thus, getting exposed to unpleasant and unwanted pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted infections. The study discovered that certain high school-aged persons were subjected to manipulation, abuse, and forced sexual intercourse. This suggests that blesser may demand continual sexual cooperation from blessee.

## Conclusions

Commercial sex work in the form of *blesser-blessee* in SA widely received media attention in 2016. Media exposed different forms of social media platforms, which enabled and encouraged young university girls to be involved in commercial sex work. Most of the young girls who were involved in commercial sex work were involved because they wanted economic freedom. The South African government has the responsibility to develop and ensure the implementation of such policies and already existing policies that are aimed at the economic development of young people, particularly young female graduates.

Young people should be encouraged to actively participate in acceptable economic activities. Such participation will prevent and hinder attraction to be involved in social media that encourages them into nefarious means of acquiring economic emancipation. The study established that some of the risk factors due to the commercial sex work involved are cyberbullying, poly-victimisation, HIV/AIDS, and human trafficking. Furthermore, the study found that Social Learning theory explains the involvement of young girls in commercial sex work. The content that young girls were exposed to from social media exalted commercial sex work. Thus, university girls found it attractive

## References

- Abidin, C. and Thompson, E.C., 2012, November. Buymylife. com: Cyber-femininities and commercial intimacy in blogshops. In *Women's Studies International Forum* (Vol. 35, No. 6, pp. 467-477). Pergamon.
- Abidin, C., 2015. Micromicrocelebrity: Branding babies on the internet. *m/c Journal*, 18(5).
- Anderson, K.E., 2017. Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: periscope up! Broadcasting via live streaming. *Library Hi Tech News*.
- Anderson, K.E., 2020. Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: it is time to talk about TikTok. *Library hi tech news*.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological review*, 84(2), 191.
- Bateman, V. (2021). How decriminalisation reduces harm within and beyond sex work: Sex work abolitionism as the "cult of female modesty" in feminist form. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 18, 819-836.
- Bekker, L.G., Johnson, L., Cowan, F., Overs, C., Besada, D., Hillier, S. and Cates Jr, W., 2015. Combination HIV prevention for female sex workers: what is the evidence?. *The Lancet*, 385(9962), pp.72-87.
- Cherry, K. (2023). Motivation: the driving force behind our actions. Retrieved July, 26, 2023.
- Chon, D.S., 2015. Gender equality, liberalism and attitude toward prostitution: Variation in cross-national study. *Journal of family violence*, 30(7), pp.827-838.
- Coetzee, J., Gray, G.E. and Jewkes, R., 2017. Prevalence and patterns of victimization and polyvictimization among female sex workers in Soweto, a South African township: a cross-sectional, respondent-driven sampling study. *Global health action*, 10(1), p.1403815.
- Cunningham, S., Sanders, T., Scoular, J., Campbell, R., Pitcher, J., Hill, K., ... & Hamer, R. (2018). Behind the screen: Commercial sex, digital spaces and working online. *Technology in society*, 53, 47-54.
- Dan, V. (2017). Empirical and non-empirical methods. *Int Encyclopedia Commun Res Methods*, 1, 1-3.
- Dart, S. (2022). *Beyond sexy is what's needed: The experiences of women employed in a luxury VIP nightclub in Cape Town* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).
- Davis, A. D. (2014). Regulating Sex Work: Assimilation, Erotic Exceptionalism & Beyond.
- Doyisa, N., Maharaj, P., & Dunn, S. (2023). Older men, younger women: blesser–blessee relationships among university students in Durban, South Africa. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 25(11), 1530-1542.
- Frieslaar, B. (2019). *The blesser-blessee relationship: A pastoral challenge*. University of Pretoria (South Africa).



- Frieslaar, B. V., & Masango, M. (2021). Blessings or curses? The contribution of the blesser phenomenon to gender-based violence and intimate partner violence. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 77(4).
- Halley, J., Kotiswaran, P., Shamir, H., & Thomas, C. (2006). From the international to the local in feminist legal responses to rape, prostitution/sex work, and sex trafficking: Four studies in contemporary governance feminism. *Harv. JL & Gender*, 29, 335.
- Halvorsen, M. S. K. (2022). *Female empowerment through OnlyFans? A sociology of law analysis of tendencies and norms surrounding OnlyFans and the use of sex as a commodity in the digital realm* (Master's thesis).
- Henry, M.V. and Farvid, P., 2017. 'Always hot, always live': Computer-mediated sex work in the era of 'camming'. *Women's Studies Journal*, 31(2).
- Klug, D., Qin, Y., Evans, M. and Kaufman, G., 2021, June. Trick and please. A mixed-method study on user assumptions about the TikTok algorithm. In *13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021* (pp. 84-92).
- Litam, S. D. A., Speciale, M., & Balkin, R. S. (2022). Sexual attitudes and characteristics of OnlyFans users. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 51(6), 3093-3103.
- López, C. (2020, June 17). A wave of people turned to OnlyFans to earn money when they lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Insider. <https://www.insider.com/people-are-creating-onlyfans-accounts-after-losing-jobs-during-pandemic-2020-6>
- Mampane, J. N. (2018). Exploring the “Blesser and Blessee” phenomenon: young women, transactional sex, and HIV in rural South Africa. *Sage Open*, 8(4), 2158244018806343.
- Masango, L. P. (2019). *Johannesburg, Sex, Love and Money: An Ethnography of Phones and Feelings* (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Faculty of Humanities).
- Maxon C (2012) Press release, available at: [http://www.kznhealth.gov.za/mediarelease/2012/sugar daddy 11.1.1 2.htm](http://www.kznhealth.gov.za/mediarelease/2012/sugar%20daddy%2011.1.1.2.htm), site accessed 21/02/2022
- Mears, A. (2020). *Very important people: Status and beauty in the global party circuit*. Princeton University Press.
- Merton, K. R. (1957). Strain theory. *Readings in deviant behavior*. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.
- Mohajan, H. (2022). An overview on the feminism and its categories.
- Moodley, P., & Ebrahim, S. (2019). # Blesser: A critical evaluation of conceptual antecedents and the allure of a transactional relationship. *Acta Academica*, 51(2), 21-40.
- Morris, M. (2018). *Incidental sex work: casual and commercial encounters in queer digital spaces* (Doctoral dissertation, Durham University).
- News24. (02 Sep 2016). The blesser phenomenon: Has it always been around? Retrieved from: <https://www.news24.com/news24/the-blesser-phenomenon-has-it-always-been-around-20160902> access on 2024/08/13
- Odell, H., 2022. Accountable to None? Challenging Sovereign Immunity Through the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. *Boston College Law Review*, 63(4), p.1517.
- Onyejekwe, C.J., 2004. The interrelationship between gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 6(1), pp.34-40.
- Palfreman, J. (2020). # Blessed: the blesser phenomenon: transactional sex and intergenerational relationships in urban South Africa.
- Robert, A. (2018). Stability and change in crime over the life course: A strain theory explanation. In *Developmental theories of crime and delinquency* (pp. 101-132). Routledge.
- Sanchez, S., 2022. The World's Oldest Profession Gets a Makeover: Sex Work, OnlyFans, and Celebrity Participation. *Women Leading Change: Case Studies on Women, Gender, and Feminism*, 6(1), pp.4-17.
- Sanders, T., Brents, B., & Wakefield, C. (2020). *Paying for sex in a digital age: US and UK perspectives*. Routledge.
- Selikow, T.A. and Mbulaheni, T. 2013. “I do love him but at the same time I can’t eat love”: Sugar daddy relationships for conspicuous consumption amongst urban university students in South Africa. *Agenda*, 27(2), 86-98.
- Solontsi, J. 2016. News24. The blesser phenomenon: Has it always been around? Accessed from: [www.news24.com/mynews24/the-blesser-phenomenon](http://www.news24.com/mynews24/the-blesser-phenomenon). Date: 21 June 2016
- Stice, B. L. (2021). The lived experiences of college sugar babies: A consensual qualitative research study.
- Suryoputro, A., Ford, N. J., & Shaluhayah, Z. (2007). Social learning theory in youth sexual behaviour study in Central Java. *Jurnal Promosi Kesehatan Indonesia*, 2(1), 10-20.
- Thobejane, T.D., Mulaudzi, T.P. and Zitha, R., 2017. Factors leading to “blesser-blessee” relationships amongst female students: The case of a rural university in Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa. *Gender and behaviour*, 15(2), pp.8716-8731.

Ulibarri, M.D., Strathdee, S.A., Lozada, R., Magis-Rodriguez, C., Amaro, H., O'Campo, P. and Patterson, T.L., 2010. Intimate partner violence among female sex workers in two Mexico–US Border cities: Partner characteristics and HIV risk behaviors as correlates of abuse. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 2(4), p.318.

Wellman, M.L., Stoldt, R., Tully, M. and Ekdale, B., 2020. Ethics of authenticity: Social media influencers and the production of sponsored content. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 35(2), pp.68-82.

Whittaker, E. and Kowalski, R.M., 2015. *Cyberbullying via social media*. *Journal of school violence*, 14(1), pp.11-29.

Worke, M. D., Koricha, Z. B., & Debelew, G. T. (2021). Perception and experiences of sexual harassment among women working in hospitality workplaces of Bahir Dar city, Northwest Ethiopia: a qualitative study. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 1119.

Zawu, R. (2020). *The rise and normalization of blessee/blesser relationships in South Africa: A post-colonial feminist analysis* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).