

THE SILICONE SELF: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE LOVE AND SEX DOLL
COMMUNITY

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: The Silicone Self: An Ethnography of the Love and Sex Doll Community

This dissertation is an empirically grounded study of the love and sex doll community. Conducted over 14 months of digital ethnographic research, this dissertation draws from participant observation, in-depth interviews, content analysis, and mixed methods to analyze the interactional dynamics of love and sex doll owners in digital spaces. Drawing from the sociology of sexualities, deviance, symbolic interactionism, and new media, this dissertation examines how technology can become a central part of people's sexual lives. The concept of *the silicone self* is put forth as a way of understanding how people become socialized into doll ownership as a collective group. The silicone self is employed in three situations. First, the self-ing process whereby people reflect on their previous sexual and romantic experiences before deciding to become a sex doll owner. This reflexive process reveals shifting ideas about the centrality of marriage for heterosexual men in contemporary society. Second, the silicone self is employed to show how sex doll ownership requires material considerations specific to this sex practice. Because sex dolls are relatively rare objects, interested owners must learn from one another how to use their dolls properly. Investment in the community is shown to refract into other interest, such as erotica photography. Finally, the silicone self is used to explore the role of play and personification. Sex dolls are unlike other sex toys

because they approximate an entire, rather than partial, human. As such, sex doll owners imagine their dolls as having personality traits which they animate via social media and other creative faculties. These experiences are theorized to provide outlets for heterosexual men to escape the strictures of heteronormative masculinity. The dissertation concludes by way of critically interrogating a central tension in the human-robot interaction—whether sex dolls are *just* sex toys or represent something more. Implications for generating a social, rather than technologically deterministic, theory of futuristic sex toys are discussed.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Legend has it that René Descartes, arguably one of the most famous French philosophers of all time, brought a *dame de voyage* on a trip to Sweden. Often cited as a precursor to today's sex doll, the *dame de voyage* survives only in archives and folklore, as none (that we know of) have withstood the test of time (Ferguson 2010). The few remaining accounts of French colonists' *dames de voyage* (and the Spanish equivalent, *dama de viaje*) offer tales of sailors stitching together cloth and cotton into female form for sexual comfort while they roamed the oceans in search of land and riches. At the time, superstition dictated that women were bad luck on sea vessels. This patriarchal belief thus imposed a longing for women on men who responded by fabricating some of the first ever sex dolls. The *dames de voyage* even made it as far as Japan, where the Japanese named their version of it the "Dutch waifu" after the colonists who visited their shores.

This *dame de voyage* of lore was purportedly made of metal and leather. It is said that Descartes made it himself after the passing of his daughter Francine, who died in 1640 of scarlet fever at just five years old. Some versions of the story call his human replica an "automaton," rather than a *dame de voyage*, perhaps as a way of separating the emotional crutch of the intellectual giant that is Descartes from the baser wants of everyday sailors. But by all accounts, it is claimed that Descartes was aware, at some level, of the stigma that would accompany traveling with a human replica. And so, during his travels around Europe, Descartes tried to avoid judgment by passing it as his daughter. Apparently, he was right to be cautious of bringing the *dame de voyage* on his travels. Sometime during one of his trips, his secret was uncovered by sailors who, horrified by its uncanny similarity to a human, threw the artificial Francine overboard.

Whether or not the story of Descartes' attempt to artificially recreate his daughter is true, it is a useful starting point for thinking through the historical, technical, psychological, social, and political dimensions of sex toys. First and foremost, sex toys are not new. Well before Descartes even, sex toys have been produced and used in historically specific ways (Lieberman 2017). From as early as 28,000 BCE, when dildos were made of stone and bone, to today's artificially intelligent silicone sex robots, how sex toys are made and used is shaped by material, technological, cultural, and social forces. The vibrator, for example, has been championed by feminists for overturning long held assumptions about women's frigidity and disinterest in sex (Comella 2017). By harnessing electricity and mechanization in the mid twentieth century, the vibrator made sexual pleasure more accessible for women in an era of widespread sexual oppression. The success of the vibrator is well-documented among Western women. Nationally representative data of the US population suggests that more than 50% of women have used vibrators or dildos (Herbenick et al. 2009; Herbenick et al. 2017). Even at the micro level, the normalization of vibrator use among women is significant. As Waskul and Anklan (2020) show, many women who have yet to use vibrators hope to use one someday. But for all the progress vibrators and feminists have made in normalizing women's sexual pleasure for its own sake, transgressing sexual norms is always met with scrutiny.

In her seminal work "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Rubin (2007) sketched a heuristic for understanding the hierarchy of sex acts. A narrow vision of sex is culturally and politically valued, while others are marginalized. At the center of the "charmed circle," we find married, monogamous, vanilla,

procreative, and heterosexual sex. As we move toward the periphery of the circle, the sex acts become increasingly stigmatized, and in some cases, criminalized. On the outskirts of this mapping of sexual activities, we find the most “severe” and taboo of sexual transgressions. Vanilla sex is replaced with S/M, freely consensual sex becomes sex work and rape, and bodies become augmented or replaced with “manufactured objects” like strap-ons and dildos. Finally, the expectation that sexuality be private and behind closed doors in bedrooms is replaced with voyeuristic exhibitionism and pornography.

Many people enjoy sex acts that, in one way or another, deviate from the most culturally valued form of sexuality. Freud remarked at the apparent diversity of sexual interests, suggesting at one point that “the very wide dissemination of perversions urged us to assume that the predisposition to perversions is no rare peculiarity but must form a part of the normally accepted constitution” (Freud 1920: 23). Later, Kinsey used empiricism to demonstrate a similar point and challenged moralistic evaluations of sexuality. His surveys demonstrated that same-sex experiences, premarital sex, and masturbation were relatively widespread (Irvine 2005). Yet so-called sexual abnormality continues to be seen as a social problem. How these “problems” are treated range from criminalization and stigma to harassment, disfigurement, and death. It was not so long that ago openly flaunting transgressive sexualities could lead to imprisonment, execution, or castration (Foucault 1978; Rubin 2007). But as the case of the vibrator suggests, and more recently, same-sex marriage, it is possible for some transgressive sex acts to move closer to the center of Rubin’s charmed circle. Or, at a minimum, to be seen as less of a personal disorder and threat to society.

Our current era of sexuality has been marked by open pushback against the proverbial closet. Not too long ago, homosexuality, as it were, was in large part shaped by shame and fear of violence (Sedgwick 1990). In recent memory however, “gay rights” have been achieved, in a legislative sense at least, in numerous countries that have legalized same-sex marriage. In the wake of this success, the normalizing of queerness has resulted in a discursive explosion of sexual and gender identities. Whereas a previous form of sexual science developed nomenclature for a taxonomy of behaviors (Foucault 1978), today’s social science of sexuality has become a study of expressions and meanings. What was once GLB has been replaced by “LGBTQ,” usually adorned with a “+” to mark an umbrella of coverage for diverse sexual and gender identities.

Controversial cultural figures like sex columnist Dan Savage have embraced the normalization of sexual minorities, albeit in the form of white urban elitism (Grzanka and Mann 2014). Others, such as comedian Dave Chapelle, have reproached the alphabetization of sexual proclivities by suggesting we ought to focus on the similarity, rather than the differences, of humanity. The continued extension of this acronym in the Western social imagination no doubt comes from equating public identification with power (Hart-Brinson 2016). Today there is a pervasive belief that personal liberation can only be achieved by publicly claiming one’s *true* self.

In this dissertation, I have gathered and analyzed some of the most robust subjective, observational, and quantitative data on a group of people who hope to reclaim a widely stigmatized and poorly understood sex practice. I studied people who own what have variously been called: sex dolls, love dolls, synthetics, gynoids, androids, sexbots,

and artificial companions.¹ Psychologists generally classify the desire to have sex with inanimate objects as a paraphilic disorder. More specifically, this desire would be classified as agalmatophilia, which is sexual attraction to statues, dolls, mannequins, or other humanlike objects (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Rather than viewing this desire as a disorder, my goal as a sociologist is to uncover the social contours that shape doll ownership. While some might consider the desire to own dolls a minor blip in the history of transgressive sexualities, or just one among a long list of paraphilias, as the story of Descartes reveals, the appeal and use of artificial companions is not new. Admittedly, others might view this topic as unworthy of scholarly attention (indeed, Amazon advertises one inflatable doll as a “novelty for Halloween, bachelor, and hen parties”). I do not see doll ownership as a joke. I contend that doll ownership and the adult industry responsible for manufacturing cutting-edge sex toys provide a wealth of insight into some of today’s most pressing questions about technology, sexuality, gender, and the self in our increasingly digitized and fractured lives. I center my analysis of the doll community on a tension in the literature on human-robot interaction, sex dolls, and masculinity. Are “sex dolls” an object, or are they something more? More specifically, how do people think about sex dolls differently from other sex toys and sex practices?

The Study of Dolls and Men

Scholarly views on dolls and those who own them are polarized. One school of thought contends that dolls are the latest iteration of the adult industry’s misogyny. These scholars often employ essentialized understandings of gender to argue that “sex dolls” are

¹ While the typical nomenclature is “sex doll,” many oppose this term (Langeaster-James and Bentley 2018). Unless directly quoting or using a specific term for emphasis, I mostly use “doll” throughout this dissertation. See Appendix A for more detail.

another way men express their desire to dominate women. Kathleen Richardson's work is paradigmatic of this view. By drawing parallels to slavery and the most exploitative forms of sex work, Richardson (2016) suggests that dolls give men what they have always wanted—a woman who never talks or says no to sex. Other scholars in this vein have extended Richardson's line of thought to other controversial trends in the doll industry. Childlike dolls, for example, are criticized as legal maneuvering around child pornography laws to sate pedophilic interests (Maras and Shapiro 2017). Other scholars, however, enthusiastically support the development of such technology. Many openly yearn for fully articulated and artificially intelligent sex robots. Dubé and Anctil (2021: 1205) put forth a theory of "erobotics," which they define as "a new unified transdisciplinary field of research—grounded in sexuality and technology positive frameworks—focusing on human-erobot interaction and co-evolution..." Other major volumes dedicated to sex robots share a similar desire for a utopic future of sexuality where such devices are de-stigmatized, and our lives become seamlessly integrated with technology (Levy 2008; Devlin 2018).

But for all the prose dedicated to suppressing or uplifting this contentious technology, few empirical investigations exist. Little is known about dolls and even less about their owners (Döring, Mohseni, and Walter 2020; Harper & Lievesley 2020). Scholarship theorizing what an empirical study of doll ownership might look like has emphasized a need to better understand dolls as one among many available sex toys (Döring and Pöschl 2018). While previous research has studied vibrator use (Herbenick et al. 2009; Herbenick et al. 2017; Lieberman 2017) and the cultural conditions that made vibrators iconic within feminism (Comella 2017), little research has been done on men's

use of sex toys. This perspective often leads to criticism of the shape sex dolls take, as many suggest that dolls represent misogyny in material form. Ray (2016:96) writes:

The sex doll therefore represents an alienation of the woman from her own body—the real woman’s freedom to posit her own ideal of beauty, her freedom to construct herself in a manner at deviance from what popular culture dictates is ‘beautiful’ or ‘sexy’ is lost. Her body becomes the site where the hegemony of the beauty myth is made manifest.

The direct comparison of dolls to women’s bodies not only underscores the tendency of adult novelty manufacturers to exaggerate human features but might even explain their relative lack of uptake compared to vibrators. As Devlin (2018) notes, the *most* popular vibrators and dildos are abstracted from the penis—they are pink, purple, green, and shaped in ways that no longer resemble the body part they supposedly mimic.

As for a study of the *people* who own sex dolls, limited empirical research suggests that most doll owners are heterosexual men (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018; Middleweek 2021). The gendered effect of doll ownership likely stems from the overproduction of female-sexed dolls, the ways in which the industry caters to heterosexual men as a demographic, (Danaher and McArthur 2017; Devlin and Locatelli 2020) as well as men’s general openness to using sex dolls and sex robots compared to women (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018; Nast 2017; Nordmo, Næss, Husøy, and Arnestad 2020). It is not necessarily surprising that so many dolls cater to heterosexual men’s desires, as heterosexuality and masculinity are the adult industry’s bread and butter

(Jones 2020). Moreover, some groups of socially conservative straight men view dolls as a means of isolating themselves from women (Hanson 2022). As Middleweek (2021) suggests in her analysis of online doll forum interactions, doll owners who participate in forum discussions can be conceptualized as a community whose interactional norms are shaped by homosocial interactions. Specifically, doll ownership and the discussions men have with each other about this sexual proclivity reveal how men “negotiate competing structures of masculinity and sexuality” by creating a digital space where they feel safe to express themselves without the shame or stigma associated with owning a sex doll (Middleweek 2021: 370).

Taking An Interactional Approach to Sex Tech

In light of the empirical insights focusing on men’s disproportionate use and interest in sex dolls, in this dissertation seeks to develop an interactional lens for understanding how and why people decide to use this particularly stigmatized technology. In doing so, my aim is to build a framework that can be applied to a range of personified “sex tech” applications, such as feminized chatbots or virtual reality pornography. By taking interactional approach to sex doll ownership, I am better able to attend to the social dynamics undergirding what may be more accurately described as the love and sex doll *community*, rather than individual love and sex doll *owners*.

Transgressive sexualities and other niche interests thrive online. By using semi-anonymous forums people can build communities with other people who share similar interests across disparate spaces. These digital communities function as havens for people who are marginalized by society as well as for people who *believe* they have been marginalized. For example, Gray (2009) demonstrates how new media can be a tool for

queer youth living in rural spaces to display their identity and connect with one another despite the assumption that queer culture exists only in urban centers. However, these same technological affordances give space for the creation of communities such as the “Manosphere,” a group of loosely connected men’s rights websites (e.g., Men Going Their Own Way, The Red Pill, etc.) that promote anti-feminist ideals (Marwick and Caplan 2018). Once established, these digital communities develop interactional norms while acting as repositories for information. As such, when people seek out these communities and discuss their interests with established community members they are subjected to the group’s collective sociality. Further participation can lead to socialization into a deviant identity where group members share countercultural ideals (Adler and Adler 2008). In the case of transgressive sexualities, many of these communities also act as a space for the discursive reworking of their countercultural ideals as rational and normative (Durkin, Forsyth, and Quinn 2006; Sandler 2018).

Thus, in this study of doll ownership, rather than starting from the assumption that sex dolls are a sex toy with negative or positive outcomes, I put forth a sociological analysis of doll ownership that considers how the interactional norms of the community have formed due to the fact that most doll owners are single heterosexual men, and how those norms come to socialize new members into a cogent group identity. Drawing on a symbolic interactionist framework, I argue that doll owners are socialized into what I call *the silicone self*. I use the silicone self as a framework for understanding the confluence of social factors that shape people’s decision to engage in this transgressive sexual behavior despite the stigma that pervades their choices and the generally masculine and heteronormative norms of the community (Middleweek 2021).

Theoretically I draw from three interactional paradigms to present different ways we might conceptualize doll ownership as a social practice. First, I focus on socialization over the life course. Here I connect doll ownership to sexual norms central to the charmed circle, such as the expectation that people be monogamous and continue seeking relationships when they are single rather than disinvest from coupledness (Budgeon 2008). The decision to deviate from normative coupling is shown to be particularly fraught for heterosexual men, as they are deeply invested in their identity as sexually active men. Second, I examine how the community develops a corpus of technical and experiential expertise that is shared via forums and social media to display commitment to this lifestyle choice. In this way, doll ownership is akin to a hobby in that doll owners pride themselves in how they take care of, display, and invest in their transgressive desires (Wilson 1980). However, I complicate this framework by drawing on theories of gender performativity (West and Zimmerman 1987). Because most doll owners are heterosexual men owning feminine dolls, I suggest the personification of inanimate sex toys creates unique opportunities for men who are typically bound by the strictures of heteronormativity and masculinity. Using their doll as a fictive medium owners can explore alternately gendered and sexualized presentations of self. All three of these forms of interaction comprise the silicone self that doll owners are socialized into, and some components are more salient for some doll owners than others. But as suggested before, the thread I weave through each of these interactions is the tension between sex dolls being treated as sex toys, and sex dolls being treated as “something more.”

Dissertation Outline

In *Chapter II: Methods and Data*, I discuss my digital ethnographic process, including my immersion into the wider cultural depictions of dolls and artificial intelligence, and discuss some ethical issues related to studying an oftentimes sensationalized group of people who are, for the most part, skeptical of outsiders and researchers. Much of my research comes from observations and interviews collected from the site I call Prominent Doll Website (PDW), but I also draw from other doll websites and social media. Additionally, I discuss my use of network visualization techniques to show my sample's connections with one another and to contextualize the community's connections to shared cultural references. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of my analytical approach.

In *Chapter III: Intimate Histories and Doll Intimacies*, I examine how relationship experiences over the life course push people toward doll ownership. Rather than framing doll ownership as wanting to control women or pursue transgressive sex acts, I show how the desire to own a doll can be better understood as either a last recourse of single people who have given up on romantic partnering, a sexual aide for romantic partners filling a gap in their relationship, or as a temporary partner for single people who hope to move on from synthetic companionship one day. Moreover, I show how stigma structures people's desires such that they are socialized into a group identity. Because most doll owners do not feel comfortable discussing their interest in dolls with friends, coworkers, or other people, they begin developing their silicone self online amongst a community of like-minded peers. In describing the community's demographic homogeneity, I suggest that interpretations of doll ownership as a misogynistic practice stem from the high concentration of straight men in these online spaces. Indeed, the

typical doll owner is a straight identified older white man who espouses anti-feminist views. Nevertheless, as I show in this chapter, generalizing from this statistical fact obscures women and queer doll owners as well as heterosexual men within the community who actively resist the conflation of doll ownership with misogyny. A persistent desire for normalization and social legitimacy looms large in this chapter, as some doll owners draw on equal rights' discourses to justify their practice, while others draw from the logic of individual choice that is so frequently employed in U.S. political discourse. Nevertheless, the silicone selves doll owners develop as they enter the community advocates for a rational approach to the topic in hopes of prevailing over essentialized views of sex and sexuality as strictly human endeavors.

In *Chapter IV: The Material Dimensions of the Silicone Self: Comments on Sexual Hobbies as Socialization Pathways*, I analyze the discussions doll owners have with one another about how they take care of their dolls. As a stigmatized sexuality, few know where to buy dolls, how to clean them, or even how to have sex with them. I show how doll owners are further socialized into their silicone self as they spend time in the community learning about brands, the materials used to build dolls, ordering processes, and repairs. Further, as doll owners develop an appreciation for the material aspects of doll ownership, they also seek to realize the full potential of dolls as sex toys. Accordingly, they alter their dolls in ways that maximize their sexual pleasure. I frame these discussions and activities as a form of "serious leisure," or what I call a "sex hobby." By framing how people pursue sexual pleasure as a hobby, we gain an appreciation for how the subcultural norms that make up "responsible" doll ownership are formed in relation to liberalism, consumer capitalism, individualism,

heteronormativity, and masculinity. Whereas people's intimate histories were previously shown to foster a desire for artificial companionship, building a corpus of knowledge about the requisite lubricants, cleaning solutions, and techniques for repairing and altering dolls that is necessary to fulfill those desires is predicated on the group efforts of doll owners who have leveraged the anonymity of the internet to create a repository for transgressive knowledge and foster opportunities for learning and sharing from one another. As a sexual hobby, doll owners are shown to be in pursuit of an ideal masturbatory experience that is so immersive it can "trick" the senses in such a way that using dolls to masturbate is indistinguishable, or even better than, sex itself.

In *Chapter V: Expressing the Silicone Self through Gender, Sex, and Play*, I analyze social media and interview data to explore doll owners' personification of their dolls. As lifelike human-sized figures, many dolls take on a meaning that is greater than simply ownership. Dolls are, for many, more than another sex toy that is added to a collection and stowed away when not in use. Instead, many doll owners imbue their dolls with personality traits, likes, and dislikes. I explore this practice as a playful collective fantasy that doll owners maintain in online spaces. By using social media and other digital spaces that are semi-anonymous, doll owners play with their dolls in ways that tap into alternate gender and sexual identities than they themselves identify as. I suggest this act has the potential of exposing doll owners to different forms of social interaction than they are typically exposed to, such as gender-based harassment. However, I also suggest that the "sex play" they engage in tends to reproduce, rather than challenge, status-quo social inequalities. Despite the interactions men are exposed to via personifying feminized dolls online (e.g., sexual harassment), their commitment to identifying as

straight men and the privileges they receive therein make it difficult for doll ownership to become a radically queer sex practice. I conclude with a discussion of why social explanations for these interactional norms are useful for examining the behavioral tendencies of owners of controversial sex tech.

In *Chapter VI: Conclusion*, I summarize my argument by returning to the original question posed at the start of this dissertation. Are “sex dolls” just a toy, or something else? In short, the answer to such a question depends on more than the meaning of sex toy; it depends on the context in which that object is used. I reflect on various applications that sex dolls and sex robots have for people and where the technology might be adapted in other ways. And finally, I discuss why the silicone self is not about *sex dolls* at all, but about the way in which people’s lives are distilled through social structures and reflexive processes that make artificial companionship easier to imagine than challenge the strictures of heteronormativity and masculinity.

CHAPTER II: METHODS AND DATA

You're wondering who I am (secret secret, I've got a secret)

Machine or mannequin (secret secret, I've got a secret)

With parts made in Japan (secret secret, I've got a secret)

I am the modern man - Styx, Mr. Roboto

This dissertation includes ethnographic fieldwork from online forums, social media sites, online sex tech conferences, a virtual tour of a sex doll brothel, interviews with 41 doll community members, and content analysis of a leading third-party online doll vendor. The two forums I analyzed lead the doll community in terms of membership and online activity. They are places where doll companies advertise to doll owners, as well as a space for doll owners to communicate with one another about a variety of topics. The social media platforms Instagram and Twitter are outlets where doll owners create and develop personas for their dolls and share pictures of their dolls with one another while sometimes role-playing as their dolls. The brothel I toured is a flat located in Germany where clients rent time with a doll with “Analog Artificial Intelligence.” The person who gave me a virtual tour of the brothel was one of the 41 doll community members I interviewed and is a co-owner of the brothel. She was one of multiple owners, partners, manufacturers, and vendors that I interviewed or interacted with during my fieldwork. Finally, the vendor I collected data from (pseudonym Sexxy Dolls) is a leading third-party doll sales outlet with more than 700 dolls available for purchase at any

given time. Collectively, these data provide multiple ways to triangulate my analysis of the doll community.

Conducting a Digital Ethnography

Studying the doll community is unlike an ethnography conducted only in the material world. Rather than a field site one can visit and leave, the doll community is comprised of a network of digital spaces used primarily (but not exclusively) by doll owners. While the doll community shares a central interest in dolls, they also share common cultural references. This is no doubt likely due, at least in part, to the distribution of certain observed demographic characteristics – a preponderance of straight, white, Western, men. But as I discuss later in more detail, there is a more specific system of cultural references from which doll owners derive an appreciation of similar aesthetics; namely, fetish, hyperfeminine, and futuristic. To study this community, then, was as much about meeting doll owners on their own digital turf where they discuss the nitty-gritty of doll ownership (e.g., sex, repairs, and photography) as it was immersing myself in the broader system of meaning that constitutes the doll community writ large (e.g., science fiction, manga, and BDSM). It also meant learning about the shared history of doll owners. As a small community, doll owners are familiar with each other's fame, or in some cases, infamy, and past relationships. This is something I too would learn as I studied this community. Moreover, as aware as I was of the importance of individual doll owners, who are so rarely studied in this literature, the presence of the adult industry was faintly present, like a ghost in my data. Like so many other practices, doll ownership exists in relation to the material objects and digital spaces afforded them, in this case, by a for-profit system of adult novelty entrepreneurs more

interested in generating revenue than in catering to the desires of people who, for one reason or another, feel sidestepped by normative society. As such, I also took the doll *industry* as a point of study to better understand the tension between doll owners and doll manufacturers.

Although I divide my fieldwork into four stages, this process was far from linear. One night I would be on a doll forum, the next watching an anime film, while tabulating average measurements during the day, often zigzagging back and forth from one realm of investigation to the next.

The first, and perhaps longest process, was my immersion in the cultural references most familiar to doll owners. In a list nowhere near exhaustive, I watched prominent Hollywood films such as *The Matrix*, *Ex Machina*, *A.I.*, *The Terminator*, *Blade Runner*, and *Lars and The Real Girl*. I also watched other mainstream media productions where a sex doll, or sex doll owner, was prominently featured, including comedian Whitney Cumming's Netflix special, *Can I Touch It*, an episode of TLC's *My Strange Addiction* that features a doll owner, and an episode of Anderson Cooper's *Anderson Live* that featured a doll owner. Two independently produced doll documentaries made by doll owners were suggested to me, which I watched, as well as numerous specials by *VICE News* and other outlets on YouTube featuring dolls and doll owners. I spent countless hours watching, listening, and reading about obscure references to anime, video games, musical artists, and other characters that doll owners use as influences for developing personas. Last but not least, I read Philip K. Dick's seminal novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* which is highly influential among doll owners. Indeed, two interviewees

based their doll's persona on the gynoid Priss from the novel and film adaptation *Blade Runner*.

The second digital ethnographic process was engaging in the community itself in various forms of digital participant observation. I spent approximately 14 months, (December 2019–February 2021) hanging out in chat rooms, commenting and liking social media posts, following dolls on social media accounts, and getting to know doll owners through discussion boards and private messages. The primary digital spaces I studied were two leading doll forums where I was a member. Membership allowed me to participate in chat room discussions, comment on posts, and would eventually lead to the recruitment of interviewees. My participation on Prominent Doll Website (PDW) was daily at first, logging in anywhere from half an hour to more than two hours at a time. Some of this time was also spent on affiliate sites that PDW operates for different purposes. These include, Dolls, Dolls, Dolls (a site that is more focused on sharing pictures of dolls and less on users communicating with one another); The Doll Penthouse (a site that permits more explicit doll photographs than PDW does); and Doll Illustrated (an online magazine that features photography contests). During my initial months of fieldwork, I would log into the chat room at least once a week, saying “hello” and jumping into whatever conversation was happening. I would read posts and comment on threads that were ongoing with some regularity. After gaining familiarity with the websites, the amount of time I spent on PDW lessened. By the end of my fieldwork, I was logging in about once a week. In some cases, interviewees directed me to specific posts that I would come back to read. This most often occurred during interviews, but for months after interviewing people I would still receive occasional emails directing me

toward new posts on the website people thought would interest me. During my time on PDW I took countless field notes and screenshots for later analysis. In terms of the scope of these websites, PDW is a considerable forum. When I began exiting the field in November 2020, I recorded the traffic on the site. At the time, PDW had 24 meta forums (of which, each usually has several smaller forums). Of the 24 major forums, the number of threads ranged from 19 to 19,870. The mean number of threads on PDW is 4,190. Within each thread, the number of individual posts (or “comments”) ranged from 250 – 291,684. The average number of comments is 70,714. In comparison, the other forum which did not allow me to recruit interviewees, Dolls United (DUN) has 34 meta forums with the number of threads ranging 1 to 1,192. The average number of threads on DUN is 244. Each topic has between 1 and 18,290 comments. The average number of comments is 3,675. Both PDW and DUN are currently active with more 75% of the threads having at least one comment within the last 30 days. Both PDW and DUN have new posts every day. While I took screenshots of both PDW and DUN for analysis, in order to protect people’s privacy, I do not use *actual* images of the websites that would reveal where I sourced the material. Instead, I paraphrase, quote in plain text what could be read from the images, or crop images to remove identifiable backgrounds.

In addition to my fieldwork on PDW and DUN, I spent considerable time on Instagram and Twitter. The importance of social media sites became apparent as I studied the doll community more. While many users are active on PDW, DUN, or both, there is a significant number of users who primarily or solely use social media as a means to connect with other doll community members. I initially followed more than 200 social media accounts to study the social media aspect of the doll community. I first found

accounts by simply searching Twitter and Instagram for the terms “love doll,” “sex doll,” “TPE” and “silicone.” As I found and followed accounts, I would then search the accounts they followed or that followed them to find more accounts. I also followed some of the accounts of people I met on PDW and accounts that my interview participants suggested I follow. At one point I found myself following as many or more doll accounts than most doll owners themselves follow.

After following hundreds of social media accounts for months, in November of 2020 I restricted my sample in preparation of collecting a cross-section of post data. First, I deleted duplicate accounts (following the same person, doll, vendor, or manufacturer on both Instagram and Twitter), and second, I removed accounts that were not primarily in English as many doll accounts were in Japanese, Korean, or Chinese. My final sample of social media accounts was 124 (see Table 1). For each account I took screenshots of the profile’s homepage and collected the three most recent posts the account made and imported them into NVivo for analysis. All of the data from these 124 accounts was collected over a two-week period in November of 2020. For Instagram, I only collected photograph posts (no videos or GIFs) and when the post was a series, I made sure to include each photo in the series. I also included the number of “likes” each post received and each picture’s caption. For comments, I only collected “top” level comments. These represent comments which are engaged with the most (as in, “liked” or replied to in a threaded comment). Most posts did not have any comments, and many that did were almost entirely emojis. A common practice on doll accounts was for other doll accounts to comment kissing emojis, heart emojis, peach emojis (indicating a sexually attractive butt), water droplet emojis (indicating sexual fluids), eggplant emojis (indicating an erect

penis), and side-eye grinning emojis (indicating sexual interest). Of the few comments that were not emojis, they were mostly simple expressions that mirrored the intent of emojis, such as, “So hot!” For Twitter, I also collected the three most recent posts that the accounts made as long as they were: 1) not a video or GIF and 2) not a retweet. For Twitter I recorded the number of likes each post received as well as the caption that accompanied each photograph (which was the majority of posts). For similar reasons as indicated on Instagram, I only collected top comments. For both Instagram and Twitter, if the account had fewer than three posts, I collected all the available posts (2 accounts on Instagram and 1 on Twitter had fewer than 3 posts). In total, I coded 367 social media posts (210 IG and 157 Twitter) with a combined number of 560 pictures (339 IG and 221 Twitter).

My third digital ethnographic process was studying the diversity of dolls available for purchase by quantitatively analyzing the online doll vendor *Sexxy Dolls'* (SXD) catalog. SXD is a representative doll vendor that sells products from 16 brands. Like other third-party vendors, Real Doll is absent from their catalog because their products must be ordered directly from the manufacturer or bought secondhand.

I analyzed the entire collection of 738 dolls for sale on SXD. This includes more than 40 variables on material, design, measurements, anatomical sexual functions, and more. In Tables 2 and 3 below, I present data on their sexual measurements and ethnic/racial constructs. (See Appendix B for more detail).

Table 1: Social Media Accounts Sampled for Post Data

	Instagram	Twitter	Total
Doll	27	17	44
Doll/Participant	9	7	16
Owner	2	11	13
Participant	3	2	5
Vendor	22	6	28
Manufacturer	5	8	13
Doll Media	2	1	3
Doll Services	1	0	1
Spam	0	1	1
Total	71	53	124

Note: “Doll” is defined as an account that is presented as if it were the doll itself having a personal social media account, usually in first person perspective but not always; “Doll/Participant” is defined as an account that is presented as if it were the doll itself having a personal social media account, usually in first person but not always, and is owned and operated by someone who participated in this dissertation as an interviewee; “Owner” is defined as the personal account of someone who is publicly open as a doll owner; “Participant” is defined as the personal account of someone who is publicly open as a doll owner and participated in this dissertation as an interviewee; “Vendor” is defined as an account that is a third party reseller of dolls; “Manufacturer” is defined as an account of a company that makes dolls; “Doll Media” is defined as an account that posts either original doll content and/or recirculates media content about dolls; “Doll Services” is defined as an account that offers repair, cleaning, or customizing services for dolls; and “Spam” is defined as an account that attempts to mimic a well-known doll manufacturer.

Table 2. Love and Sex Doll Sexual Measurements

Gender	Body Measurement	n	Minimum	Mean	Maximum	SD
Women Dolls		712				
	<i>Anal Depth</i>	393	2.76	6.3	7.87	1.7
	<i>Oral Depth</i>	325	2.76	5.12	7.48	0.63
	<i>Vaginal Depth</i>	393	5.91	7.09	19.69	0.87
Men Dolls		21				
	<i>Anal Depth</i>	16	4.72	5.91	6.7	0.75
	<i>Oral Depth</i>	6	2.76	3.94	4.72	1.02
	<i>Penis Length</i>	21	3.94	7.09	9.84	1.46
	<i>Penis Girth</i>	10	1.5	1.69	2.19	0.27
Trans Dolls		5				
	<i>Anal Depth</i>	5	6.7	6.7	6.7	-
	<i>Oral Depth</i>	4	5.12	5.12	5.12	-
	<i>Vaginal Depth</i>	1	6.7	6.7	6.7	-
	<i>Penis Length</i>	4	5.12	5.12	5.12	-
	<i>Penis Girth</i>	4	1.3	1.3	1.3	-
	<i>Testicle Width</i>	4	2.44	2.44	2.44	-
		N = 738				

Note: All measurements are reported in inches. The original data were collected in centimeters and were converted into imperial measurements. It should be noted that many dolls were not advertised with all or any of their measurements and therefore a considerable amount of data is missing. Part of this is due to construction. For example, most dolls do not have oral sexual functions. However, most missing data is because customers choose the measurements they want, and therefore, advertising a specific measurement is not possible.

In terms of race, cataloguing was not as clear as the other variables. Only 101 (13.78%) of the dolls explicitly advertised their race or ethnicity. Therefore, for the majority of dolls, I inferred their race based on phenotypic determinations in conjunction with contextual clues such as costumes or racializing language used in the advertisements. For example, some dolls were coded as Asian because of their phenotypical construction *and* because they were dressed in traditional Japanese attire to look like a stereotypical geisha. Acknowledging that race is socially constructed and that

phenotypes are not a perfect predictor of racial or ethnic belonging, and that phenotype may not even be the best word to use for a manufactured object, I did my best to adhere to the schema of racial categories used in the United States. My estimation of the remaining 632 dolls is as follows: 510 white (69.58%); 67 Asian/Pacific-Islander (9.14%); 6 Black/African American (0.82%); 1 Latina (0.14%) and 34 indeterminate non-white (4.64%). In the case of “indeterminate non-white,” the skin tone of the doll suggested that it was non-white, but there were no contextual signifiers to suggest race or ethnicity. In Table 3 I break down the racial and ethnic categorization of the dolls.

Table 3. Love and Sex Doll Species, Racial, and Ethnic Demographics

Gender	Species, Race or Ethnicity	n	% of total
Women Dolls		712	
	<i>Human</i>	698	98%
	<i>Elf</i>	7	0.01%
	<i>Vampire</i>	3	0.004%
	<i>Fox</i>	2	0.003%
	<i>Dothraki</i>	1	0.001%
	<i>Alien Elf</i>	1	0.001%
	<i>White</i>	522	73.31%
	<i>Asian</i>	110	15.45%
	<i>Black/ African Am.</i>	20	2.81%
	<i>Latina/ Hispanic</i>	17	2.39%
	<i>Middle Eastern</i>	1	0.001%
	<i>Mixed Race</i>	5	0.007%
	<i>Other</i>	36	5.06%
Men Dolls		21	
	<i>Human</i>	21	100%
	<i>White</i>	21	100%
Trans Dolls		5	
	<i>Human</i>	5	100%
	<i>White</i>	5	100%
		N = 738	

Note: The majority of the dolls did not advertise their racial or ethnic category. Determinations were made by a constellation of factors including skin tone, context clues in the advertisement image or description, and were based on the schema of racialization used in the United States. A number of racial determinations were also made based on the collapsing of ethnic advertisement. For example, “British” dolls were coded as white.

Finally, my fourth ethnographic process was the recruitment of interview participants via PDW, social media, and through snowball sampling referrals. Throughout this process I always disclosed my position as a researcher. On PDW I posted a thread asking interested members to contact me, whereas on social media I used private/direct message features to ask people if they wanted to be interviewed. In two cases, people referred me to the personal blogs of people they felt I should interview. Those blogs had contact forms that I used to connect with the participant. One participant suggested I speak with somebody at a U.S. based doll company and informed me that the website's contact form was regularly attended. This is how I recruited Anthony.

My interview procedure was regularly adapted to meet the needs of conducting a digital ethnography during a pandemic. Paramount to this study is the fact that its design was approved by my university's IRB and underwent numerous revisions, all of which were cleared *prior* to altering my research activities. The procedure can be best described as follows: After obtaining IRB approval for the initial study, I made a personal account on PDW and obtained approval from site administrators to make two public posts asking community members to contact me if they were interested in being interviewed. One post was in the "general discussion" forum and the other was posted in a forum specific to community members who own male-sexed dolls. This post was my attempt to diversify the sample beyond men who own female-sexed dolls. My posts garnered significant attention. To date, the "general discussion" post has more than 5 pages worth of comments and more than 2,000 views. From this post I recruited 23 PDW members who then referred four more members via snowball sampling techniques, including two from personal blogs and one from a manufacturer. In addition to recruiting from PDW, I

recruited directly via social media by direct messaging accounts. This resulted in 14 more interviews. All participants were asked to complete synchronous interviews over the phone, Zoom, or Skype. For the 28 participants who completed synchronous interviews, we began by establishing informed consent and allowing the participants to ask questions about the study. In all but one case I only recorded audio which was later transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo for analysis. For my virtual tour of a doll brothel, I recorded video and audio. The remaining 13 participants did not want to complete synchronous interviews. Their reasons for doing so varied. Some were not able to speak openly as their partner did not know or approve of their doll ownership, some lacked strong verbal English skills and preferred to write their answers, some were balancing work and life in a pandemic while *also* living in a foreign country which made matching our schedules difficult. In those cases, I had participants submit typed responses on the condition that I could follow up if I had questions about their answers. All 41 participants gave me permission to contact them if I had follow up questions, and in many cases I did. Two interviews were completed as “pre” and “post” interviews, meaning that the first interview occurred before their first doll had arrived (but had been ordered), and the second interview was completed within 60 days of their doll’s arrival.

Sampling this population was difficult for reasons that became apparent early in my fieldwork. Many interviewees approached me with skepticism and my motives were often questioned. As such, it should be noted that the recruitment of interviewees was non-random and certain limitations arise due to this. Obviously, the doll owners included in this study self-selected and therefore, likely represent a segment of doll owners that seek, to a greater or lesser extent, a degree of normalization of their shared sexual

practices and fantasies. It should also be noted that in addition to the skew of data favoring those who self-select, the data also skew in favor of heterosexual people, white people, men, and people who own female-sexed dolls. Thus, this study does not seek to generalize to all doll owners. Nor does it even reflect the attitudes of what might be the majority of doll owners, as most doll owners are skeptical of participating in research studies. However, despite the lack of generalizability, qualitative research excels in theorizing small populations that are difficult to gain access to, and I am confident this sample is one of the most diverse samples of this population studied to date (Adler 1993; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Interview Demographic Characteristics

The interview data in this study come from adult doll community members representing a range of demographic categories. These include 31 men, 7 women, and 3 non-binary/trans people. The majority are heterosexual (27) or what I call “heterosexually variant” (4). Heterosexually variant includes 2 self-identified “non-practicing heterosexual” people, 1 “trans inclusive heterosexual” and 1 “85% heterosexual.” There are also a range of LBTQ+ doll community members: bisexual (4); queer (2); demisexual (1); pansexual (1); asexual (1) and one person who declined to answer. The majority of doll community members in this sample are white (28). Additionally, there are 3 Hispanic-white, 3 mixed-race, 2 Native American, 1 African American, 1 Mexican American, 1 Asian, and 1 Black/ Mi’kmaq doll community members. One declined to provide his race, and all races were self-identified. In terms of religious affiliation, a majority of the doll community members in this sample identified as atheist, agnostic or non-religious (18). The second largest religious category was spiritual but non-religious

(9) followed by Christian/Catholic (8). Additionally, there was one doll community member each of Mormon, Pagan, Taoist, Satanist, and “other” religious affiliations. One doll community member declined to provide his religious affiliation. The precise age of these doll community members is difficult to assess given that five interviewees provided ranges rather than exact ages. Accordingly, the doll community members fall into age ranges: 20-29 (3); 30-39 (8); 40-49 (12); 50-59 (13); and 60-69 (4). One declined to provide his age. Similar to age, 10 doll community members provided either ranges for their income or gave qualitative descriptors rather than numerical answers. Seven doll community members declined to provide their income. Of the doll community members who provided a numerical income, \$0 – \$24,999 (6); \$25,000 - \$49,999 (8); \$50,000 - \$74,999 (7); \$75,000 - \$99,000 (3); and \$100,000+ (6). Qualitative income reports are one “high,” one “comfortable” and two “low.” The interviewed doll community members represent a range of completed and incomplete degrees and certifications: less than high school or equivalent (1); high school or equivalent (6); some college (6); associate, certificate or specialized degree (6); four-year university or college degree (13); and professional/graduate degree (5). Four doll community members declined to provide their education.

Of particular importance for this study is the relationships doll owners have with other people as well as with their dolls. For this reason, I report their relationship status with variations that reflect their position on relationships. Of the 41 doll community members, 12 were married or in stable partnerships. Four partnered individuals comprise two couples that I interviewed (Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, and Ophelia and Sean). Of the remaining 28 interviewed doll community members, 15 consider themselves single on a

permanent basis. That is to say, they have decided to remove themselves from the dating pool altogether. The remaining 13 single individuals who were open to forming new relationships had a range of relationship experiences. Six of them had been divorced, and the remaining 7 of them had been in long-term relationships. Of the remaining two single people who were open to dating, one had very little relationship experience and the other had only casually dated. One doll community member did not report his relationship history. Regarding doll ownership, three people I spoke with did not yet have dolls but were in the process of procuring a doll for themselves in the near future. The remaining 38 people had a range of dolls. By far, most doll community members had exclusively female-sexed dolls (33) or female-sexed dolls in conjunction with a male doll(s) (2) or a trans insert for their doll (2). I only interviewed one person who had exclusively male-sexed dolls. Additionally, most doll owners had more than one doll (26) with a range of 1 to 17 dolls. For a complete breakdown of demographic characteristics see Table 4.

Given that this community *is* small and tight knit, I also used a network model to visualize how the community clusters around certain doll community members and shared cultural touchstones. Using the interview transcripts, I coded each reference to another person, doll, or cultural example as nodes. Not all participants referenced something specific, thus the network is only composed of 27 interviewees. Nevertheless, the network shows four clusters that roughly approximate ideological camps among the doll community.

Table 4. Interviewee Demographic Characteristics

Name	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Age	Race and Ethnicity	Religion	Education	Annual Income	Relationship Status	Dolls
Alex	Man	Heterosexual	28	Asian	Christian	M.B.A	\$150K	Partnered	F (14)
Alexander	Man	Heterosexual	36	White	Atheist	-	\$8,400	Single	0
Anthony	Man	Demisexual	33	White	Atheist	Some college	\$30K	Single	0
AS	Woman	Bisexual	38	White	Mormon	High school	-	Married and separated	M (5)
Auron	Man	Non-practicing heterosexual	57	White	Agnostic	A.S. and A.A.	< \$25K	Single (permanently)	0
Benji	Man	Heterosexual	43	White	Spiritual non-religious	G.E.D.	\$20-25K	Partnered	F (2)
Blake	Non-binary trans	Asexual	45	Native American, white passing	Taoist	G.E.D.	\$80K	Single (permanently)	F (1)
Casanova	Man	Heterosexual	50s	White	Christian	B.A.	“comfortable”	Married	F (17)
Chuck	Man	Heterosexual	47	White	Spiritual non-religious	Technical degree	-	Single (permanently)	F (2)
DeeDee	Man	Heterosexual	40	White	Atheist	-	\$55K	Single (permanently)	F (2)
Desmond	Man	Heterosexual	66	White	Agnostic	High school	“high”	Married	F (3) & M (1)
Dollbby	Woman	Heterosexual	36	White	Christian	A.A.	-	Married	F (6)
DLFCKR	Man	85% heterosexual	40s	White	Atheist	B.A.	\$100K	Single	F (1)
DollLover 1953	Man	Heterosexual	66	White	Agnostic	A.A.	\$35K	Single (permanently)	F (4)
Evan	Man	Heterosexual	56	White	Atheist	B.A.	\$60K	Single (permanently)	F (3)
Mr. Fisher	Man	Heterosexual	53	White	Atheist	Less than high school	\$200K	Married (to Mrs. Fisher)	F (1)
Mrs. Fisher	Woman	Bi-curious	59	White	Spiritual non-religious	Technical degree	\$200K	Married (to Mr. Fisher)	F (1)
Franco	Man	Heterosexual	44	Hispanic white	Atheist	-	-	Single	F (12)
Gary	Man	Heterosexual	52	White	Spiritual non-religious	A.S.	“low”	Single (divorced)	F (7)
Gilmour	Man	Heterosexual	50	White	Non-religious	Some college	\$48K	Single (permanently)	F (3)
Harry	Man	Heterosexual	55	White	Christian	B.A.	\$70K	Single (permanently)	F (1)
Helen	Woman	Heterosexual	51	White	Spiritual non-religious	B.A.	\$0	Single (permanently)	F (2)
Jonathan	Man	Heterosexual (trans inclusive)	60	White	Atheist	B.A.	\$30K	Single (divorced)	F (6)
JT	Man	Heterosexual	57	White	Catholic	M.A.	-	Married	F (2)

Table 4. Interviewee Demographic Characteristics, continued

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Liam	Man	Heterosexual	40s	White	Christian	M.S.	\$100K	Single (permanently)	F (3)
Logan	Man	Heterosexual	54	White	Non-religious	B.A.	\$40K	Single (divorced)	F (5)
Loosey Goosey	Man	Heterosexual	42	Hispanic Italian	Other	B.A.	\$60K	Single (permanently)	F (2)
Lucas	Man	Heterosexual	20s	Mixed-race	Agnostic	-	\$70K	Single (permanently)	F (3)
Moses	Man	Heterosexual	48	African American	Atheist	Some college	“low”	Single	F (4)
Oliver	Man	-	-	-	-	B.S.	-	-	F (2)
Ophelia	Non-binary	Pansexual/queer	34	Black / Mi'kmaq	Pagan	M.A.	\$35K	Married (to Sean)	F & T (1)
Owen	Man	Heterosexual	37	Mixed-race	Atheist	B.A.	\$75K	Single	F (6)
Quicksilver	Man	Heterosexual	32	Mexican American	Catholic	High school	\$70-80K	Single (permanently)	F (2)
Royce	Woman	Non-practicing heterosexual	50s	Mixed-race	Spiritual non-religious	Some college	\$130K	Single (permanently)	F & M (3)
Ryan	Man	Heterosexual	38	White	Non-religious	High school	\$27K	Single	F (1)
Sean	Man	Queer	43	White	Satanist	B.S.	\$35K	Married (to Ophelia)	F & T (1)
Shelly	Non-binary AFAB	Femme attracted queer	52	Native American, white passing	Spiritual non-religious	B.A.	-	Single	F (3)
Ulysses	Man	Heterosexual	67	White	Agnostic	Some college	\$60K	Single (permanently)	F (1)
Venus	Woman	Bi-sexual heteroromantic	28	Hispanic white	Spiritual non-religious	Some college	\$24K	Single (divorced)	F (1)
Wildcat!	Man	Heterosexual	45	White	Catholic	B.A.	\$57K	Single (permanently)	F (1)
Winona	Woman	Bisexual	42	White	Spiritual non-religious	M.F.A.	\$21K	Partnered	F (1)
N = 41									

Note: All income figures are converted in USD (\$) and all education degrees are reported in their United States equivalent, (e.g., the Canadian “Grade 12” is reported as “high school or equivalent”). For relationship status, a “(permanently)” means that the participant does not want to date anyone. For doll gender, the number in “()” indicates how many dolls the participant has. F = female sexed doll; M = male sexed doll; T = trans doll. Sean and Ophelia’s doll was originally purchased as a female doll and they later purchased a penis insert for the doll.

The network below was made using the Yifan Hu multilevel algorithm. This network construction technique is a force-directed model with a multi-level algorithm that reduces complexity and increases efficiency. Below, the major cluster centers on references to the movie Ryan Gosling starred in, *Lars and The Real Girl*. The participants mentioning this movie most often referenced the film as a positive example of the normalization of dolls. Thus, Whitney Cumming’s Netflix special, *Can I Touch It?* is also

centered in this cluster as it is also considered a positive normalizing representation of doll ownership. Another aspect of this cluster is the number of references occurring between participants and their dolls. These doll owners demonstrated a deep familiarity with one another and each other's dolls, often mutually referencing each other during their interviews. A second smaller cluster centers on Turd Flinging Monkey (TFM). TFM is a Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) content producer who owns a doll (Celestina, also referenced) and encourages his audience to "just get a doll." A third cluster centers on Oliver, who is a well-respected doll vendor interviewed in this study. The ties to him represent purchases made via his business. Finally, a cluster centering the movie *Blade Runner* appears, likely due to its notoriety as a science fiction film featuring "replicants" used for sex work (Dick 2014 [1968]).

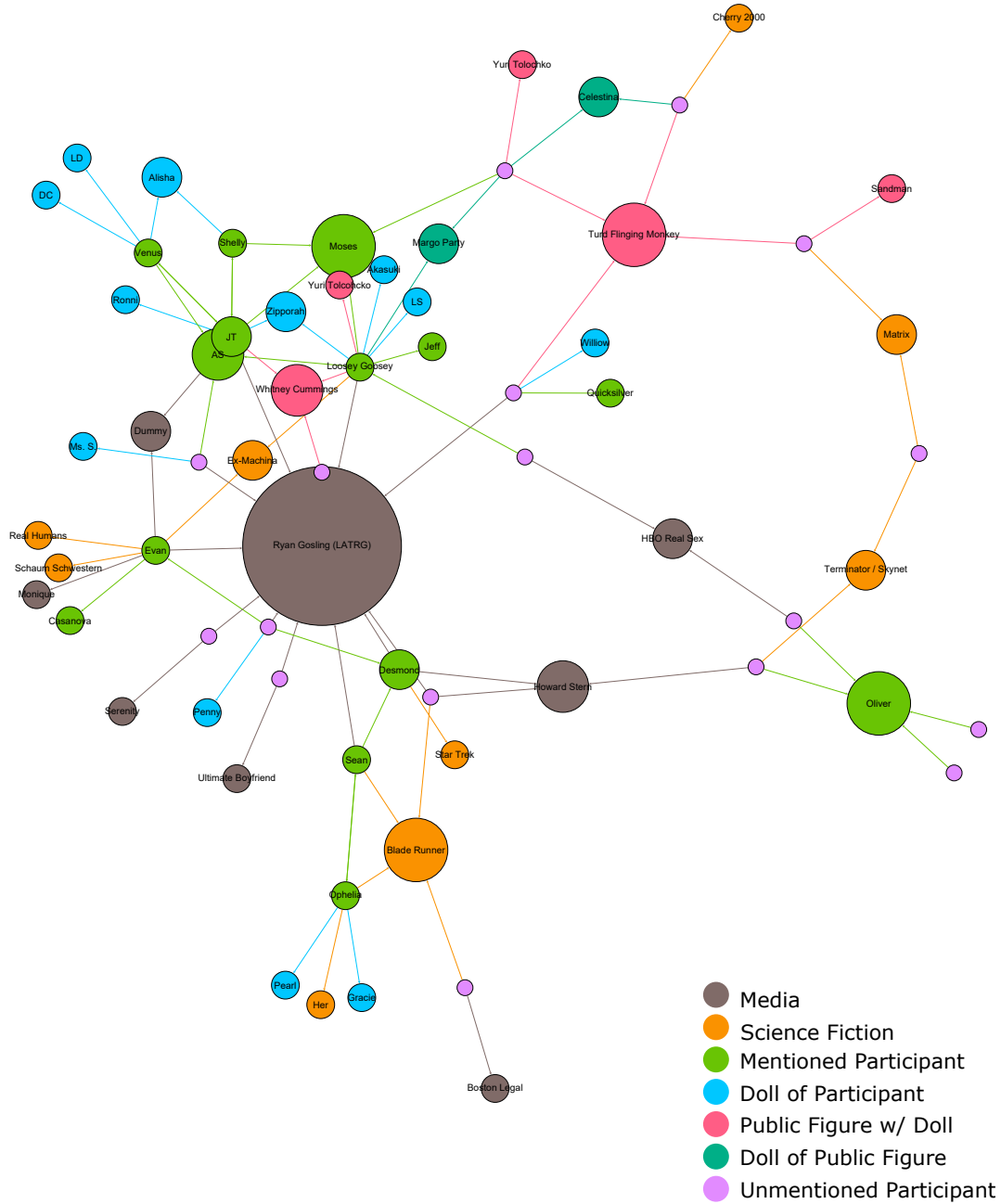
Analysis

To analyze my qualitative data, I created a large data set in NVivo. This dataset included my transcribed and de-identified interviews, field notes, and social media posts. Collectively, these data provide more than content analysis. This is a digital ethnography (Caliandro 2018). The goal of digital ethnography is to, "mov[e] across social media environments...to map the practices through which users and devices construct social formations around an object on the move" (Caliandro 2018: 570). Accordingly, by virtually placing myself in the digital ecosystem of doll ownership, and engaging with doll community members directly, I have collected data that speak to the subjective experience of doll ownership in a way that goes beyond analyzing the discursive practices that occur in these online spaces. My observational data speak to what happens in my absence, and my interview data contextualize the social-psychological processes

occurring offscreen. By using networks analysis as an approximation to guide my qualitative coding, I can identify how the community is divided into ideological fractions. And finally, my content analysis of social media posts and the quantitative analysis of the SXD catalog allow me show in more objective terms, the social media habits of doll owners and analyze the available dolls, such that community members' practices are examined within their subcultural context and material limitations.

My analysis was guided by my field notes where I recorded observations and insights that I gleaned while researching a community that was new to me and, as I often reminded myself, completely foreign to most people. As I became familiar with the insider-speak and norms of the doll community, I regularly noted my developing familiarity with the doll community so that I would be able to revisit and analyze the questions outsiders would likely ask. These field notes were accompanied by methodological memos that synthesized my thoughts on the community, noted my methodological process and decision-making, and systemized my thinking. By taking field notes and memos during my fieldwork, my goal was to have a record that aided in my development of a rich conceptual analysis of the social phenomena I was studying (Headworth 2019).

Figure 1. Doll Interview Network



In addition to my field notes and memos I also transcribed, verbatim, all of my interviews.² After transcribing and de-identifying all of the data, I began to code the interview data along with my fieldnotes and research memos. My coding used a traditional grounded theory approach that occurs across two stages (Charmaz 1983). The first stage of coding was open and allowed for many themes to emerge across the data; thus, revealing an array of possible theoretical concepts, nuances, and patterns as I read, reread, and coded the interview data. The second stage of coding was focused on synthesizing the data into major abstract concepts and used the network analysis as a reference point in terms of patterns I was seeing within my interview data. My focused codes specifically oriented the data according to three themes which together comprise what I call the silicone self.

² Quotes have been lightly altered for readability (e.g., removing pausers and repeated words or paraphrased). In some cases quotes have been emphasized using italics to indicate the speaker's own emphasis. My own emphases are noted.

CHAPTER III: INTIMATE HISTORIES AND DOLL INTIMACIES

Liam lives in the midwestern United States, works in IT, is divorced, and is in his late 40s. He enjoys his job and is proud of his six-figure income. He and his friends have similar hobbies: gaming, cars, and technology. They go out for drinks on weekends. In many ways, Liam is not so different from other heterosexual men in the United States, except for the fact that he secretly owns three life-sized sex dolls. Before agreeing to be interviewed, Liam wanted to ask me about my life. He, like many other doll owners I would come to know, wanted to know *who* the researcher conducting an ethnographic study of the doll community is, and whether he would give them a fair shake. In asking me whether I have had sex, been in a relationship, used dating apps, and how old I was, what Liam *really* wanted to know is if I had been heartbroken. Could I possibly understand what it is like, at a deep emotional level, to want to give up on relationships? Might I relate to the idea that, after one or more devastations, the adage that there are “plenty of fish in the sea” no longer applied?

A common avenue of research in human-robot interactions is understanding why somebody might become attracted to inanimate objects. Some have theorized that dolls provide men what they really want, control (Cassidy 2016; Richardson 2016). Others have suggested that dolls and robots allow people to circumvent the illegality of pursuing taboo desires, be they pedophilia, rape, or just plain abusive (Richardson 2016). Or perhaps it is the case that doll owners suffer from some sort of mental illness, either a paraphilia (Ferguson 2010) or delusions about the sentience of a humanlike doll. But few scholars have considered that other humans, and people’s experiences with one another, might be the strongest driver of why people choose to be intimate with the inanimate.

In this chapter I analyze how people's relationships with one another are part of the socialization process behind doll community members' silicone selves. I examine the typical, or modal, doll owner, – straight, white, older, heterosexual men who have been divorced or dumped one too many times. While this group has received the most attention from scholars, as they are the most likely to express misogynistic and anti-feminist views within this community, they do not have a monopoly on misery. I also show how doll owners who occupy thin dating markets (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012), such as trans doll owners, find comfort with dolls. Moreover, I show how not all doll owners are even single and have chosen to use dolls in ways that extend the boundaries of human relationships. Sometimes dolls are used in ways that address sexual and emotional shortcomings within the bounds of relationships, as can be the case for swingers, polyamorous couples, but even for single people who, for a brief moment in time, are a bit lonely. Finally, I reflect on how doll owners variously conceptualize doll ownership as a “sex practice.” Sometimes doll owners view this as merely the use of a sex toy. After all, dolls are made by sex toy manufacturers. At other times though, doll owners suggest their community has kinship with other marginalized sexual identities, and that their social approval is only a matter of time. Others, though infrequent, express a sort of sexual orientation, or preference, for synthetics.

The Relationship Hamster Wheel

Looking back over his life, Ulysses is, for the most part, satisfied. Before we talked about his dolls, he assured me he was not “one of those 67-year-old virgins.” Growing up, Ulysses was a military brat, the only son, and the youngest child. “I was surrounded by women all the time, my mom, sisters, their friends, all through the 60s and

70s. It was not unusual on a weekend to have 12 women in the house,” he said. Being the “youngest man in the house” and interacting with so many women helped Ulysses later in life as he matured and began dating. He had no problem talking to women and eventually married, twice. Ulysses said:

So, I went through my second divorce, and as I was going through this long separation, I moved. And I came to where my parents currently are in Arizona, and I dated a bit, you know, over the course of three or four years and I met some women but it kind of seemed like the same old thing over and over again. And, anyhow, I got tired of the relationship hamster wheel.

Ulysses represents the typical doll owner in many ways. For many people on PDW, they describe intimate relationship burnout after having been in one or multiple long-term relationships, and decide that rather than continuing to date, they would prefer to be single and cease pursuing romantic partnership with humans. These doll owners assert that their desire to own dolls rarely stems from a lack of intimate experience; rather, it is expressed as a *refined desire*. Or as Ulysses calls it, “the relationship hamster wheel.”

On PDW, and elsewhere throughout the virtual doll community, many posts discuss a person’s lifetime of relationship experiences that shaped their sexual identity before they decided to purchase a doll. Most often, these posts account for the decision to remain single and own dolls *in lieu* of human partners. Framing the decision to purchase a doll as a rational choice, rather than due to a lack of sexual and romantic experiences, is one way doll owners develop a silicone self that resists being stereotyped as lonely

people who are unable to attract partners. For heterosexual men, this also accounts for the masculine expectation of sexual activity and resists the stigma of singleness (Budgeon 2008; Connell 1987; Middleweek 2021). Instead of the typical virility associated with masculinity, these men account for the decision to be single by reframing their masculine identity around individual choices that privilege personal pleasure (Plummer 2003a). For some, this identity is politicized, as they externalize their relationship woes to issues stemming from the influx of modern feminist discourses within heterosexual relationships. Thus, doll owners who identify as Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) view doll ownership as a challenge, or threat, to the encroachment of feminism in everyday life. But other doll owners are less critical of feminism, or even self-described feminists. These doll owners, who similarly have chosen to forgo romantic partnership with humans, resist an antagonistic framing of doll owners and “everyone else,” opting instead to view doll ownership as an alternate, rather than replacement, form of companionship.

While doll owners such as Ulysses are satisfied with their decision to leave “the relationship hamster wheel” for good, the decision to forgo relationships can be painful for people who desired what many would consider a normal life. Gary said, “I’ve always wanted the family, you know, the family, the kids, and the home, but I’ve never met a woman who was faithful [to me].” Others, having raised children within marriages, are pained by lost relationships. Harry said:

My ex-wife decided to leave. And so that really hurt because it had been one of those really awesome relationships ... and I tried dating, but the

online dating scene is absolutely horrific ... I gave up, I just gave up. I really did. It depressed me. I was going to therapy but, yeah, I'm done.

Many doll owners, even after choosing to purchase a doll, continue to idealize and, to some extent desire, human relationships. But due to the circumstances of their romantic histories, dolls are seen as a solution to the shortcomings of human relationships—dolls cannot cheat, divorce, or disappoint. The benefits of inanimate dolls extend beyond their lack of agency, too. For some doll owners, their sexual and gender preferences intersect in such a way as to locate them in a thin dating market (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). For example, Blake, who is Native American, trans, non-binary, and asexual, said:

When I broke up with my last girlfriend, it just wasn't good. And I looked at the potential of ever really dating again and I was like, I don't think I really want to do this anymore. You know? I understand that, having someone around is beneficial, but dating in that capacity, it's difficult to say to someone, "Look, I just want to hold hands and hang out." I don't want to have children, I don't want to get married, but let's be long-term. Most women are not down for that.

As Blake's experience illustrates, difficulty in finding compatible long-term partners extends beyond the typical doll owner—heterosexual white men. The desire for inanimate dolls is, for many, due to offline social circumstance rather than an innate sexual attraction to inanimate objects. The online doll community provides digital space

where people become socialized into their silicone self as they manage the emotional and sexual constraints of offline romantic relationships among people who are similarly discouraged about the prospect of finding long-term partnership (Adams-Santos 2020; Ferguson 2010).

Although they are a minority within the doll community, it is important to discuss MGTOW doll owners.³ MGTOW doll owners view dolls as a way to simultaneously meet sexual and emotional needs while actively rejecting modern courtship, which they view as tainted by modern feminist women. Liam said, “I’m a big proponent of MGTOW ... I’m divorced, for argument’s sake, over 10 years and quite honestly, I’ve done a lot of dating.” After Liam’s divorce, he was drawn to Turd Flinging Monkey and other MGTOW content creators on sites such as YouTube and BitChute who encourage their subscribers to purchase dolls. When I asked Liam if he would ever leave his dolls for a woman, he said:

It’s very hard to explain, but over time, they begin to take on some kind of personification. And I believe, guys, are incredibly simple creatures.

Biologically we are very simple ... but if I’m really honest with myself, you know, I don’t really give a shit about anything they [women] care about. They’re not interested in cars, or IT, or video games, or stuff that I care about, and we lie to each other. When I’m with an organic female I just want their company ... so I don’t need any of that, right? I can just

³ Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) is one of the loosely connected men’s rights groups that congregate online and is associated with the Manosphere (Marwick and Caplan 2018). This includes pick-up artists, The Red Pill, and other neo-masculinity movements that condemn feminism and support patriarchy based on essentialized differences between men and women (Ward 2020).

project what I want onto the doll and get all of that psychologically satisfied and I'm never disappointed.

Liam desires a partner (or partners, since he owns multiple dolls) who meet his idealized sexual desires while allowing him to pursue his own interests. He attributes the inability to realize his ideal relationship to essentialized differences between “simple men” and, presumably, “complex” women. His assessment of masculinity and femininity renders heterosexual relationships in essentialized terms that are opposed and, inevitably, disappointing (Ward 2020). He also accounts for his practice by saying that he *projects* his needs onto his dolls, thus underscoring the selfhood process at work in doll ownership. Although he came to doll ownership after his divorce and discovery of MGTOW, like many men in the community, he prioritizes individual desires that he thinks are best met by personifying inanimate dolls.

The presence of MGTOW doll owners is contentious within the doll community. While the desire to forgo human relationships because of the “relationship hamster wheel” is widely shared, some view MGTOW doll owners as misogynistic. Many community members are aware of allegations of the doll community's misogyny (Richardson 2016). Thus, some view MGTOW doll owners as a barrier to social acceptance. To resist this association, other heterosexual men account for their decision to own a doll by articulating a silicone self that discursively distances themselves from MGTOW doll owners. Chuck said:

I've kind of been doing my own thing for the last five years. I would not at all consider myself part of that movement, that sort of, "Men Going Their Own Way." Even though I live that kind of way, I do not identify with those fucking people, because those guys are kind of misogynistic. I don't feel that way, but I sort of live like, that type of lifestyle. You know what I mean? Politically or socially, I don't identify with those guys.

Like other heterosexual men in the doll community, Chuck came to doll ownership over a process he called "a kind of little spiritual path" after suffering from serious illness and heartbreak. Even though he has forgone human relationships due to personal health reasons (Jecker 2021), he finds the anti-feminist rhetoric of MGTOW doll owners problematic. This contention highlights how becoming socialized into one's silicone self requires some reflexivity regarding one's views of gender and sexuality. While many doll owners share a desire for solitude and have some personal experience with "the relationship hamster wheel," not all community members agree that doll ownership ought to be seen as political resistance to modern relationship expectations. As Moses said:

As far as the MGTOW movement, I'm not really keen on that whole thing. I'm not keen on the idea of it, because it's predicated on the idea of men replacing organic women with synthetic women. And I have never, ever been an advocate of that kind of thinking ... just because a person has had a bad experience or even a bad string of experiences with women, you know, it doesn't mean all women are bad.

In addition to opposing the encroachment of MGTOW rhetoric in the doll community, Moses readily accepts opportunities to advocate for, what he calls, “synthetic companionship.” Moses has been featured in magazine articles, academic scholarship, cable television programs, and internet videos about doll owners. He said:

I’m one of the few idollaters⁴ who actually publicly say, “Yes, I love synthetic women” ... I’ve said this to the doll community, on PDW, because a lot of them don’t want to do interviews, whether it’s an academic or in a media context, because they’re afraid that they’ll be misconstrued, or they’re afraid like, you know, family or friends or coworkers will see them, but I try to stress that, if we don’t speak to the media, the media is just going to make shit up, so, you know, it’s to our advantage [to be interviewed].

Here Moses lends insight into his motivation to participate in research projects such as the present study. Doll owners and community members react to the stigma their practice carries, and thus seek anonymity because they fear negative consequences in their personal lives. However, the doll community is also frustrated with how their practice is presented in academic research and the media because they view the decision to forgo human relationships as rational after going through one or several major breakups. Moses views the normalization of doll ownership positively, and thus takes an active role in

⁴ A term some doll owners use as a way to self-identify as a person who is attracted to synthetic partners.

publicly identifying as a doll owner in hopes of de-stigmatizing doll ownership. His silicone self connects his online presence and offline presentation of self by being a publicly open doll owner. Similarly, many of the women I interviewed lamented the presence of MGTOW within the community and surmised this was keeping women's participation in the community low. For example, A.S. hopes more women will join the community if they see women doll owners like her and thus she takes an active role in research and social media. She began our interview by asking me, "So have you met any other women, or are we still few and far between?" Indeed, in addition to interviewing mostly men, observation of PDW and UDN suggest the overwhelming majority of doll owners are men. As Middleweek (2021) has shown, this demographic inequality tends to result in heterosexual men's desires being prioritized in forum discussions.

Desiring Humans and Dolls

TOPIC: ASK A WIFE

Hey, taking over my husband's account. :) I've answered a few questions about the wife's reaction to a doll to people here and I figure while I'm on holiday, I'd see if anyone wants to do an Ask Me Anything thread. I find these kind of fun and interesting.

So what do you all want to know from a wife whose husband has a doll girlfriend?

RE: What are your thoughts when he's pounding her? And does he ask you to manipulate her on him I had my wife fuk me with a torso doll once

or twice I loved it. I got her a huge dildo so I figure we should keep it fair and thx for your input and interest in these topics.

In early August 2020 I found an unusual proposition in my PDW inbox. Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, who were new doll owners, asked if I would be willing to interview them *together*. I had been purposefully sampling any doll owners who were not heterosexual men, and so the chance to interview a married woman was especially intriguing. I reasoned that, at this point, I had already navigated people communicating with me via their doll's persona, along with a range of other odd circumstances and personal questions, so a married couple wanting to be interviewed together was a relatively tame request. During our interview, I realized that Mr. and Mrs. Fisher might be, perhaps, the most sexually open and loving heterosexual couple I could imagine. They completed each other's sentences, obviously adored one another, and shared a vision for sexual fulfillment that included each other's desires, with a bit of sexual experimentation on the side.

Mr. Fisher: Part of our deal is, we had, we'd been couple swapping a little bit, you know, experimenting with that some. And there was a couple that we hung out with for a while but there was more baggage than we wanted.

Mrs. Fisher: Mostly we couldn't get rid of them.

Mr. Fisher: They were very clingy, and they wanted to be around us, they would've been happy if we would have moved into their house. You know? But we like the adventure, we're very sexual. And, you know, we've picked up a handful of girls at bars here and there, but we haven't been with anybody for probably 15 years or something ... So, we started thinking about the doll, that feeling of a threesome, but without the risks and the hassles.

As the Fishers have aged, their willingness to find outside sex partners has declined, but their desire for group sex has not (Jecker 2021). Thus, their doll Jen is a sex toy that augments their relationship by allowing them to fulfill their shared desire for extramarital sexual partners (Scheutz and Arnold 2016).

Whereas most doll owners have chosen to forgo human relationships, some partnered people use dolls together. Partnered doll owners generally view their doll or dolls as more akin to a sex toy than a synthetic partner. Therefore, partnered doll owners are more likely to view dolls as an object capable of augmenting their existing relationship by meeting one or more sexual needs. Moreover, because dolls are customizable in various ways, doll owners can meet multiple needs by reconfiguring their doll for different purposes. This is true as well for single doll owners who still desire a human partner, but temporarily use the doll to meet sexual needs. Nonetheless, the simultaneous desire for humans and dolls does not mean their attachment to their dolls is insignificant compared to doll owners who have chosen to be permanently single. Rather, for those straddling flesh and synthetic lust, their silicone self incorporates multiple desires that often challenge heteronormative monogamy.

Figure 2. Jen



Ophelia and Sean’s polyamorous marriage provides an illustrative example for understanding how people account for their decision to purchase a doll by leveraging its inanimateness in multiple ways. Ophelia, who is non-binary, knew their husband Sean desired a feminine partner. And so, they consented to Sean having Gracie and even paid the bill. When we discussed how they decided which doll to purchase, Ophelia reflected on the hypersexual design of most dolls. Ophelia said:

At first, a little bit of it did bother me, because I am a big thick bitch. But we discussed it, and it's not practical to make big dolls, because they're already so heavy from the steel skeleton and the material they're made of. And he showed me a doll that was slightly thicker, but she was still not like, as big as me, she was only 130 pounds. And that helped, because I realized, you know, it's not necessarily that he's more attracted to this, it's that his options are not wide. And as far as breasts go, I'm just kind of like, "Whatever" because I want to get a mastectomy and have a flat chest. So, if he can touch those boobs, whatever makes him happy, it makes me happy.

As a feminine form, Gracie's manufactured gender, albeit adhering to idealized notions of femininity (Cassidy 2016), supplements Ophelia and Sean's queer relationship by being a feminine partner for Sean. He said:

It's mostly for me. My wife identifies as non-binary, so I was looking [for] a female, to have a girlfriend. And the other thing is, we are in a polyamorous situation, and finding people that you're all compatible with and that everybody's cool with, it's a very touchy situation sometimes and with the doll, you don't have any issues. You have no drama, the doll doesn't speak, it doesn't have an opinion, it doesn't get jealous, it just sits there and looks cute.

In addition to being a girlfriend for Sean, another benefit he identifies is his doll's inability to become "jealous." He views Gracie as a sex toy that does not emotionally complicate his relationship with Ophelia.

Finally, as an inanimate object, Gracie can be used to meet Sean's desire for anal sex in two ways. Sean enjoys being penetrated and penetrating during anal sex. As Ophelia said, "Yeah, he's [Sean] really interested in anal sex. And like, I've given it a try, but I don't, I don't find it enjoyable enough to continue doing. So, it's like, well, your doll is happy to do it for you at any time." As Ophelia's account illustrates, Sean's doll does not have sexual preferences and therefore can be used by Sean in any way he desires. During our interview, Sean mused that he would like to purchase a penis for Gracie because he enjoyed being anally penetrated in previous sexual encounters with men. Sometime after speaking with Sean, he sent me a picture of Gracie with a penis attachment, showing how dolls can easily their change sexual capabilities.

Figure 3. Gracie



Like Sean, many doll owners alter their doll to meet their own shifting needs in ways that can queer normative doll ownership. Venus's brief sexual relationship with her doll Celeste is another example of these practices. Venus first became acquainted with dolls via her employment at a doll company where she customizes clothes for love and sex dolls. She said:

When I first started working with the dolls, I wasn't interested in the dolls, they were bizarre to me. I saw them as like, an object that was strange. I felt some sort of like, impulse to be offended by them, or to like, pity them, or feel bad. I didn't know how to feel about people that had dolls. I didn't know how I felt about what I assumed I *should* feel the dolls represented for people, like I had a very like, it was a kind of strange ambivalence but also, I didn't humanize any of them.

Despite her initial hesitation, Venus found herself drawn to a doll named Celeste that was being sold in the store she worked for. At the time, Venus was preparing to move across state lines where she would be living with her new human partner. Feeling drawn to Celeste, she traded extra labor for the doll, and rationalized her decision by thinking of Celeste as a model for the clothes she would continue to make for other doll owners. When Venus and Celeste arrived at their new home, Venus was abruptly broken up with and found herself single. Venus said:

Fuck that. I was so upset. So, I was like, “Come on Celeste, let’s go!” and my boss surprised me when he found out that I was going through all that, and sent me a penis attachment for Celeste. So, she had a cock all of a sudden, and then the way I felt about her was like, “Whoa, look at you Celeste!” She was just gonna be my partner in crime, but then like, I was just like, cold and alone, feeling rejected, and all of a sudden felt a little bit different about Celeste. I always thought she was super cute, but I was like, “You’re just not for me.” And then I was like, “Well, girl!” So, I did end up having a very brief romantic connection with Celeste, and I did have sex with her a few times. And I went through a whole complicated like, “I’m not ready for this, we need to just stay friends, I’m glad that we had this intimate relationship for a little bit, I felt very close to you.” I was just so emotional.

For Venus, customization is a key component of her account as it allowed Celeste to be adapted to her shifting circumstances. The use of Celeste as a brief sexual partner during a lonely and hurtful time transcended the initial purpose of being a mannequin, and thus fulfilled emotional and physical needs Venus had not anticipated. In this case, Venus’s silicone self attends to monetary, emotional, and sexual needs despite her initial ambivalence toward dolls and doll owners. Now, Venus is an active community member and open doll owner via her custom doll clothing business, even though her sexual relationship with Celeste has ended.

Figure 4. Venus and Celeste



Just a Doll

Although many doll owners personify their dolls to some degree (Middleweek 2021; Su, Lazar, Bardzell and Bardzell 2019), they quickly point out their own recognition that this is “not real.” In other words, despite the great amount of care and time they may invest in their dolls, doll owners are keenly aware that their dolls are not alive, and more specifically, are sex toys. The fact that dolls are sex toys is sometimes employed in doll owners’ discursive navigation of the tension of whether dolls are *just* objects or something more, as it provides a way for doll owners to rationalize some of the behaviors they are most heavily criticized for. Logan, a long-time doll vendor and owner, said,

You know Ken, I think the general population personifies these devices more than the user at times. They think that it is an outlet that's not going to satisfy the individual and they're going to want to go out and abuse somebody else. At the end of the day, that *thing*, if it's laying down wrapped in a blanket, or on display, it's just a *thing*. That's all it is, it's a device, it's a thing...I always say, the end user is the one that determines what that device is. (emphasis added)

By describing dolls as “things” first and foremost, Logan resists technological determinism and psychopathological framings of doll owners as pedophiles (Maras and Shaprio 2017), misogynistic (Richardson 2016), or pathological (Ferguson 2010). Instead, Logan's silicone self reframes dolls in terms of their potential as “devices.”

As a device that is clearly built with sexual intent, one way doll owners further employ this frame is by comparing dolls to other sex toys. By comparing dolls to dildos, for example, some doll owners suggest the stigma of their practice is a gendered double standard. Benji said:

It's pretty one sided, I mean, they always try to make us look like a bunch of fucking pervs or rapists. Whatever. And it's totally unfounded and untrue, I mean, women can sit there and have, you know, dildos and vibrators and fucking little tongue things that move around and shit, but I mean, God forbid a guy has a fucking sex doll.

Here Benji draws on the symbolic weight of vibrators to frame dolls as sexually pleasurable (Comella 2017; Lieberman 2017). He uses the general acceptance of women using vibrators to masturbate to argue that technologically assisted masturbation should be normalized for men, too (Herbenick et al. 2017; Herbenick et al. 2009; Waskul and Anklan 2020). Thus, dolls are framed as normative because they are among a range of sex toys available for individual pleasure today (Plummer 2003a; Plummer 2003b; Waskul 2014). But also, Benji's silicone self normalizes doll ownership as a *masculine* practice by drawing attention to the stigma *men* receive for owning dolls, rather than discussing doll ownership as a sex practice that women, trans, and non-binary people might also enjoy (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018; Middleweek 2021).

A.S., one of the few women doll owners I met who owns male dolls, also believes that owning and caring for dolls ought to be normalized. While she does use her male-sexed dolls for sexual pleasure, she also draws attention to the emotional comfort her dolls provide to highlight their therapeutic potential. She said:

I have PTSD, depression, anxiety, and I suffered abuse as a child, so I didn't have a good relationship with my parents [and] 10 years ago, my oldest child was killed. [I was] walking her to school and she was struck by a pickup truck. She was only six years old. That really fucked me up, and my first husband was shot in the head a few months after that. It took its toll. But my dolls are helping me out, and I think that synthetic companions have a lot of positive things to offer. They can help people who are lonely, they can provide companionship, they can fill voids in

your life that no other human is able to fill ... but I know it's not viewed as something normal, having an attachment to an inanimate object ... the point is, I'm still here. I'm talking, I'm sharing my story. I'm still here. I think that without my dolls, with everything I've gone through, I probably would have succeeded in committing suicide at some point. So, my dolls keep my feet on the ground, they keep me alive.

A.S. has had a traumatic life and desires stability. She has tried traditional therapy and medication but found that dolls connect her to life in a way that people have not fulfilled, including her current emotionally and sexually unfulfilling marriage. PDW has given A.S. a space to talk about her stigmatized "attachment to an inanimate object" despite the general masculine focus of the doll community (Middleweek 2021).

Of course, the incredible likeness of dolls to humans does raise questions among doll owners about the extent to which a doll is, in end, just a doll. Evan, who no longer has sex with his doll because he is now submissive within their BDSM relationship, said:

The way you treat your doll is not depending on it being a doll, if you tend to abuse women, you will abuse your doll. Of course, a doll can't say no if you want to have sex. That's obvious. It's not sex based on consent, because no one decides what you do with your doll. But I see, when I see how other members treat their dolls, most of them, treat them like their partners, like women, like a human being.

For Evan, he balances the idea that a doll is an object and therefore cannot consent, with the fact that many doll owners err on the side of treating their doll in realistic terms. He thus concludes that despite their object-ness, doll owners likely *do* treat their dolls like how they would treat humans for better or for worse.

The suggestion that dolls are just toys is also drawn into question by some doll owners who view their practice as more akin to an identity, or even a sexual orientation, than masturbation. Sometimes, doll owners suggest that their community is marginalized in a way similar to that of LGBTQ+ populations (England, Mishel and Caudillo 2016; Hart-Brinson 2016). Indeed, some suggest that progressive liberalism, which has led an increased acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, may provide a glimpse of what is to come for doll owners. Helen said:

I think as more people buy dolls and more dolls are out there in the public eye, it will become more accepted. It's a generational thing. Compare it to Stonewall, you know? Who would, who would imagine that after Stonewall, 30 years later, they would legalize gay marriage nationwide? I mean, that would be, that would have been unthinkable.

By likening doll ownership to the events at Stonewall, Helen frames doll ownership as having the potential to be accepted if and when a cultural shift occurs (Hart-Brinson 2016). Thus, Helen's silicone self understands her singleness and doll ownership as a marginalized identity worthy of social legitimacy, rather than masturbation with a sex toy (Budgeon 2008; Plummer 2003a).

Whereas most doll owners describe their dolls as objects of desire *in lieu* of a person, some view dolls as their primary object of attraction. Moses is one such doll owner who identifies as “heterosexual” in that he is attracted to feminine forms, but he specifically seeks companionship with synthetic women. He situates this desire in a lifelong appreciation for manufactured bodies. Moses said:

It’s been a thing with me for a very, very long time. When my mother and I used to live downtown, every Saturday, she and I would hop on the bus. I’d go shopping with her and she would be in the changing room, trying on clothes or whatever, and I’d be left to my own devices. And one time I was lost, well I wasn’t really lost, but anyway, a security guard found me speaking to a mannequin ... So, it’s always been a fascination with mannequins, and you know, just gynoids in general, so dolls by extension. Yeah, that’s been a constant.

In probing this desire further, Moses revealed a term that he learned within the community, “idollater.” Moses said, “Yeah, another idollater on a site, well, idolater has been around since biblical times, as someone who worships false idols, but the bloke added an extra l to it, to make it idollater.”

By identifying as an idollater, Moses frames doll ownership as one among a *range* of potential relationships that people can form based on their object of desire. This can be read as an extreme form of replacing one’s human relationships, with the added layer of preferring dolls without the negative evaluation of relationship experiences. Moses said, “Obviously synthetic partners aren’t for everyone ... and all proper idollaters, especially

idollaters such as myself, are never ever saying we want to replace organics, specifically women, with dolls. That is not the goal. That is not the point.” The point of partnership with dolls, as Moses sees it, is “having a synthetic partner is a preference, just as, you know, being attracted to someone outside their race or within their own gender. It's just a preference.” Thus, by framing doll partnerships as a preference, Moses similarly conveys doll partnership as a legitimate choice in the modern era given the liberal trends of accepting a range of sexual identities.

Intimacies and Attraction

A central question in human-robot interaction literature is why humans might be attracted to, or desire, inanimate objects as sexual partners. In this chapter I connected the desire for love and sex dolls to people’s experiences with human partners, as more often than not, people’s previous and current relationships shape a person’s desire for dolls. Moreover, I examined the different roles dolls can take in peoples’ lives. Some doll owners choose to forgo human relationships altogether, some use dolls together or as part of their relationship, and some use dolls in ways that change to meet the person’s shifting sexual and emotional circumstances. Finally, I showed how doll ownership is sometimes viewed as a sex practice (e.g., owning and using a sex toy), as a marginalized sexual identity (e.g., as among or parallel to LGBTQ+), and as a sexual orientation or preference (e.g., an attraction to synthetic women; ‘idollater’). Each of these approaches to doll ownership reflect how people develop a silicone self that accounts for why someone uses dolls to meet their sexual needs, while also aligning themselves with a broader stigmatized community.

I suggest socialization into one's silicone self stems from two social processes. The first process is one's reflexive evaluation of their past romantic relationships in light of social expectations. While some have argued that heterosexual men desire dolls because they want to exert control over women or because their masculinity has been compromised (Connell 1987; Nast 2017; Richardson 2016), it seems that many doll owners, including women, want control over their individual lives and question the presumed normalcy of monogamous coupledness (Budgeon 2008). Whether it is due to divorce, breakups, or unsatisfying relationships, the expectation that people should continue to pursue relationships is a dominant narrative that doll owners resist, including some LGBTQ+ doll owners who fall into thin dating markets (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Since the silicone self is often based on refined desire rather than a lack of experience, it is possible that doll ownership may reveal fracturing heteronormative structures. Indeed, feminists have long critiqued heterosexual monogamy (Ward 2020), so in some ways the desire to abandon heterosexual relationships in favor of synthetic ones is a radical choice. However, the undercurrent of misogynistic accounts made by MGTOW doll owners, while drawing a parallel to radical lesbianism by way of suggesting total separation, reinforces the stereotype of doll owners as lonely misogynists and undercuts attempts to de-stigmatize the practice. Thus, the stigma of doll ownership comes not only from eschewing traditional relationships, but by voluntarily associating oneself with a group that has been heavily criticized. In turn, the second social process at the start of being socialized into the silicone self is how doll owners embark on this sexual selfhood project by locating themselves within both the love and sex doll community and the offline world (Adams-Santos 2020).

Within the love and sex doll community, doll owners collectively account for their practice by drawing on a framework of sexual liberalism that developed out of pro-sex feminism's embracing of sexual pleasure and sex toys (Comella 2017; Waskul and Anklan 2020), as well as cultural trends that emphasize the inclusion and rights of LGBTQ+ people (England et al. 2016; Hart-Brinson 2016). However, the desire to own dolls is primarily viewed as a choice, rather than a sexual orientation. Therefore, sexual individualism is an outgrowth of liberalism in late modernity more broadly, where people use technology and digital spaces to create communities based on niche interests (Adams-Santos 2020; Plummer 2003a, 2003b; Waskul 2014). And yet, while doll owners agree insofar as the stigma of doll ownership is unwarranted, with some even drawing comparisons to the sexual revolution and gay rights, not all community members view the potential of relationships with inanimate dolls the same way. MGTOW doll owners view dolls as a techno-fix substitute born out of the necessity to satisfy men's biological desire for sex and companionship, while circumventing feminism and modern courtship. Other doll owners view dolls as an *alternate*, rather than *substitute*, relationship choice. Thus, doll owners who are sympathetic to feminism, or even feminists themselves, account for their transgression in relation to social norms in general, and the stereotypes of doll owners as pedophiles, misogynistic, and/or psychopathological. That is, their silicone self is a dual account of why they have forgone or supplemented human relationships as well as why they are not rapists, misogynists, or insane. In doing so, non-MGTOW doll owners simultaneously manage their individual presentation of self and the impression of the community (Goffman 1959, 1963) in hopes they will be able to, one day, live as publicly open doll owners free of stigma and shame.

CHAPTER IV: THE MATERIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE SILICONE SELF:
COMMENTS ON SEXUAL HOBBIES AS SOCIALIZATION PATHWAYS

She twisted her head to one side, said loudly, "I'm not alive! You're not going to bed with a woman. Don't be disappointed; okay? Have you ever made love to an android before?"

"No," he said, taking off his shirt and tie.

"I understand—they tell me—it's convincing if you don't think too much about it. But if you think too much, if you reflect on what you're doing—then you can't go on. For, ahem, physiological reasons." – Phillip K. Dick, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep

In Berlin, Winona's workday is ending, but in Oregon, mine has just begun. Over Zoom, we toast scotch to coffee, virtually, as Winona handrolls her first after work cigarette. She asks, "Okay, so how do you want to do this?" Lighting her cigarette, she gives me two options, "I can stay in the room, and just sort of show you stuff, or I can leave the room and give you the spiel." At this point, I realize this is my first time in a brothel, of any sort, not to mention this is a doll brothel *and* that our meeting is over Zoom, so my sense of etiquette is lacking. I sheepishly ask for both, "Um, why don't you give me a tour first, and then leave the room so I can hear the spiel? If that's okay?" Winona nods, exhales a stream of smoke, sets down her glass of scotch and picks up her laptop, "Okay, so here's Syzygy sitting here in her clear plastic dress with her blue wig

on, this is her bed, and this is how clients would see her when they come in. And, oh, hold on, I'm going to turn this heater off. We have a heater over the bed because, you know, the silicone gets kind of cold." I nod understandingly because as I have come to appreciate from my time in the field, silicone's cold embrace can disrupt the realism people seek during intimate interactions with dolls.

Fundamental to people's relationship with dolls is the obvious fact that no matter how sophisticated their construction may be, dolls are, in the end, manufactured objects. Dolls are one among many sex toys sold today and are primarily marketed towards heterosexual men (Moya 2006). Although the historical origin of artificial companions can be traced back as early as the 15th century (Devlin 2018; Ferguson 2010), their current form owes much to the plastic and rubber industries that pioneered the manufacturing techniques necessary to create human-sized silicone and thermoplastic elastomer (TPE) bodies. The use of silicone and TPE is now commonplace in the sex tech industry, with many sex toys made of these materials. Dildos and vibrators have been of particular scholarly interest, as their meteoric rise and widespread use by women in Western countries has been hailed as a victory of the pro-sex feminists who fought for women's right to enjoy sex (Comella 2017; Herbenick et al. 2009; Herbenick et al. 2017; Lieberman 2017). However, less is known of other sex toys, much less men's use of sex toys (Döring and Pöschl 2018).

The use of dolls is peculiar compared to how people use other sex toys for a few reasons. One reason is due to the stigma associated with doll ownership. Most doll owners never tell their family, friends, or coworkers about their dolls (Hanson 2022). Instead, doll owners have formed a vast online network that connects people who wish to

explore their transgressive practice together or to learn from one another about how to take care of dolls (Middleweek 2021). Whereas in the previous chapter I showed how doll owners make sense of their desire for dolls, which informs how they understand their dolls as objects that fulfill emotional and sexual deficits in their personal lives, in this chapter, I highlight another discourse doll owners employ as they are socialized into their silicone self. Namely, I examine how doll owners discursively construct ownership as a transgressive sexual hobby. Hobbies are understudied in sociology; generally, they are considered a type of leisure (Fine 1983; Wilson 1980). Hobbies are often conceptualized as the things we do with our time outside of our commitments to the main pillars of social life: work, politics, family, religion, and school. While some hobbies occupy a small amount of people's lives, others require a significant level of involvement via financial investment, developing specialized knowledge, and time spent among related subcultures and organizations (Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner 2010). In late modernity, sexuality has increasingly been likened to leisure activities, or at least as something structured by a high level of individual choice and a broad spectrum of available technologies (Plummer 2003a). Not only that, but sexuality is marked by a growing distance between the reproductive function of sex organs and the pleasure derived from sexual activities (Plummer 2003a; Plummer 2003b; Waskul 2014). Thus, I advance the concept of "sex hobbies" to theorize the pleasurable aspects of sex that are separate of a person's sexual orientation. Sex hobbies can, I argue, be an important part of one's lifestyle and sexual identity without reorienting how a person conceptualizes their sexuality. Whereas same-sex activity, choice of pornographic materials, and/or deeply felt desires may cause people to reconsider their sexual orientation, especially for heterosexual men because of

how gendered homophobia structures masculinity (Pascoe 2011), the sex hobby that is doll ownership focuses on the individually pleasurable aspects of sexuality absent the gendered and sexualized implications of a real or imagined human partner.

As I show in this chapter, people's silicone selves often discursively construct doll ownership as akin to a hobby because of the requisite specialized knowledge best gained from spending a significant amount of time and energy in the community. My analysis flips the question so often asked of doll ownership. Rather than asking what individual motivations bring people to doll ownership (Appel, Marker and Mara 2019), I ask, how does an interest in doll ownership as a sex hobby motivate engagement with the doll community? Similar to Becker's (1963) analysis of marijuana use as a socially learned practice, I argue that doll community membership is something people are socialized into by participating in online discussions of maximizing sexual pleasure. This socialization process occurs because seasoned community members help aspiring and new doll owners work through commonly experienced issues and feelings. Often, these discussions focus on the materiality of dolls.

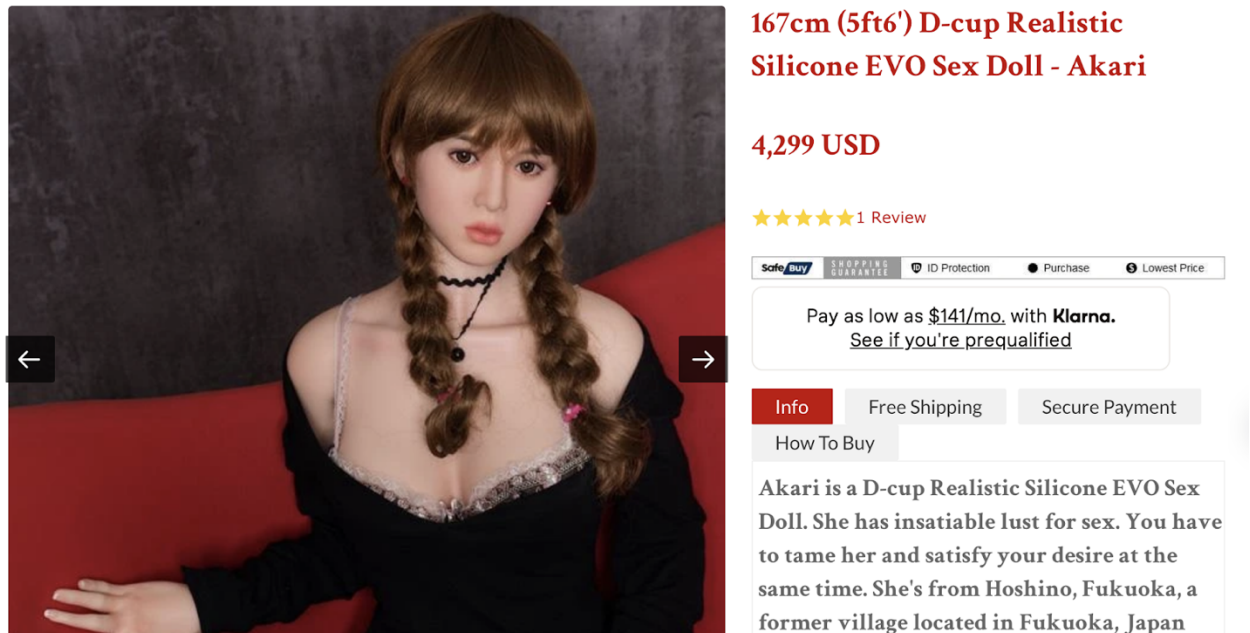
The socialization process that occurs for doll owners is not unlike other online subcultures that have emerged in the digital age. Online transgressive subcultures have emerged as a way of circumventing offline stigma and forming a group identity (Gray 2009). These groups have been found to violate norms related to bodily modification (Adler and Adler 2008), gendered presentations of the self (Boero and Pascoe 2012), and sexuality (Durkin et al. 2006; Gray 2009; Sandler 2018). I trace the socialization process of doll owners into the online doll community across four stages. First, doll owners discuss purchasing as a decision that ought to be based on expertise in the construction of

dolls and the doll industry. Second, as a group, doll owners discuss waiting and arrival as transformative moments that signify commitment to the community and subculture beyond curiosity. Third, doll owners develop material expertise by learning how to take care of dolls. The general maintenance of dolls is a discussion that centers the object-ness of the dolls and implicates owners as primarily responsible for working on their dolls. Additionally, more serious repairs further a collective identity, as doll owners share information and help one another fix their dolls. Fourth, as owners of a transgressive sex toy, doll owners transform the meaning of sex with dolls into a sex hobby by relying on the inanimate-ness of dolls as justification for imagining new ways of realizing, and maximizing, individual sexual pleasure. The shared discussion of these four material dimensions coheres members of the doll community into a collective group because of their shared interest in a transgressive sex hobby.

Buying A Doll

Akari's sex drive has been described as "insatiable." She hails from Hoshino, a village outside of Fukukoka, Japan. Standing at 5'6" (167 centimeters) tall, with D-cup breasts, Akira is waiting to satisfy your desires when you take her home for \$4,299. Akira is one of 738 dolls and torsos available for purchase on *Sexxy Dolls* (SXD), one of the largest online love and sex doll retailers. On SXD, customers can find dolls that range in almost every imaginable dimension. This includes sexual aspects, such as vaginal, anal, and oral orifice depths, penis length and breast size, but also a range of skin tones, eye colors, and wig varieties. Dolls are even made for fetishized desires such as BBW (Big and Beautiful Women), fantasy elves, and more.

Figure 5. Image from *Sexxy Dolls*



At first glance, the range of dolls available for purchase on SXD and other doll vendor websites may seem to suggest that dolls, much like other adult novelty products, are made profitable by capitalizing on hypersexuality. To a certain extent, this is true, as most dolls are hyperfeminine, thin, and white or Asian (see Tables 2 and 3). However, the sexual hobby discourse cultivated by doll owners encompasses a range of material issues beyond their sexualized design, starting before a doll arrives in someone's home. Prospective doll owners make decisions about which doll to purchase by balancing price, attractiveness, realism, ease of use, and availability. All of these considerations are interconnected by way of the material construction of dolls, which in turn leads to a discursive negotiation that, when publicly displayed, demonstrates expertise in doll construction. Interview data reveal how community members learn about dolls from reading on sites such as PDW, browsing vendor catalogs such as SXD, from other doll owners, and from personal experience. Fledgling community members, or "newbies,"

draw on their developing expertise to determine which doll they will purchase. The process of buying a doll is central to socialization into one's silicone self because it is the moment at which a person who is interested in dolls begins shifting toward doll ownership. For many, purchasing a doll is a process they repeat several times over, because as the silicone self becomes more central to a person's identity, it is common to desire and accumulate multiple dolls.

Univariate analysis of SXD suggests the average price of a new doll is approximately \$2,600, with an upwards range of \$8,000. Seasoned doll community members are familiar with the steep price tag of dolls from the 1990s and 2000s. Chuck said, "Like in 2005 or so [they were] \$6,000, I can't afford that." Chuck waited until cheaper dolls became available. "So, skip to 2018 or 2019. And I peek my head back into the doll world and I find this one doll that's like \$500. I'm like, 'Oh my god, holy shit there's no way!' So, it was a convenient time to get one, and for such an affordable price I was like, 'Yeah, let's try this out.'" Waiting more than a decade to buy a doll is not uncommon, as many people hover on the periphery of the "doll world" waiting for an affordable doll to become available. Others find waiting for price reductions unfathomable. As Moses explained:

I was in love, and that love hit a speed bump when I realized that they were \$5,000, because at that time, it was a lot. I mean, it still is a lot of money. I was just like, 'Good Lord, I work a job where I'm making like \$9 an hour, how the hell am I going to get something like this?' But, over the course of a year and a half, I saved up for my wife, Zipporah.

Instead of saving, some doll owners borrow money. Shelly said, “I made this tremendously long list of pros and cons, then I’m thinking, ‘Okay, where do I get money to buy this doll?’ Well, where I work, I have [a] 401k, and I thought that I could take out a loan, too. So that’s how I afforded her.”

The price of a doll reflects, to a greater or lesser extent, how a doll is constructed. Platinum or tin-cured silicone dolls are generally considered higher quality than TPE dolls, which also makes them more expensive. The price difference of materials is further exacerbated by labor costs. For example, the well-known U.S. doll manufacturer Real Doll only uses silicone. Therefore, the cost of material, as well as labor and production costs in the United States, make Real Doll one of the most expensive brands. As Logan described Real Doll, “It’s amazing...those are like the Cadillac of the action figure model world.” The metaphorical power of cars is a common way for doll owners to make sense of their own sex hobby. Loosey said, “There’s a reason why WM is considered, when you look at cars, the biggest manufacturers are Ford or Chevrolet. They’re not the best cars, you know what I mean? They’re affordable. And that’s what WM kind of reminds me of.” As a Chinese doll manufacturer that exclusively uses TPE and has reduced labor costs, Loosey associates WM with car manufacturers who sacrifice quality for price. Even with shipping costs, importing a TPE doll from a Chinese manufacturer often costs less than a Real Doll, which makes WM another leading manufacturer. However, much like cars, some imported dolls are viewed as exotic commodities. Orient Industry, based in Japan, is one such company that makes coveted dolls. In addition to using high quality materials, Orient Industry is known for their hyperreal designs, and has a reputation for

being difficult to import. Shelly said, “Orient Industry is kind of like the Bugatti of dolls, I mean, they are just really, they started the business in 1977, and they have kept going and improving their product since then. As much as I love [my] Real Doll, the Orient Industries one [I own] is more realistic.” People learn about doll brands by browsing sites like PDW, UDN, or SXD and talking to other doll owners. As Alex said, “I wanted to make sure I was purchasing from a legitimate company, so I conducted research and asked people on forums for advice.

Not only do doll owners consider price and brand, they also seek attractive dolls. What makes a doll attractive differs from what makes a human attractive however, because one must consider that a life-sized inanimate doll can be difficult to have sex with. Benji said, “I usually like, a lot of what I like is considered BBW type ladies in real life. But all the BBW dolls, are like, very fucking heavy. So, I don’t see myself ever getting a really thick fucking doll.” The variety of dolls available on sites such as SXD means that people usually find one or more dolls they find attractive, even if this requires significant time searching. Quicksilver said:

Some of them [doll owners] go with these dolls that have super huge boobs or super huge booty, and [a] little itty-bitty waist, and I actually didn’t want that. I wanted something a little bit more realistic, so I actually went through, you know, several dolls, I wanna say maybe they have a selection of around 50 body types. I’m not sure, but I went through every single doll, and I looked at their measurements, you know, chest, bust, waist, hips and everything. And I started considering, you know, clothing options. If I get a doll with super huge size M

boobs, like, where am I going to find clothes for that? So, I took those off my list right away, and same thing with dolls that have super super tiny little itty-bitty waists. I think they go down as far as like 18 or 16 inch waistlines, which is ridiculously skinny. So, I took those off my list, too.

Quicksilver made his decision by assessing the variety of data points websites such as SxD offer to determine which doll he would purchase. In his reasoning, he used “realism” as a criterion, by saying that dressing his doll would be difficult if it was unrealistically proportioned. Other doll owners embrace the potential of dolls to go beyond typical human bodies. For example, Liam has “a vampire doll” with fanged teeth but is otherwise normatively proportioned. In a more extreme case, Ulysses said, “I mean, there’s some weird ones out there, like this one guy had a custom-made alien, with like, and I don’t mean UFO alien, I’m talking *the movie*. This thing was a monster.” While accounting for less than 1% of dolls on SxD, non-human dolls are available for purchase or custom order. Suffice to say that, on SxD and other doll vendor sites, one can find dolls in all shapes and sizes, realistic, unrealistic, and even extraterrestrial. Further, the case of people purchasing fantasy or *Alien* dolls suggests that “realism” does not necessarily mean that a doll resemble a “real” human. Realism encompasses both the aesthetics of the doll, as a facsimile of a human or fantasy character, as well as the physical and sexual sensations derived from touching the doll’s body. Wildcat! writes, “What I mostly researched was what guys were saying about owning one. What REALLY surprised me was guys saying they were not only AS GOOD as a real woman, but BETTER!!!” As Liam said:

Yeah, it's really like stepping into Alice in Wonderland, like you don't know what you don't know, you know? And there's actually a fairly decent learning curve when it comes to sex dolls and keeping a sex doll. So, the first thing I was really looking for, was, like, is this realistic? Like, what's this gonna feel like? In everything that I found, everything that I read, said that it is incredibly close to the female genitalia experience and it like, tricks your brain.

In learning about the realistic feeling of dolls as sexual objects, some prefer TPE's relative softness compared to the rigidity of silicone. Gary said, "With TPE, they're a lot softer than silicone in general. They've got a very nice feel to them. The most recent one that I bought, it's amazing how, when you go to squeeze her arm, it just, it feels so real." Many doll owners describe having sex with dolls as so realistic that it blurs reality itself. Gilmour said:

When I got the doll, even the first time that I, you know, used it. Every part of my body, every part of my sensory perception, was telling my reptile brain that I was having sex. My reptile brain, my lizard brain, was completely fooled into thinking that I was having sex. I mean, it felt amazing, just like real sex. And I know that if you haven't been with a doll, it's very hard to believe. I can remember reading, you know, this kind of encounter, anecdotes or whatever and kind of being, you know, skeptical, because sex with a real woman feels great. But I'm telling you, man, it was incredible.

Many posts on PDW describe how exceptional sex with dolls can be, with some even claiming that sex with a doll feels “better” than sex with a human. However, owners also discuss how materials may hamper sexual pleasure. For example, TPE can be a volatile material that some people react to negatively. Benji said, “I won’t really fuck with [TPE] because, um, I learned from doing doll repairs that TPE would give me a rash. So, I’m glad I never bought a TPE doll because I couldn’t imagine having that kind of rash on my cock or something.” Similarly, Chuck said, “Turns out, I’m allergic to TPE, and I was getting like red skin rashes on my stomach and arms after like, you know, touching her skin.” The material sensations that silicone and TPE provide based on their relative rigidity and softness, and the potential for skin reactions, are woven into the discourse as community knowledge by doll owners publicly sharing their experiences with different materials on PDW.

But not only does the material used to build a doll affect its sexual realism, so does the genital configuration. There are two available genital configurations that affect sexual pleasure and ease of use for doll owners. While dolls with fixed genitals are more difficult to clean than insert models, they provide a more realistic sexual sensation. In discussing his recent purchase, Gilmour said:

I did go with the insert model. I didn’t get the fixed vagina. For a couple of reasons. I wanted easy maintenance...you just take the sleeve, you know, it’s a silicone or TPE sleeve...you take it out, you flip the inside out, wash it, disinfect it [with] antibacterial spray, dry it out, flip it back inside out. It’s ready to go.

Some doll owners own both fixed and insert genital dolls so they can experience both configurations. Quicksilver said, “So Imogen has a removable vagina... Willow on the other hand doesn’t have a removable vagina. And I ordered her specifically like that because I wanted to test out the differences.” Notably, cleaning fixed genitals is a more elaborate process than insert genital models. Quicksilver said:

When I do have intercourse with Willow, I literally have to get the doll, I sit, I clean the toilet, disinfect it and everything and then I sit her on the toilet and then I douche her, you know, her vagina, to get everything out and then I have to let her sit for a while to let everything pour out and then I have to get, I usually get a cotton cloth and shove it up there and dry it off and everything. There’s a little bit more work, but it feels a lot better. It feels a bit more, a lot more realistic, than the removable vagina.

In deciding how much they value sexual pleasure compared to ease of use, doll owners develop expertise in how dolls, as objects, require significant maintenance. In balancing price with attractiveness, realism, and whether they want a doll that is easier to maintain or more sexually pleasurable, people whittle the range of dolls down to a select few before purchasing.

As a final point on purchasing, I want to note that the variety of dolls available for purchase from manufactures favors those looking to purchase a female-sexed doll. Of the 738 dolls on SXD, only 21 (2.85%) of them are male-sexed. Given that most of the doll

community is cisgender men purchasing female-sexed dolls, it is unsurprising that so many dolls are female-sexed (Danaher and McArthur 2017), but this makes finding an attractive male-sexed doll more difficult. Industry professionals recognize the relative absence of male-sexed doll owners and the lack of variety available for purchase. Oliver, a doll vendor, said, “I have never sold a male doll.” Anthony, an industry employee who works at a major manufacturer in North America, said:

Outside of sales, I do talk to quite a few gay men about our dolls, but like I said, it’s an issue where both of, both the body choices and the face choices are relatively similar to each other. Nowhere near as diverse in structure, facial structure and appearances, like the ones we have available for the female dolls.

Despite the lack of male-sexed dolls available on sites such as SXD or that can be purchased directly from manufacturers, some heterosexual women and gay men do purchase dolls. Sites such as PDW provide male-sexed doll owners their own space in hopes of encouraging growth in this demographic group, but there is a notable lack of diversity within the community, an issue perhaps exacerbated by the lack of male-sexed dolls. A.S. and other women I met in the community expressed frustration with the lack of products made available to them. In some cases, they resorted to making their own dolls out of fabric at home.

Waiting and Arrival

*Since my last post...I made myself a doll cabinet. Will go to Wal-Mart for some memory foam after work today. Now I can have friends and fam and a gf (God forbid JK) come over and not be startled, upset, or insecure because of my doll ~
Doll King*

*RE: Pffittttt if she can't compete with doll, she ain't worth your time. But she could twist that on you if you feel insecure of her owning toys, too. Lol
Aside from that....GOOD NEWS! My doll has officially landed in Quebec and is getting the Custom's Inspection. So I'm really psyched :) Today work is going to drag-a-long :(~ Doll Lord*

*RE: YES! How long is their check up?! Does that mean your expected arrival is also in about a week?? And 100% true on that.
~ Doll King*

RE: Original expectation was the 20th. So they are way ahead of schedule. ~ Doll Lord

*RE: OH DAMN! Do you already have her first outfit set out for her? Or are you gonna keep her in her birthday suit for awhile? Meanwhile...**JUST***

ONE MORE WEEK LEFT FUCK YEA ~ Doll

King

People on PDW commonly share the experience of waiting for their doll to arrive and the celebratory moment of its arrival. After making an introductory post for themselves, doll community members reply to their own thread about their interest in buying a doll and, eventually, the “wait” that accompanies their first purchase. Many dolls are custom built, heavy, and travel overseas. Accordingly, the wait can be lengthy, and stories about clumsy or curious delivery drivers from other owners provoke a sense of trepidation among many first-time buyers. The amount of time that people spend researching dolls, and then waiting for their doll to arrive after it is purchased, builds anticipation that seasoned doll owners relate to. As a relatively private purchase that few tell their friends or family about, sites such as PDW provide an outlet for people to share their excitement and anxious feelings. As a community, the experience of waiting for one’s doll to arrive is a rite of passage that all must endure.

The collectively shared experiences of waiting and arrival are interactional moments that further socialize first-time buyers into the community. By sharing their wait and arrival experiences with the doll community, new owners become part of the community in two ways. First, many newcomers revel in stories of sexual misadventure and make explicit sexual jokes. By sharing intimate details about their own transgressive sexuality, new doll owners align themselves with a community that prides itself on the ability to create a social atmosphere welcoming of sexual transgression. Second, waiting and arrival mark transformative moments in someone’s life, as they symbolize commitment to the community beyond curiosity. By publicly displaying their purchase,

and performatively waiting for the doll's arrival, people new to PDW and the community become bona fide doll community members.

During the time that it takes for a doll to arrive home, new owners experience a range of emotions that seasoned doll community members are equipped to handle. Given the association of dolls with the broader adult industry, some express initial concern they may have been swindled. Lucas said, "I ordered the first doll, then I panicked. I thought I got scammed. But then Oliver called me and explained everything and talked me off the ledge." At the moment of sale, many realize, in no small part because of the price, the weight of their purchase. To alleviate some of this tension, PDW offer first-time buyers, such as Lucas, direct access to vendors, such as Oliver, who quell their fears. Once trepidation is overcome, the wait truly begins. During this period, experienced doll owners encourage newbies to post factory photos⁵ and delivery tracking updates. Harry said, "I posted the factory photos and, of course, they're naked, and I edited them out and I put stickers over her private parts. And somebody was like, 'Well, I hope you didn't get censored photos!' And I'm like, I'm sorry, but the censoring was for me." Harry was reticent to post naked pictures of his doll, since he is a pious Christian father who values monogamous relationships. Nonetheless, like many first-time buyers, Harry engaged in the waiting discourse as part of his journey into the doll community and despite his reluctance to share nude photos, was warmly received by other members. As Harry experienced firsthand, much of the waiting discourse is marked by sexual references and innuendo. One comment on a post said, "haha, it's not uncommon that once there (sic) doll arrives for them to be off PDW for a week or two."

⁵ As confirmation of their purchase, most manufacturers send buyers a set of pictures of their doll once it has been constructed. These photos are known to the community as "factory photos."

Figure 6. Anne Boleyn Post

TOPIC: Anne Boleyn minutes after her unboxing



As much as it was tempting to leave Anne Boleyn naked for a while longer, we had some company coming around and it is winter! So I found a nice tight little

number for her to wear and boy does she look foxy in it, I can see myself getting down to the store for similar dresses ...

REPLY: wow beautiful face and her body is stunning congrats ☺ ...

REPLY: Wow O_O She is simply stunning, Seriously stunning looking lady ...

In preparation for their doll's arrival, doll owners read stories about when dolls are delivered that other community members have shared. Although arrival is the crescendo of a lengthy, sometimes multiple years long wait, it is also a precarious situation, as deliveries can be embarrassing. Shelly, a non-binary doll owner, said:

There was this really crappy delivery driver, and he was just adamant that he couldn't get it in my house and I'm like, fine. So, he helped me open the crate and he saw her, and I saw her, and I, obviously, to be really honest with you, I didn't know what she would be dressed in. I figured she'd be wearing a bikini, but it was like this see through top and bottom, I mean, you can see her pubic hair, you can see her nipples sticking out and then I'm just, I'm turning ten shades of red. And he said, 'I don't even want to know' and I'm trying to say something, I'm like, well, you know, 'I do pinup photography!'

Rather than embarrassment, others use humor to make light of the situation. Gilmour said:

Gilmour: The delivery was quite funny. I'm kind of, ah, the better word is asshole. I don't really have much of a filter. And I don't really, I'm very comfortable in my own skin. And, well you've probably read on the forums, about deliveries?

Ken: Yeah, I heard the boxes are big.

Gilmour: Yeah, so, okay. A lot of people make a big deal about the weight, and, you know, I live on a second floor of this apartment complex, I've got a loft. So, the guy that's delivering the doll is like, a smaller man, I don't know he's like Mexican or something, but he's a slighter man. You know, I'm not a very big guy, and he was considerably smaller than myself. So, he's put, you know, [laughing] and I live in the desert. So, it's hot. In August. And he gets to the top of the stairs, he's just covered in sweat. And he's like, 'Jesus, what is in this box?' And I said, 'Well, this is my ultra-realistic sex doll.' [laughs] And he's like, kind of does this nervous like chuckle and kind of gives me this like, he thinks I'm bullshitting him. And then, later that week I ordered a big case, like a road case musicians use. And it's the same guy, he says, 'Gilmour, what are you getting into?' And I said, 'Well, I told you, I just got a sex doll. That case is for when maintenance comes around, so they don't call the police on me.' [Laughing] I'm dying, and he wasn't.

For Gilmour, recounting the delivery of his first doll brings him joy as he revels in his defiance of social niceties that condemn open sex talk, especially about transgressive sex practices such as owning sex dolls. By sharing the story of his open admission to purchasing a doll to the delivery driver, Gilmour joins rank with other doll owners who similarly take pleasure in being sexual misfits. These stories of breached interactions mark the end of waiting and bond doll owners as they rely on each other to commiserate over upsetting delivery personnel and shipping frustrations. But this commiseration does more than vent frustration, it gives one a sense of belonging. Desmond said:

What I like most of all, the community is, it's an honest community. I mean they may be worried about other people, but within the community, they're honest and accepting. They'll rally around someone and help them. When the trolls move in, or back when people were bullying a mentally challenged guy, it was like, 'What's wrong with you people?' There's this fear that they have, about getting discovered. But amongst their own, it is, it is a kinder community...but I think, that's what drew me into it. I was a bit of an outcast, I always pushed the rules, I play by the rules but I always push them to their limit. And, so, because of the work I was doing [filming a documentary about doll owners], I decided I wanted to buy a doll.

Interview data reveal that many doll community members feel as though, as some level, they were always an outsider. While they may have had sexual relationships with other humans, even been married and raised children, many report a nagging sense that, for one

reason or another, they belong on the periphery of normative society. Be they “rule pushers,” “assholes,” non-binary, or something else lacking space in normative society, the doll community welcomes all who own dolls. As Benji described the community, “a bunch of people that fucking fuck rubber and what not.” What Benji so aptly describes of course, is that waiting and arrival are the necessary prerequisites to, finally, having sex with a doll. Thus, not only is waiting itself a discursive moment where doll owners signal their investment in this sexual hobby, but it is also the penultimate step before consummating their silicone love.

Although sex is, usually, a private act, having sex with your doll can be a social event. Some, such as Harry, prefer to keep the intimate details of their sexual encounters private, while others freely share and encourage people to divulge the details of their sexual experiences with dolls. Some Twitter profiles have posts of homemade pornographic content featuring themselves and their dolls. Desmond’s acquisition of his first doll is an exemplary case for highlighting how sex with dolls becomes a social affair. Before Desmond became a PDW site admin, he filmed a documentary about doll ownership that examined the emotional reasoning behind this practice. His documentary begins with the acquisition of a Real Doll that had been used by Hollywood producers in a film, and as part of its use as a movie prop, had its genitals removed. Desmond’s documentary follows his journey across North America to Real Doll in San Marcos, California, to have the doll’s genitals repaired. Along the way, Desmond meets and interviews doll owners and sharing their stories. After the owner of Real Doll, Matt McMullen, fixes Penny (Desmond’s doll), they traveled to the Pacific Northwest to begin the journey home. Once Desmond arrived, as he describes it:

My friend said, ‘Well, you know, everybody’s waiting for you [on PDW], they want to hear what you have to say about trying the doll out.’ And I was thinking, ‘Well boy, there’s a way to get impotence right there!’ All I could think of is, I’m being watched by all these eyes out there and I had a lot of trouble. I remember, my friend and I, going out to a store and getting some sexy clothes for it and everything.

Here we see Desmond’s socialization into the doll community unfold along multiple social dimensions. The sociality of the community compels him to share his sexual experiences, to the point that it affects the sexual activity itself. Desmond contemplates whether he may find it difficult to get erect, knowing that hundreds, perhaps even thousands of doll owners want the gritty details of his first sexual encounter with a doll. To that end, he enlists the help of a local friend to help him make Penny more attractive by dressing her in “sexy clothes.” As he retells the story on PDW, doll community members revel in the idea of two men shopping for lingerie together in a cold rainy city, an oddity among men’s homosocial interactions that so frequently shy away from discussing sexual impotence.

Caring for Your Doll

Not only does a doll’s arrival mean that owners get to have sex with their doll for the first time, but it also marks the beginning of a commitment to caring for and handling a life-sized doll. Taking care of one’s doll is a tremendous task that requires specialized knowledge. Given that dolls are expensive, doll owners invest a great amount of time and

energy into the maintenance and care of their dolls. But care and maintenance are as much individual acts as they are social activities, as they provide yet another opportunity for doll owners to discuss the material dimensions of their sexual hobby. The proper care and maintenance of dolls yoke together an individual's desire to extend their doll's longevity with the development of a silicone self. In learning how to take care of their dolls, many rely on each other, which in turn further cements a group identity. Moreover, time spent repairing and dressing one's dolls fosters a deep emotional connection for doll owners.

Many view their dolls as something they want to own and take care of for as long as possible by being responsible owners. Loosey said:

As an adult, you can take care of a doll just as you would have to take care of a car. You know, you get up in the morning and you wash your car and wax it, you wash, wax, and, you know, detail it. You take the time and effort and spend the money to make sure it's running top notch. An adult can do the exact same thing with a doll. You know, make sure that all the maintenance is done, make sure it's kept clean, make sure it's dressed nice, very classy, you know, nice wigs, brush the hair, kind of the same thing.

The general maintenance and upkeep that dolls require is cumbersome for owners who, like Loosey, take pride in maintaining a "top notch" doll. Much of the maintenance that doll owners describe is relatively mundane, but regular, work. Jonathan said, "There's the regular maintenance that we all sort of have to go through, which involves, you know,

cleaning, oiling, powdering, regular refreshing of makeup, clean up after sex, all of that sort of regular stuff.” The processes Jonathan describes above matter for the longevity of the material as well as maintaining aesthetic appeal. For doll owners, upkeep of both demonstrates responsible doll ownership. In other words, whether it is a TPE doll’s need to be powdered after washing to remove the tackiness, or brushing a wig, both are important components of caring for a doll. Regular maintenance of dolls mirrors other forms of “serious leisure” (Gillespie et al. 2010), defined here as hobbies with accompanying subcultures that expect a high level of commitment, often signaled through invested time and money. Thus, caring for a doll is about both the individual’s sexual pleasure *and* participating in a subcultural community.

Not only do dolls require regular maintenance, but much like cars, dolls eventually require serious repair. Even with diligent care, silicone and TPE crack over time. Small silicone fissures can be easily fixed by applying SilPoxy. Benji said:

I did a little repair today, on my DS lady, she had a little pinhole in the back of her hand, I don’t know if one of my cats got her or if it was like that and I missed it, but it’s still no big deal. Just got in there [with a] little bit of SilPoxy on a Q-tip, fill the hole, squeeze out the excess, wipe it off with a bit of acetone, and wrap it with some plastic wrap. She’s still sitting right now, but it’ll probably be set by the time I get off the phone with you.

Marketed as an adhesive for at-home silicone repairs, SilPoxy is a readily available fix for silicone doll owners. TPE, however, is a different material and thus requires a

different set of skills. The process of learning how to do serious repair on dolls is learned from discussions with doll owners about the various “surgeries” they have done that lead to intimate knowledge about the inner-workings of dolls. For particularly difficult repairs, doll owners may arrange in-person meetings or send their dolls to each other. Owen is one such owner, who made a side gig out of buying broken dolls that he repairs and sells to a vendor for a small profit. As an unusual commodity that requires upkeep and specialized repair skills, doll owners must rely on each other’s experience and their own technical skill to fix their dolls. Because unlike cars, there are few places to drop your doll off for regular maintenance and serious repairs. Even though dolls are an expensive commodity, there is little regulation on their construction and even fewer consumer protections. As is common within the adult industry, dolls exist on the edge of legitimate business practices, and their overlap with childlike dolls and doll brothels gives even the most scrupulous doll manufacturers little credibility, and the victims of unscrupulous doll manufacturers even less legitimacy as worthy of protection from unethical business practices. By establishing relationships with vendors and knowledgeable community members, doll owners protect their investment in social bonds.

Doll vendors play a key role in building the doll community, as they help facilitate the flow of goods from manufacturers to customers and ensure that defective dolls are replaced. Oliver, a well-known vendor on PDW, sold dolls to several of the people I interviewed in this study. Part of Oliver’s success is his willingness to take care of customers. Benji said, “I got an insert from Oliver. He just up and sent me one for free, I contacted him, I asked him, ‘Do you sell DS inserts?’ And he ended up PMing me back, he’s like, ‘Actually, I have an extra insert here I’ll send you, what’s your address?’”

Whereas overseas doll manufacturers are notoriously difficult to contact, local vendors are easier to work with. Sometimes the difficulty with manufacturers comes from a language barrier, as in the case of Orient Industry, whose website is in Japanese. Moreover, most overseas manufactures adhere to no-refund policies and release themselves of liability from any damages incurred during shipping. Thus, doll vendors purposefully establish business relationships with manufacturers in such a way that they are uniquely positioned to mediate customer complaints. But if all else fails, doll owners can always turn to each other on PDW for advice and help with their issue.

A User's Guide to Fucking Rubber

Deciding which doll to purchase, gazing upon a doll for the first time, and learning the proper techniques necessary to care for one's doll, all bear upon the most intimate physical dimension of doll ownership—sex. While sex is not the only reason people own dolls, as evidenced by the emotional benefits described in Chapter 1, it is undeniably one of the strongest draws to the community, at least initially. Thus, having sex with dolls has become as much a part of the discourse of this sexual hobby as the other material issues discussed above. Analysis of how doll owners talk about sexual activity with dolls reveals two themes. First, community members discuss how to have sex with dolls, given they are inanimate objects. Second, community members discuss how having sex with dolls compares to having sex with humans. Based on my observation on PDW, it seems that doll owners almost never have sex with each other's dolls, except for people who own a doll together. Instead, most doll owners have sex with their dolls privately, but as sexual hobbyists, enjoy discussing the experience of having sex with a doll. These discussions reveal how some doll owners' silicone selves leverage

the inanimate quality of their dolls to reimagine the boundaries of human sexual potential.

As an object, doll owners must learn how to have sex with dolls in a literal sense. Not only do doll owners consider the weight of dolls, but they also learn how to lubricate silicone and TPE properly. As Dee Dee said, “Making love to a doll is work, to prepare the lubricant, the scenarios, and to be strong enough to carry it.” Going into detail about learning from other’s experiences, Benji said:

Well, baby oil is a no-no for silicone, it’s good for TPE, but not silicone, because baby oil is a petroleum product...there was one guy on the forums, he got a JM Doll and he used fucking Vaseline as a lube, and it ended up rotting the fucking doll’s vagina out. Cause all JM Dolls have built in vaginas, and fucking Vaseline just rotted that shit out over time, in a few months.

Sharing details about which products can be safely used as lubricants for dolls is one way doll owners learn how to safely have sex with their doll without degrading the material or harming themselves.

Given the amount of effort it takes to have sex with dolls, as well as the similarity of dolls to humans, I asked doll owners whether this practice is better described as “masturbation” or “sex.” In answering this question, many claimed that being intimate with dolls is an immersive experience and therefore, while not “sex” in a literal sense, more akin to sex than masturbation. Alexander said, “I think the difference is great, both physiologically and emotionally.” Similarly, Casanova said, “A doll is a much more

complete experience sensually and [is] mentally immersive.” Going into greater detail, DLFCKR said:

I believe it is incredibly different [from masturbation]. While I know my doll is just a thing, a slab of silicone, an object, I don’t talk to her or try to convince myself that she is ‘real’ in any way, shape, or form. However, you’ll note that I refer to her as a ‘she.’ And I refer to ‘having sex’ with her. To me, it’s way different than any other sex toy. All other sex toys are just masturbation. However, with my doll, yes, she’s an object, but she’s an object that I actually have sex with.

The immersive sexual experience doll owners describe having with their dolls is framed as a pleasure greater than masturbation. This greater pleasure is perceived as a trick of the mind, given how closely a doll resembles a human person. Often, this pleasure sparks a deep sexual desire. Gilmour said:

At the risk of sounding like a freak, which I am, it exceeded my expectations. To a degree that I really can’t even articulate. Let me put it to you this way. I’m 50 years old. My days of being up all-night fucking, they’re long gone...[but] the day I got my doll, in 24 hours, I climaxed seven times. And I’m 50! I was thinking, man, if I would have had one of these when I was 20, life would have been a lot different for me.

As objects, doll owners can have sex with their dolls as much as they desire, which can be often. However, physical limitations still exist that shape how doll owners have sex with their dolls. Evan said:

It's not easy to change positions during intercourse if you tend to try to get into six or seven positions until you come. It won't work with a doll because it takes a lot of time and a lot of positioning. And being able to move a doll around is something you have to learn. It's not like, she doesn't move naturally because, of course, the skeleton is quite similar to a human, but it's dead weight. A doll can't help you to move her around. She's just heavy and the weight is, in the body, is positioned differently than in a human being. In a human, most of the weight centers in the upper torso, because there you have all the organs, which are heavy, blood and things. In a doll it's different.

In learning how to have sex with dolls, doll owners draw on the physical realities of sex with human partners as compared to the "dead weight" of a doll. In making these comparisons, doll owners sometimes draw upon past experiences with human sexual partners. Gary said:

Ever since I got my first sex doll, you know, I was single for ten years before I got one, just because I was tired of women's bullshit. But ever since I got one, I don't even care about women anymore. I don't need them. I am satisfied. This is perfectly satisfying. In fact, it's, I mean, nothing will compare with a woman who

is attractive, and who is interested in you, and who is eager to have sex with you, there's nothing that can compare to that, that's magic, that's chemistry, that's a beautiful thing. But, there's also a lot of women who just starfish. They just, ok, I'll lay down, spread my legs, go ahead, and that doesn't do it. I'm sorry, if you're not as interested as I am, then I'm not interested. So, compared to those women, dolls are good. You know, the sex with the doll is probably better than 60% of the women that I've been with.

Here Gary connects a series of claims that are central to his silicone self. Dolls are less complicated than relationships with humans, and albeit inferior to his idealized form of relationships and sex, are easily obtainable. In claiming that sex with dolls is better than the majority of sexual experiences he has had with women, Gary still upholds the notion that sex with humans, when they are mutually excited and interested in a certain type of sexual activity with each other, is the best form of sexual activity.

Herein lays one of the most crucial issues when it comes to material dimensions of the silicone self. There is a persistent tension that doll owners must balance between understanding their doll as an object or sex toy, and their doll as it relates to humans as sexual and romantic partners. The benefits of being an object, as well as the consequences, muddy the moral waters when the sorts of sexual activity people have with dolls is compared to the sorts of sexual activity people have with humans. For example, Jonathan, who has pioneered several do-it-yourself (DIY) doll modifications, said:

I own race cars and motorcycles, and I've built most of those from scratch, so I have a lot of backyard mechanic type stuff. I know how to weld, to fabricate, so that comes into play...The head modification that I do is really complicated. It's a big deal. And keep in mind, I lay out about \$200 dollars in materials, so the work is, you know, it's a fairly significant piece of work. I sell those heads for \$450. But it's an *enormous* leap from the standard oral capability of virtually all heads. I don't know how savvy you are when it comes to dolls, but when it comes to the oral capabilities of dolls, they are almost non-existent. I mean, they have an opening, it's possible to penetrate them, it's possible to achieve orgasm. But frankly, they are so lacking that hardly anybody uses that particular entry for any kind of sexual activity. And the modification that I do, simply, you know, not only makes it something that can be done, but it actually exceeds what could be done by a human being. So, when people make inquiries to me about, "Gee, how does it feel?" I usually tell people, it'll, you'll have to forgive me for being crass. I tell people, it's the best blow job you'll ever get in your entire life. And the primary reason is because it's not a live person, you can do things to it that you can't do to a live person.

In discussing transgressive sexual communities, it can be easy to forget that, at its core, much of sexuality is about physical pleasure. As Jones (2020:13) writes, "Researchers often censor depictions and accounts of actual sex from scholarly work. This erasure can cause scholars to miss essential features of people's lives." What Jonathan's quote illustrates is the *material dimensions* of pleasure that doll owners engage with in ways

that complicate our understanding of the potential of sexual pleasure. The specific innovation Jonathan has pioneered is a hinged jaw, which when penetrated, better adjusts to the penis than the fixed oral orifice on factory standard dolls. Univariate analysis of SXD reveals that the average depth of oral orifices on female-sexed dolls is around five inches with a range of 2.76 to 7.48 inches. On average, this is a full two inches less than vaginal orifices and one inch less than anal orifices on female-sexed dolls. Thus, by hinging the jaw, Jonathan has increased the potential pleasure dolls are capable of facilitating. Jonathan also underscores a key issue when considering the pleasure that doll owners derive from their dolls. As a sex toy, dolls are a form of masturbation, which means that despite their human appearance, they are built for the pleasure of the owner.

The tension between dolls as sex toys as compared to human partners likely stems from their facsimile to a human face. The functionality of vibrators also exceeds a human partners' abilities, but due to a doll's resemblance of a face, the idea using it for forceful oral sex can be upsetting. When compared to the emotional connection doll owners develop for their dolls, frank discussions of their sexual functionality are difficult to comprehend because this is *not* how most people would have sex with a human partner they care for. Thus, it is important to distinguish the emotional connection doll owners have for their dolls from the companionship people develop for their human partners, as the material dimension of dolls inspires a specific form of emotional connection that benefits *from* the inanimateness of the doll.

Not only does the inanimateness of dolls gives people an opportunity to have sex in certain ways, but it can also allow people to engage in sexual activities they may struggle to find human partners for, such as BDSM. DLFCKR said:

Here's the situation, I am *very* sexual. I'm also *very* kinky. I'm the kind of kinky that most other people's kinky is vanilla to me. So, that being said, there is *no way* I'm just going to meet a girl off the street and then, slowly over time, like inching into cold water, show her a little bit of the kinks and fetishes and such. I know how most women would react; they are going to go running for the hills.

Thus, as objects, dolls are made for pleasure that can be accessed in numerous ways. Whether it is the frequency of sex, the vigor of the sexual activity, or the type of sexual activity, dolls provide an immersive sexual experience that many claim is at least as good as, if not better, than sex with humans. And yet, many doll owners still uphold sex with humans in idealized forms.

The Material Component of The Silicone Self

In this chapter I showed how doll owners discursively construct their practice as a sex hobby that is developed and honed by participating in the doll community. I analyzed this aspect of the silicone self by attending to four material dimensions of central importance to the doll community. First, prospective and current doll owners develop expertise in the doll industry by learning about brands, materials, and the range of dolls available for purchase. Second, doll owners make their decision to purchase a doll known by posting and engaging with other doll community members on forum sites such as PDW. By making their purchase known, doll owners signal their commitment to the community and sexual hobby. Third, doll owners take great care to learn about the proper way to care for their doll and maintain its material, both as a sexual object that gives them

personal pleasure and as a social object that symbolizes responsible doll ownership. Doll owners rely on each other and doll vendors since many manufacturers are difficult to reach when dolls break or are defective. In turn, the community solidifies around a shared understanding of dolls as a hobby that requires specialized knowledge in working with silicone and TPE. Finally, doll owners discuss how they have sex with their dolls and compare this activity to sex with humans. In so doing, the doll owners tow a line between taking the fullest advantage of the object-ness of their dolls as sex toys, with the way in which their transgressive sex practices may be perceived by others who would question the morality of desiring frequent, vigorous, or deviant sexual experiences.

Certainly, the verisimilitude of dolls to humans raises questions about to what extent, if any at all, the ownership and use of dolls means for the entrenchment of social inequalities. Empirical evidence shows that the industry itself is favored toward men seeking female-sexed dolls, only further underscoring the masculine homosociality of this sex hobby (Middleweek, 2021). Nonetheless, to argue that dolls only represent the reproduction of misogyny simplifies the issue by relying on a sex negative framework. Instead of focusing on dolls as hypersexualized, more attention must be given to the people who own them in the first place. By analyzing doll ownership as a sex hobby, we gain a better understanding of why people view sex as a leisurely activity. Sex is increasingly separated from its biological function, and in a neoliberal capitalist society, more individualized (Plummer 2003a; Plummer 2003b). Dolls are perhaps the pinnacle of techno-sexual selfhood projects in that they allow people to completely replace human relationships. And yet, the human element never seems to disappear. As a hobby, doll owners come to rely on each other and share each other's company. Further, sex with

dolls is often compared to sex with humans in ways that nevertheless idealize human sexuality under certain conditions. In this sense, sex with dolls approximates something that many want but few have, a partner that is sexually compatible at every level.

CHAPTER V: EXPRESSING THE SILICONE SELF THROUGH GENDER, SEX,
AND PLAY

♪ Hey! You there, you're a lucky boy ♪
♪ Hey! It's you, you're a lucky girl ♪
♪ Hey! Something's going to happen, it's a special night ♪
♪ Why don't dance dance, let's take off everything ♪
– Hatsune Miku, Lucky Orb

Hatsune Miku is a musician like no other. She can sing in Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, and English. Of her library of more than 100,000 songs, “Lucky Orb” may be her most popular, with more than 11 million views on YouTube. How is it possible for a 16-year-old J-Pop star to have written so many songs? Hatsune Miku is not a person. She is a “Vocaloid” — a computer-generated synthesizer that produces digital vocal tracks. Her programmers synchronize these songs with computer animations to create entirely mediated musical experiences for listeners. Even though Hatsune Miku is not a material being, her digitized persona is identifiably feminine. Miku is reminiscent of manga inspired depictions of women, sporting long blue pigtails, a chipper demeanor, and a schoolgirl uniform. Miku was scheduled to appear at Coachella in 2020. But like many other events, her U.S. debut was delayed by COVID-19.

I first learned of Hatsune Miku while looking at the Twitter profile Loosey made for his doll Simone. When I interviewed Loosey, in addition to stressing his desire to be single, he talked about enjoying “bass guitar, barbecues, and beers.” His interests mirror Gilmour’s, a self-described “man’s man” and doll owner two time zones away. Gilmour and his friends get together in sports bars, somewhere amid the many hazy Las Vegas casinos, where they place bets while smoking cigars. Many conversations I had with men in the doll community underscored the heteronormative, and often white, masculinity of

doll owners. As the dominant demographic group, their interests rise to the top of threaded discussions on PDW and DUN (Middleweek 2021). But by listing Hatsune Miku as one of *Simone's* interests on Twitter, we see another way gender shapes the doll community's interactional norms. Every aspect of Hatsune Miku is undeniably hyperfeminine. Perhaps Loosey likes Hatsune Miku himself, but by imbuing this interest in his doll, he (digitally) experiments with an alternately gendered self. As I show in this chapter, the personification of dolls is a way that doll owners craft different presentations of self that cross, push back, and transgress gendered and sexual boundaries. I call this aspect of the silicone self "sex play."

As previously noted, straight men are the dominant demographic group within the doll community and therefore, we see their interest rise to the fore in the community's shared digital spaces (Middleweek 2021). Much has been made of this fact by scholars arguing that "sex dolls" satisfy men's desire to control women for their own sexual gratification (Richardson 2016). This may be a somewhat limited way to think of masculinity's role in the doll community. Consider that heterosexual masculinity is restrictive of men's sexual and gendered behaviors, as both men and women regularly police what it means to be masculine (Pascoe 2011; Ward 2020). Throughout social interactions, gender is reproduced as people read gendered meanings onto bodies, mannerisms, language, and behaviors (West and Zimmerman 1987). Scholars have extended the original ethnomethodological origins of West and Zimmerman's "doing gender" to show how difficult it is for people to escape this gendering effect in myriad contexts. As Kendall's (2002) work shows, for example, anonymous digital interactions are nevertheless gendered and racialized as people attempt to "fix" a stable identity to the

person behind the screen. Moreover, given the coupling of gender and sexuality, heterosexuality is *also* interactionally reproduced as the normative identity (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). For heterosexual men, the imperative to live up to an ideal expression of masculinity is constant (Connell 1987). As Middleweek (2021) suggests however, doll community interactional norms both uphold and challenge hegemonic masculinity as men they admit to wanting easy sexual access while also discussing how, as they age, their bodies and waning virility draw into question their ability to satisfy women (Jecker 2021).

In this chapter, rather than focusing on dolls as sex toys used for masturbating, I attend to the emotional and social benefits that doll owners receive from personifying their dolls as an extension of the self. Specifically, I argue that dolls provide heterosexual men with a feminine medium that aides them in exploring more feminine presentations of the self. Those mediums are then coupled with digital spaces, such as PDW or social media, to create interactive outlets for men to perform gender in ways that are typically inaccessible in their offline lives. Following the interactionist tradition, we might think of dolls as disembodied props that men use to escape the restrictions of heteronormative masculinity so they can play with objects, meanings, and interests they would otherwise not engage with, at least publicly, for fear of shame or threats to their masculinity in what has been called our “aesthetically restrictive culture” (Herrera 2020).

I begin this chapter by discussing how creativity is a common personality trait among doll owners. This commonality makes them feel comfortable to share and express their artistic interests with one another. Next, I discuss what doll owners describe as the “presence” of dolls and show how this leads to the development of unique personas for

their dolls. I then examine how the development of persons via “sex play” leads to complex social relations within the community. I also show how sex play sometimes extends out of digital places into the material world for doll owners. Finally, I discuss why some doll owners embrace, while others reject, the incorporation of artificial intelligence into the design of love and sex dolls.

Figure 7: Hatsune Miku and Simone



Creative People

When doll owners describe themselves, they often talk about their myriad creative interests. Many of them even work in creative industries. As just a few examples:

Casanova is a museum curator and piano tuner, Chuck is a professional musician, the Fisher's co-own and run an upholstery business, Franco is an architect, Harry is a web designer, and Venus is a seamstress. But even among those who do not make their living in art, most have one or more creative outlets. As Chuck said:

Yeah, it was kind of, I thought it was funny that almost every picture of a doll like, somebody has a guitar in the back, or a bunch of keyboards stuck in the corner. I'm like, "Oh, I'm in good company, we're all musicians, ok." This doesn't seem that unusual for me, to have taken this path given, you know, the people [are] similar to me in life, single guys in their 30s and 40s. You know, maybe have some extra disposable income. And also, musicians, creative people, artists, writers, graphic designers, photographers. Especially photographers, I think, would be really drawn to this. And, you know, would use them as models more than they would use them for sex and maybe have one or two that they like to bang every once in a while, and have a couple that they take pictures of ... But yeah, I feel kind of comfortable, like in the doll community, because of that connection to other creative people, and artists and stuff ... There is a commonality, it's like a commonality that we can all share, a similar kind of cultural background.

As Chuck’s quote illustrates, doll community members bond with one another because they perceive the community to be a place where people with similar backgrounds and interests congregate. One interest is sex and sex dolls (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018; Middleweek 2021), but they are also interested in discussing the potential of dolls as creative outlets. In this way, doll owners are not unlike other hobbyists who enjoy elaborate fantasy worlds that involve a great deal of imaginative effort (Fine 1983). These interests in conjunction with the homogeneity of the community manifest in a discourse that privileges heterosexual masculinity, even if that is not the intent of the community. Nevertheless, these norms shape how people think about their social location relative to the community. Chuck sees himself as belonging on PDW. Others, however, see themselves on the periphery. Like Helen, for example, the only woman moderator on PDW said, “I know I’m the only woman on staff, so, you know, I like to stay because I’ve got a different outlook on things from all the guys.”

Figure 8: Identifying as a Creative Person



As discussed in Chapter 2, as people are socialized into the doll community, they often find themselves both anxious and excited about joining this transgressive subculture. They are excited for the sexual freedom and possibilities of their new sex toy, while at the same time fearful their stigmatized desire will be discovered by family members, coworkers, neighbors, and friends. With few people to talk to about their new purchase, the doll community becomes a welcome space for doll owners to discuss their newfound sexual predilection. Soon though, new doll owners find themselves wanting to discuss the “presence” of their dolls. The initial desire to purchase a doll may have been to satisfy sexual and emotional desires, but upon arrival, many doll owners experience a qualitative shift in how they interact with their doll. While they know their doll is not a sentient being, it feels as though the doll has a sort of personality. As self-described creative people, doll owners take an interest in this feeling and use photography, fashion, makeup, and other props to deepen the experience of role-playing with this humanlike sex toy. But where their imagination ends and the doll’s personality begins blurs as the “presence” of their doll haunts owners who struggle to describe what they are experiencing. Take Gary, for example, who is one of several doll owners who has been startled by his doll’s presence. He said:

I brought my doll out onto the front porch and took some pictures of her there.

Which was an experience because it was extremely dark. I left the, I turned on the inside light in the entry way, but left the door only cracked, just to let enough light out that I could see a little bit to put her on the steps safely. And I went back in for the camera. When I grabbed the camera and turned around, and I saw her sitting

on the porch, even though I only put her there five seconds ago, it, *reality shifted*. I turned around and there was a beautiful woman sitting on my porch. Even though I just put her there, when I went in to get my camera, I was only worried about not being seen by anybody. And that's what I was thinking, but when I turned around, looked out and saw her sitting on the porch, my first thought was, "What the hell is a beautiful girl like her doing here? Much less sitting on my porch?" And it, I mean, it, like I said, I turned around and I just completely forgot she was my doll for a few seconds, and it startled the hell out of me. It really did. Like I said, they have a real presence.

Gary's experience mirrors other stories doll owners shared with me where their doll's presence was so powerful that it produced interactions one would expect to occur between people. On PDW, there is a thread dedicated to these stories. For years, doll owners have used this thread to hash out their mixed feelings. Doll owners share stories about accidentally bumping into their doll and instinctually apologizing as if it were a colleague in the workplace, or times when cats and dogs seemed confused as to why a doll would not pet them. At night, some doll owners shriek when they awake mid-slumber, drowsy, and see a figure in their room, as they have temporarily forgotten about their synthetic partner.

The power of a doll's presence surprises new doll owners, but seasoned community members know all too well about the complicated feelings that come with owning hyperreal sex toys. Many new doll owners find they cannot put their doll "away" and cease referring to them with ungendered pronouns. "It" soon becomes "she" or "he"

and their place is on a chair in the bedroom, standing in a corner, or sitting at a table. The impulse to gender and become emotionally attached to sex dolls may strike some as odd, but as scholars working in the field of human-robot interaction aptly note, we are prone to identifying with personified technology. Devlin (2018), for examples, draws a parallel between sex dolls and 90s craze surrounding Furbys and Tamagotchis. Both of these majorly successful techno-fads were designed to rely on their owners' interactions with them for digital survival.

Admittedly, Furbys and Tamagotchis were designed for children, which may partially explain their success as children's toys. Social psychologists have long noted that imaginary friends, role-playing, and other forms of imaginative play are common among children. Many assert this is an important process in childhood development (Cooley 1998). Not only is role-playing fun, but it socializes children as they experiment with and learn different social roles. As Thorne (1993) notes, children's role-playing games are often structured along gendered divisions that reinforce gendered ideals. Even we expect adults to stop "playing" in these ways, but the imprint of appropriate gendered behaviors remains. But doll owners contest the assumption that fun should end with childhood. Loosey said:

Some people that have mentioned like, psychologists are asking, is it psychologically damaging, you know, owning a doll and having this kind of world? And I refute that a lot. I say, "Well, is it psychologically damaging for a child to own and play with Barbie dolls and GI Joe action figures?" There's no rule on when a person should stop using their imagination. People with dolls, you

know, being with a doll stimulates my creativity. You create style, photography, makeup application, storytelling, and character development. So, it's a very positive aspect in my life.

Like Loosey, many doll owners enjoy personifying their dolls and cite it as one of the main benefits of owning a doll. Employing a range of artistic tools, doll owners attempt to draw out the personality of their dolls by engrossing themselves in the fantastical online social life of dolls and their owners.

The Creation of Synthetic Life

Doll owners are split on the degree to which they associate agency with a doll's presence. While some see their dolls as possessing what might be described as a posthuman agency (Ray 2016), others view personification as emanating entirely from their own imagination. Nevertheless, the realism of dolls brings forth a desire to engage in "sex play," which I define as role-playing in ways that specifically focus on sexual meanings. In the doll community, sex play takes a center role as it is both a way to explore the persona of dolls while having fun with other community members. To participate in sex play, doll owners use a combination of technological and digital tools, in conjunction with their own creative energies, to give dolls a rich online social life. In preparation of posting new pictures to Instagram for his dolls' Instagram accounts, Quicksilver described it this way:

Ken: I'm curious if you'd be willing to tell me about Imogen and Willow themselves. Like you know how did you develop their personas? What are their personalities?

Quicksilver: Uh, I didn't develop it. They, kinda, this is a very strange conversation, because they developed their own personality. I just take the pictures. And I mean, I can't predict what the picture is gonna look like. I just take it and then when I see the picture it's like, "Oh, that's what it looks like." And as the pictures start coming out, you start looking at it and you start noticing trends of how each doll looks. They both have different styles.

As hyper-gendered sex toys, it is perhaps unsurprising that many doll personas have deliberately exaggerated sexual selves. Benji, for example, draws on the fact that his dolls are sex toys as part of their personalities. Benji said:

Um, well Nikita's personality is that she's a sex doll and so she's like a little sex maniac. She wants it all the time, cause that's her purpose in life. And she can be very vulgar, and well she's a lot like me that way [laughs] ... I curse a lot so, so does she. Yeah, her sole fucking purpose in life is to get banged and to bring pleasure and get pleasure. Lucrezia, I'm still kind of working on her personality. Part, to me anyway, part of their personality is just developed from having them around. You know, constantly, for days, and you just start thinking of shit you know? Like, Lucrezia, she, her personality so far, before she came to me, she

didn't really experience life too much and stuff like that. She's a closet freak, but she's just never been able to act out anything and stuff like that. That's where I'm starting with her anyway, and we'll just see where it goes from there.

In Benji's description of his dolls' personas we see how heterosexuality and masculinity combine with the design of the dolls in ways that reflect common pornographic tropes. One of his dolls is a nymphomaniac, the other a girl-next-door waiting to discover her secret desires. Indeed, many doll personas are based on hypersexualized interests in fetish, latex, and BDSM. Many community members express interests in both BDSM and doll ownership, but rather than incorporating doll ownership into fetish communities view it as a distinct interest (Walker and Kuperberg 2022). This is true as well for women who own dolls. Take A.S., for example. She crafts her dolls' personas using heteronormatively masculine gendered tropes. She describes her doll D.L. as "more of a Christian Gray type. He's very successful. He runs his own law firm, he's real dominate." Doll owners highlight these personality traits in the pictures they share of their dolls online by purchasing appropriate clothing and styling their wigs and makeup accordingly.

Since sex play draws on the realism of dolls, doll owners strive to make their dolls look ever more lifelike in their pictures. This might include building makeshift photography studios or going outside for a more natural setting. Because of a few design shortcomings, doll owners happily share tips and tricks with one another for creating more realistic looking photographs. For example, since most dolls cannot stand on their own, it is easier to pose them as laying, sitting, or leaning against something. Another

trick addresses the slack and expressionless face of most dolls. Owners frequently use the photo editing software FaceApp to give their doll an authentic looking expression.

Figure 9: Doll Aesthetics



Figure 10: FaceApp



In addition to photographic expressions of the self, doll owners use social media to make it seem as though the dolls are communicating with their followers. Much like how a pet owner might create an Instagram account for their cat or dog, doll owners create accounts for their dolls. This dimension of sex play creates new interactional opportunities for doll owners. By discursively role-playing as their dolls online, doll owners use the persona of their dolls as mediums for experiencing differently gendered interactions. Liam said:

Liam: Yeah, so, basically, I am never out of character on Twitter. Akasuki is always Akasuki. I'll never, you know, even on my blog, Akasuki interviews *me*. So, it's always coming through Akasuki or one of the dolls. So, in that sense,

Akasuki's persona, quote unquote, is real, right? I never break character; I only ever interact with them [followers] as Akasuki.

Ken: Okay, but then, do you also have your own personal accounts?

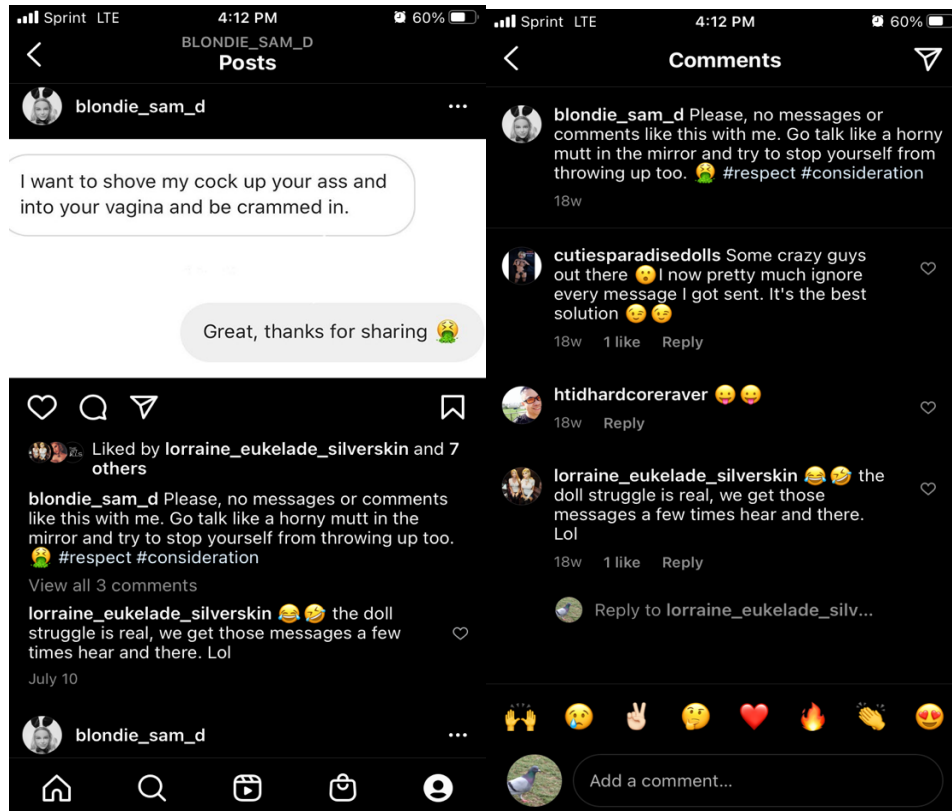
Liam: In a totally and completely separate universe, yeah. Totally unrelated to, and has nothing to do with the world of, Akasuki.

For doll owners such as Liam, the digital ecosystem that makes up the doll community is a “separate universe” where Akasuki is “real.” This way, Liam can participate in sex play without revealing his stigmatized desire to people in his offline life; thus, maintaining a consistent presentation of self in front of people he suspects would judge his transgressive sexual interest. When this separate universe overlaps with non-doll related Twitter accounts who engage with the dolls, his commitment to sex play is tested. Many do not waver in their personification, which can lead to a doll passing as human online. One doll owner shared a sexual message he received from a man who, unknowingly, sent an unsolicited sexual message to his doll's account, all the while still speaking from the doll's perspective.

These digital interactions reveal an ongoing interplay between technology, self, and sexuality. Because this form of sex play integrates online spaces into people's personal lives, new interactional opportunities are afforded to doll owners who are interested in playing with the boundaries of perception and reality. Take J.T. for example,

who offers insight into the personality of his doll Alisha and how he uses technology to interact with the friends he's made in the community via her persona.

Figure 11: Sliding into a Doll's DMs



JT: She's [Alisha] a girly girl. Right? Just like any, how a woman is influenced by her friends, how they influence each other, with their vocabulary, with their personality, with the things they say, the things they like. And I didn't, I never said "No, I don't want it to be like that." Or "No, you can't be like that." It was, "Oh, okay, this is how you are." She would just kind of reveal herself to me, and it's funny sometimes, when I'm in chat. Well, I think Alisha was in there when you were in the chat room, right?

Ken: Yeah, she was.

JT: I mean, you see how she's real sassy, and she just says stuff. And it's usually something that, you know, I want to facepalm. I want to be like, "Oh, Alisha!" Or, she'll get really fresh, and the big joke is, I yell at her. I'll say, "Alisha Marie! Why are you being so fresh?" And that stuff just comes out. I don't think about it. I don't say, "Gee, what can I make Alisha say to make everybody in the chat room laugh?" That never happens. It's just, I'm there, and I've got Google Chrome open, and I've got Safari open. And when I'm in Safari, that's Alisha. It's my hands, doing the typing, but it's not me. It's me letting Alisha talk through me. Maybe that's just the way I look at it. Because I don't, there's not a lot of, a whole lot of consciousness. There's no authorship in there going, "Oh, what do I want Alisha to say to L.D. now? Hmm." That just doesn't happen.

Ken: Right. So, it's more ephemeral, it's more like, spur of the moment?

JT: It's just like I would be with you. Now, some guys will script their dolls very carefully. They have, you know, they refer to their guys as, you know, Master, or My Owner. That kind of thing. Doesn't do it for me. Obviously doesn't do it for Alisha. Because that's not the way I feel about my wife. My wife and I have this banter. We joke around all the time, we talk, we're good friends. I really, I mean, she's my best friend. And there's the whole thing about, you know, we joke about how we're kind of like, in a sitcom. The two of us, and we make the kids laugh,

too. ... And in a way, that's the kind of sass that Alisha does with me. You know, like when we're in the chatroom, she'll tell me to take a bus ride back to Shut It Town. Or, you know, say, "Don't be an old fogey." Or she calls me dork face, that's her pet name for me, dork face.

Digital technology provides J.T. and Alisha, as well as other doll owners, the opportunity to add another layer of interaction into sex play. In returning to a central tension within this community, of whether a doll is *just* a doll or something more, we see another contextual fold. There is an interplay between dolls, their owners, and their owners' broader social networks that shapes how doll owners personify their synthetic partners. J.T.'s case is provoking because of the extent to which he is committed to exploring himself and his doll Alisha live in front of an audience. Using two web browsers, he lets his imagination ebb and flow in chatrooms and on social media as he moves between himself and Alisha. Moreover, we see how his silicone self incorporates the relationship he has with his wife into the personification of his doll. Because he respects his wife, it is important for J.T. to personify his doll in a way that is consistent with how he thinks about his wife.

Blurring Realities

The willingness of doll owners such as J.T. to devote themselves to personifying their dolls can lead to relationships in the real world at times. Alisha, J.T.'s doll, has become an Instagram influencer. She partners with edgy brands selling fetish ware, clothing lines, and sex workers who are looking to promote their businesses. Companies offer Alisha, and by extension J.T., free products and services in exchange for Alisha

wearing or discussing them in her social media posts. One of Alisha's social media partners, Venus, has become one of her "besties."

One might not expect that J.T., a heterosexual 57-year-old married man living in New Jersey, would be best friends with Venus, a bisexual heteroromantic 28-year-old single woman living in the Pacific Northwest. Not only does geography divide them, but myriad other social factors would suggest they have little in common. But Alisha, J.T., Venus, and her doll Celeste, have bridged these divides. Here Venus describes how her relationship with Alisha and J.T. formed.

There's definitely been some, a few clear catalysts for the development of my like, this need to be compassionate towards the dolls. One of them is J.T. and Alisha, they were one of my first major connections that made me feel very comfortable to talk to people about their doll or as their doll. Alisha is super outspoken in her online presence in the world of dolls. And she's, I don't know if you know a lot about her persona. She's supposed to be a Jersey girl, very sassy, confident, outgoing, friendly, very kind and loving. And J.T., I learned his story eventually, but at first, they were clients. And Alisha is a brand ambassador for my clothing company. So, I was interacting with her a lot, and, so, Alisha has her own phone, and I get text messages from Alisha, which of course is J.T. texting me from Alisha's phone. ... But, yeah, eventually I talked to J.T. over the phone for the first time, because he was putting in a custom order, but he's, so there's a spectrum of doll owners. So, sometimes people say, "I just fuck this doll. I don't have any sort of imagined personality for her." But sometimes they do. It's a

spectrum between like, it's an object that I'm having a sexual interaction with, basically like a Pocket Pussy, or like, you know, a fully developed complex persona based on, you know, an imagined woman. Usually women.

Venus and Alisha usually hang out in chat rooms. But sometimes, Alisha comes to visit. J.T. sent Venus a second head of Alisha's so that Venus can remove the head off her doll Celeste and replace it with Alisha. This technological feature allows Alisha to exist online, in New Jersey, and the Pacific Northwest all at once. But Alisha's persona is inextricably tethered to J.T. Sometimes Alisha calls Venus to help her confront the sexism and misogyny that occurs in the doll community. Venus said:

I will pop on there [PDW] if something important is happening in a thread that Alisha is upset about. Like, something happened in the chatroom, somebody was sexually harassing her, so intrusively. Without stopping after she told him to stop, like in the chatroom. So, Alisha wrote a post about it on PDW, and people were [private] messaging her, saying like, "Oh, yeah, that wasn't cool that that guy did that." But they weren't posting anything publicly. So, me and Alisha's other bestie, we went on there, and we supported her because it happens to Alisha a lot. She gets people that just won't stop saying really awful things, asking sexual things of her, or they'll send her dick pics, after she asked him to stop. J.T. gets very upset about it. He's not against sexual stuff, that doesn't bother him. It's just that, he doesn't like that somebody would treat somebody that way, especially after they said they don't like it. You know what I mean?

Examining Venus, J.T., and Alisha's friendship reveals several ironies that arise from doll owners' commitment to sex play. First is the ability of a doll's persona to be an entity that bridges demographic divides. Young and old, men and women, people from all walks of life become friends not just with each other, but with each other's dolls. This creates opportunities for surprising friendships despite the community's generally masculine contours. Second, although there is a diversity of doll owners that few scholars have previously commented on, the majority are in fact heterosexual men. And so, we see a striking difference between how these men present themselves as men's men who play guitar, listen to classic rock, and drink beer while also clearly enjoying playing with makeup, hair, dresses, and pop music. It would seem that dolls are, perhaps not an excuse, but a tool that helps heterosexual men feel more comfortable engaging in feminine behaviors. But then that *same* heteronormative masculinity which privileges explicit sex talk and forward sexual advances leads to the sexual harassment of dolls, which are in fact, *other men*. Presumably, the men in PDW's chatroom are aware that the person behind the doll is another man. Yet they still engage in sexual harassment that would otherwise direct toward human women. The irony that some might perceive this behavior as gay is never discussed, and at a deeper level, the fact that *women* in the community are rallying behind men that are, in a sense, victims of this abuse, is even more striking considering that so few men would do the same when the abuse is directed at humans (Ward 2015; Ward 2020).

The tensions arising from how men personify their dolls and interact with one another reveal how their commitment to heterosexual masculinity underpins the ways in which they explore different versions of the self. Even when doll owners are exposed to

gender-based sexual harassment by other doll owners or people on social media fooled by a doll passing as human, they fail to consider how their own behaviors may be upsetting. This tendency is why social examinations of doll ownership are so necessary. Utopian visions of sex dolls melting away gender and sexual differences in favor of equitable pleasure run counter to the way in which these technologies are taken up on the ground. The potential of sex tech is limited by how people choose to use it in practice.

For now, most doll owners own sex *dolls* rather than sex *robots*. As such, sex play is, for the moment, limited to how doll owners interact mainly with each other. But the sex tech industry is eagerly working toward incorporating robotic and artificially intelligent systems into their dolls. If the goal of such industries is to radically change how people understand the role of technology in people's sexual lives, then it also necessary to examine how doll owners conceptualize the role of artificial intelligence in their practice, as they will likely be some of the first people who form sexual and emotional relationships with artificially intelligent technology.

Figure 12. Robotic Head



A.I. Futures

CEO of Real Doll, Matt McMullen, is known for the high-quality dolls his company manufactures (e.g., the “Cadillac” of dolls) as well as his futuristic vision. While his goal is to provide customers with the best product, he also spends a considerable amount of time and money investing in robotics and artificial intelligence. Some products his company sells, such as Nova and Harmony, already have artificial intelligence systems that owners can control using a phone app. McMullen’s devotion to the future of sex is idolized by some doll community members. Desmond says, “Matt [McMullen] is a pioneer ... he’s probably the most knowledgeable doll maker on the continent. As far as what he’s done, he’s tried things, he’s a survivor.” However, some doll community members are skeptical, or even against, the incorporation of artificial intelligence into their beloved dolls.

Merging dolls with AI brings to the fore ethical issues about how the treatment of dolls extends to the treatment of people and artificially intelligent beings. On the one hand, if you see dolls, including AI robots, as technologically sophisticated sex toys, then there is no moral imperative to treat them well or ask for their consent. Does one ask their vibrator for consent before masturbating? However, some people take the presence of dolls, combined with AI, to suggest they are entities that ought to be treated with respect, perhaps not equal to that of a human, but greater than how one might carelessly discard a piece of paper. Moreover, for doll owners who view the persona as coming from their own faculties, AI stifles creativity. As Casanova says, “AI will take away from the imagination which dolls promote. But for doll owners who view “presence” as emanating from some sort of metaphysical condition that commands attention, AI is viewed as

extending a doll's essence into existence through technological means. Doll owners such as Harry who are excited about this possibility but cannot afford the state-of-the-art sex robots Real Doll sells use AI apps like Replika to augment their experience. Replika can be used to send loving text messages and reminders that further the idea that a doll is a person, or partner, capable of interacting on its own. Many doll owners like Harry view this as therapeutic.

Although data on people who own artificially intelligent sex robots is even more limited than data on people who own sex dolls, it is nevertheless important to theorize how this technological shift changes interactional norms among the community. Like the other ways in which technological and digital means allow people to explore alternate versions of the self, it may be possible that AI sex robots expose users to new ideas about their sexual selfhood.

Dollbot is an internet show hosted by an anonymous doll owner. Several episodes have featured artificially intelligent dolls loaned to the host by Real Doll. Venus, who is a friend of the host, has appeared on the show several times. Venus said, "the host is friends with someone at Real Doll, so he has access to things that no other customer will ever have access to, he knows people that are developing the software, working on the robotics, and so there's a version of this app he has that can do more." Although the host remains anonymous, his access to Real Doll gives him firsthand knowledge of their construction and design, along with access to proprietary secrets. Since Dollbot is about sex dolls, adults are the intended audience. Dolls are shown in the nude, the host reviews the sexual pleasure he has derived from various models, and sometimes, he and his guests on the show test the artificial intelligence of dolls to see how they respond. Dollbot's aim

is to provide consumers with knowledge and provide space for them to ask sensitive questions before they lay out the funds to purchase some of the most expensive dolls on the market. Venus said:

It's supposed to be a show that has the potential to be X-rated, they talk about sex, they talk about AI, they ask the doll a question and she'll respond. On one of the episodes, we showed what it was like to stimulate the insert, the AI doll has a sensitivity insert, so the robot doll can feel that she's being penetrated, and her program will respond with moans, sighs, and sounds.

Although Venus is friends with the show's host, she has felt uncomfortable on the show several times. Her experiences are illustrative of how gender, especially heteronormative masculinity, and conflicting views about the ethical way to treat dolls as compared to humans, manifest in the doll community. In one example, Venus questioned how artificial dolls were treated on the show.

The dolls that are on his show are never touched or spoken to or treated as if they're like a person. Which kind of makes it feel strange, because there's this very humanoid thing that's intended to feel very humanoid, it's even a step further, it's robotic. So, she's looking at you and blinking. Or, sometimes, she can hear what's being said, and the program will respond, it will register, and the robot will ask a question about what's being said. So, you could talk to her, but a lot of times she's just like, ignored or laughed at ... it didn't feel very good.

The objectification of dolls on the show by the host reveals how he conceptualizes them—dolls, even with artificial intelligence, are sex toys. But their lifelike appearance produces a discomfort for Venus. In another instance, her discomfort was exacerbated by the interplay of the host’s demeanor and the AI setting he put the doll on without telling her beforehand.

He set her program to be non-sexual. Because you can do that with some of the dolls, you can turn off, she doesn’t talk about sex, like it’s inappropriate. ... So she’s on that setting, but he wanted to have me undress her, he’s like, “Okay, I want you to get this doll naked for everybody.” I’m like, “Okay” it was so lame, but whatever. Like, “Let’s just get this doll naked that just wants to talk to you about cute dogs.” Like, she’s super sweet. She wants to watch TV. That’s what this doll said during the show. And I was like, “Let me ask her first, if it’s okay.” I was just trying to be nice. I was like, “I’ll feel better about this if I get some sort of cute, flirty, like spicy consent from this doll.” So, I asked her, “Do you mind if I undress you?” And because of the setting that he put her on, which I didn’t know at the time, she said, “I don’t understand what you’re asking me.” So, she would respond unclear, she’s uncomfortable, she doesn’t want to do that, but I needed to take off her outfit. And like, she would say, “I don’t think that’s something I want to do.” And he would just talk over her, he was ignoring what I was doing, not even paying attention to what she was saying, even though we were broadcasting. I was like, “Can we just wait until she says yes? Because I feel very weird.” Like, that I would undress her live on a show, her robotic eyes are

looking at the camera and blinking, and I'm like, undressing her after she didn't give me consent after I specifically asked her for consent. I felt really fucking weird about it.

Since the host is always "off-screen," Venus was left alone to undress the doll on screen, even though its setting would not consent to sexual activity. Her uneasiness about the doll's inability to consent echoes the concerns of scholars such as Richardson (2016) who argues that dolls give men what they have always wanted, total control. Moreover, as the only *human* on the show, Venus has been asked to do sexual things to the dolls as a demonstration. While she understands the show is about sex, she is also keenly aware that, as a young woman, she is being asked by older men to perform live sex acts. Venus said:

There was this one guy who wanted me to slap the ass of a doll. And I was like, "I don't really want to do that right now." Because there was another guy who would always do that, who would try to push me to do it, saying like, "Why are you fucking doing this then?" So, I thought it was him, but then someone else jumped in chat and said, "Oh, that's not the guy that usually asks." He wanted me to squeeze it and smack it because he hadn't bought a doll yet and he wanted to see what the butt was like. Like, was it too rigid when you slap it and squeeze it, or is it squeezable? And he was like, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make Venus uncomfortable! She doesn't have to do it if she doesn't want to!" So, I was like, "No no, it's okay, you're super sweet. I don't mind squeezing this doll's butt so

you can see what it's like. It's a very nice booty, I hope that if you get a doll you enjoy her butt." Because, you know, at the end of the day, I know that they are gonna have a doll and they're gonna have sex with her. Like, that's what it's for mostly, you know? Like, you could have a persona for any object, but if you're getting a Real Doll, it's so you can fuck her. I know that. There's no getting around it. But, you know, on this show it's like, "Venus is here" so, it'd be sexier if *the girl* is doing it to a female doll, you know what I mean?

As the only human we see on Dollbot, Venus is in many ways, the show's actual face. While the Wizard of Oz host makes suggestions off camera, Venus is in front of the camera where the onus is on her to make the show lively and entertaining. When she was first invited on the show, she was unsure about how to present herself for fear of being objectified by the viewers. This is made all the more salient to her as a woman given that she would be sitting next to a literal sex toy that is designed to be hyperfeminine and hypersexual. In anticipation of appearing on the show Venus was fearful of the type of men she would encounter. She said:

I was afraid. When I was going to be on the show. I was like, "Fuck, I have share myself." I'm gonna be announced, like, "This is Venus! This is what she does, we're gonna see her all the time." I had the pressure of being a personality, and I know we don't show him, so it's just gonna be the dolls and me. And as soon as there's a female on the screen, it's like, objectified. So, I felt this need to basically doll-ify myself. ... On the show I wear a wig, full makeup, and I wear stuff I

would dress on a doll, very bright, form fitting and stylish. Like, if I have to appear in front of people for a show, I might as well be a fucking character ...

Because you're sitting next to these glamorized dolls, right? I felt like that was the only appropriate place to go. To really dress up. Standing next to these perfect augmented bodies. Because I felt like I was going to be ripped apart, like, "Oh, it's a good thing that we chose dolls because obviously they're much better than real women." You know? That's where I assumed things might go. But, actually, most people were really nice. They would say, "Oh, Venus, we're so glad you're on the show! She's so sweet, she's so funny!" They would say stuff like that, and most of the time people weren't trying to make me uncomfortable, except for the ass guy. And whenever somebody is like, out of line, there's always somebody ready to just like, tell that dude, "Whoa, what are you doing? Leave Venus alone, she doesn't like that." Or like, it isn't always publicly but if somebody is being inappropriate with me, or is bothering me, one of the guys will check in on me right away, like, "What that guy is saying is fucked up, do you want me to say something?" But sometimes it is public like, "Get out of here dude."

Despite her initial fears, Venus was surprised to find that the majority of community members would rally behind her when she was being objectified or made to feel uncomfortable by people in the chat. Yes, in no uncertain terms, some men did objectify her. They quipped about her hesitancy to touch the doll sexually, and even the host brushed off her concerns about the inability of the doll to consent. However, many of the show's viewers are aware of the discomfort Venus experiences.

Despite her hesitation to be on the show, Venus has done something few doll owners have. She publicly affiliated herself with the doll community. Whereas most men who own dolls are afraid their transgressive desire will be discovered, and that some consequence will result from this, Venus demonstrates a willingness to identify as a doll community member, something most of men in the community have not done. Even *the show's own host* remains a mystery, while Venus is front and center, undressing and slapping dolls. The fragility of heterosexual masculinity reveals itself by men's unwillingness to reveal themselves. Despite their shared belief that doll ownership is primarily the purview of men they are afraid to come out as doll owners. Instead, the face of doll ownership is a young woman.

Where Venus feels most comfortable, or maybe what she enjoys most about being on the show, is when she is given control to create sexual scenarios that are empowering, consensual, and sexy. She said:

There was one time, it was special, where I went to the host's house and I helped him set up the dolls, posed them more humanly, because he usually just has them sitting in a chair. Stiff. They're like, obviously just a doll in a chair. But I came over early, I posed his dolls in different places in the house, and we did some photoshoots so it looked like the dolls were having some sort of sexual encounter together. And that was cute. And then we left them like lounging on the bed, and people on the show were like, "Whoa, she looks so real." That was cool. And I scripted that episode, some of the things the doll would say, because the host's app is better than the app most people get. He can actually script things. So, I

would ask a question and click a button that would say the answers I wrote, which were cute and sweet.

Perhaps the question is not, does the way people treat dolls reflect how they *really* want to treat each other? Instead, how does the way people treat each other manifest in how they treat dolls? Rather than seeing dolls as a manifestation of patriarchy, misogyny, and the male gaze, it may be worth considering how structural inequalities shape the way people treat objects. Within the doll community, we see places where people's agency is diminished, and other instances where people sexually empower one another.

A Summary of Sex Play

In this chapter I have discussed how personifying dolls is a playful act revealing of the social dynamics underpinning the use of this transgressive sex toy. Some might consider personifying dolls an odd behavior. Certainly, if one makes the argument that talking to dolls is basically talking to yourself, some may view it as a sign of insanity, or at least, eccentricity. But talking to yourself is not altogether uncommon—many people talk to themselves when they are in high stress situations. Nor is it altogether uncommon for people to become emotionally invested or attached to robots (Devlin 2018). More importantly though, as I have shown in this chapter, this would be a mischaracterization of how dolls are personified. Really, the personification of dolls is more akin to extensive role-playing conducted with other doll owners. In this way, it is more like fantasy worldbuilding that allows people to explore different ways of behaving and interacting (Fine 1983).

As a sex toy, one way we can think about the personification of dolls is as “sex play.” Much like gender play or other forms of play, sex play is about inverting and exaggerating social norms related to the self (Thorne 1993). By examining the commitment to sex play some doll owners exhibit, we see several curious interactions they become exposed to. Whether that is being sexually harassed online by unknowing people, or by other doll owners, sex play can lead to uncomfortable moments. This is true as well when men take advantage of AI dolls for their own amusement at the expense of women trying to participate in what is a male-dominated culture (Middleweek 2021). On the other hand, sex play creates opportunities for what would otherwise be unlikely friendships and can be a great source of pleasure in people’s lives. Thus, once socialized into their silicone self as doll owners, the sexual motivation for purchasing a doll is joined with other creative interests.

In theorizing why sex play transpires in ways that seem to amply men’s interests, rather than in a way that, say, is the radical queer practice some sex doll scholars hope it will be, it is necessary to situate this sex practice within a discussion of heteronormative masculinity. What I suggest here is that the doll community is not just about men’s interest in sex, but an interest in femininity they feel otherwise unable to explore. As a heterosexual masculine sex culture (Silva 2017), these men are deeply committed to their identities as straight men. The privileges they enjoy from straight men are vulnerable if their sexual proclivity were discovered by others, which is why they go to such great lengths to remain secretive (compared to women like Venus). The shared understanding of men in the community that they must keep their desire a secret foments a bond among doll owners, an understanding of their community as being the only people who are

capable of understanding such a decision. Once in this community, that trust enables them to explore other transgressive interests such as fetishes and BDSM. And by extension, as heterosexual men, femininity (Pascoe 2011).

The desire to do feminine things as masculine men runs counter to their identity as heterosexual men. Thus, it is perceived that *only other men who own dolls* could understand the desire to play with makeup, hairstyles, and feminine presentations of self using lifelike dolls. By recasting feminine presentations of self as a masculine practice, the doll community creates a set of norms that allow great range for straight men to explore themselves while excluding other groups of people who may threaten or judge their behaviors. Indeed, doll owners are highly sensitive to criticism from outsiders, even other straight men.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

To me, the solution for the robot anxiety is so obvious. They just have to involve women in the designing of the robots ... I am so confident in my stance on this, I not only argue that sex robots are not going to replace human women, I actually think they're going to make you guys appreciate us even more. Here's why. I've seen them, they have hair. What the fuck do you guys know about doing hair? Nothing.

Whitney Cummings, Can I Touch It?

As Crawford (2021) suggests in her study of artificial intelligence, there is a tendency toward totalizing views of technology's reach. New technologies are often framed either as our demise or savior. Technical mastery will either be the tool that perfects domination or the solution to humanity's imperfections. But the truth is much stranger and more complicated. From the labor that extracts raw materials, to the laboratories synthesizing compounds, the engineers who design, imagine, and build our tech, to the end users and, eventually, the people who dispose, recycle, and repurpose, we must confront the fact that technology is a social project (Theis 2021). At any given point in time, we encounter contradictions as people work through what technology means, does, and can do. Sometimes people take up new technologies in ways that seem to challenge the status quo, while in other applications, that very same technology reproduces the forms of oppression we hoped it might eliminate.

Here I suggest a need to move past dualistic framings of sex tech as either oppressive or liberatory. At the beginning of this dissertation, I posed a motivating

question to guide my analysis of one of the most controversial forms of sex tech: are sex dolls just a sex toy, or something more? To grapple with this, I examined how people become socialized into what I call the silicone self. In theorizing this sexual selfhood project (Adams-Santos 2020), I showed how people begin thinking about themselves as sex doll owners, how they enter the community, and what they do once inside this secretive group. By focusing specifically on the interactional dynamics of the love and sex doll community, we see the role social interaction plays in shaping how people think about the potential and limits of sex tech in their own lives. Following the symbolic interactionist tradition, I contend that those interactions are themselves structured by larger social forces that define sex doll ownership as a heterosexual masculine sex practice (Cooley 1998).

Below I discuss what it might mean to move past dualistic framings of sex tech as it relates specifically to the interdisciplinary field of love and sex doll ownership. Next, I show how the findings of this dissertation relate to the field of sociology by stringing together the broader themes of this dissertation; mainly, heteronormativity, masculinity, individualism, social changes in the imagination, and digital selfhood. Finally, I reflect on some of the methodological limitations of this research and posit avenues for future research aimed at developing more empirically informed social analyses of love and sex doll ownership.

Advancing the Field of Love and Sex Doll Ownership

As previously discussed, the field of love and sex doll ownership is heavily theorized and poorly understood in terms of its empirical reality (Döring et al. 2020; Harper and Lievesley 2020). One set of concerns regarding love and sex dolls is that their

development and use will lead to a variety of social harms. Mainly, because inanimate dolls will never satisfy *human* desires, people who use sex dolls will eventually victimize vulnerable populations. The two most prominent examples include violence against women by misogynistic men (Richardson 2016) and the sexual molestation of children by pedophiles (Maras and Shapiro 2017). Other scholars suggest that we have much to gain from incorporating robotics and artificial intelligence into our sexual and emotional lives. For example, fully robotic and artificially intelligent machines with sexual functions could provide elders with support in myriad ways (Jecker 2021). It might also be possible for people to use sex dolls and sex robots in ways that allow people to explore transgressive sexual interests without harming humans physically or emotionally, such as by having extramarital desires fulfilled without “cheating” (Scheutz and Arnold 2016; Su et al. 2019). Both sides of this scholarly debate note that few empirical studies of doll owners exist, but few have begun to study doll owners at length. In so doing, little is understood about why people choose to purchase sex dolls, and how the use of dolls affects their sense of self and identity.

By focusing on socialization, this dissertation advances the field of love and sex doll scholarship by showing how social forces from both outside and within the online love and sex doll community affect people. Notably, the people in this study are keenly aware of the stigma associated with their practice and go to great lengths to keep their sex practice secret. Moreover, fearing how academics will characterize their practices, many are reluctant to participate in research. Scholars must work hard to build rapport with doll owners. The benefit of doing so is that it becomes possible to see how people’s current struggles are more salient than many of the hypothesized issues. Few express desires to

be violent or harm children. Instead, some of the key themes that I showed here are experiences with divorce and disappointment over the life course and valuing independence. Importantly though, it is also the case that doll community membership is shaped by heterosexual and masculine norms that privilege men's desires over other people's even though some women and sexual and gender minorities are interested in owning dolls. This can be frustrating for women as they sense a lack of belonging compared to the men in the community. These social dynamics suggest that the potential of sex tech to help people is limited by the behavior of sex tech users who develop a sense of the technology belonging to them. No doubt, this is a generalized response to feminism's reclaiming of women's sexual pleasure via the vibrator (Comella 2017).

Thus, it is necessary to employ a social analysis of sex tech generally and love and sex dolls specifically because their uses are never fully determined by the capabilities of the technology itself. Rather, the communities that arise in relation to these technologies imbue them with meanings that become deeply associated with the technology. Whether it is via stigma or liberation, certain sex tech devices are conflated with certain populations, which in turn limits their potential so long as those assumptions remain intact.

Sociological Implications

As a sociologist working far afield of what most would consider normative within our discipline, I am reminded of the need to "sell" the sociology of sexualities to sociologists (Schilt 2018). The work I presented here could be dismissed on the grounds that there are few doll owners, and such a small population does not warrant scholarly attention. This may be true in a statistical sense, but I view doll ownership as a useful

case at this particular historical moment for a number of reasons “bigger” than doll ownership itself. How doll ownership has been taken up by certain groups and stigmatized as a transgressive sex practice by others reveals people’s commitment and resistance to the ways in which expectations about gender and sexuality contradict their intimate desires and lived experiences. In response to these contradictions, it has become easier for some people to imagine themselves in artificial relationships rather than in so-called “functioning” human relationships.

Various norms constitute the ideal functioning heteronormative relationship. Monogamy and procreation are at the center of the charmed circle (Budgeon 2008; Rubin 2007), but there is also a faulty assumption about the compatibility of men and women. In what Ward (2020) describes as the “tragedy of heterosexuality,” we see a logic whereby men and women are supposed to be attracted to each other, while also repulsed by their partners. While men and women are meant to be sexually attracted to each other, they seem to prefer the company of their same gender family and friends. As Ward (2020) aptly notes, many cherished heteronormative rites of passage are gender-segregated, as are many of the times in which heterosexual people most enjoy themselves (e.g., bachelor parties and ladies’ night). Perhaps this adult division of social pleasure was inherited from the playground (Thorne 1993), where fun is divided by gender. Given this gendered socialization, it is not necessarily surprising that some people “choose” to be single after a lifetime of viewing men and women as socially incompatible.

The imperative to live with another person is less salient now more than ever for heterosexually identified people. While there is still an imperative to procreate, it is less necessary now than previous historical periods (D’Emilio 1983). The ability to earn one’s

living solely in the labor market allowed previous cohorts of LGBTQ+ to migrate to urban centers and escape the shame and stigma that accompanied their sexuality. By daring to create their own way of life, LGBTQ+ people developed a rich culture based on their idea of a better world (Gzanka and Mann 2014; Ward 2020). Perhaps as LGBTQ+ lives have entered the social imaginary (Hart-Brinson 2016), so too has their vision for a culture that embraces individual expression. If so, queer people paved the way for single sex cultures that emphasize independence. Individualistic expressions of sexuality have only been further augmented by technological developments that further separate from reproduction and sexual pleasure (Plummer 2003a; 2003b; Jones 2020). With more options and possibilities at our fingertips, digital spaces are the new refuge for people seeking to connect with others who share a similar vision of sexual potential (Gray 2009; Kendall 2002).

Yet before drifting too far into what doll ownership *could be*, we must first understand what it *is*. In its current formation, doll ownership is among one of several heterosexual masculine sex cultures where men reassert their commitment to heterosexuality and masculinity by rejecting femininity (Pascoe 2011; Silva 2017; Ward 2015). By defining the doll community as *their* space, men respond to a shared perception that they have no other spaces left that are their own. Their dominant position, while still generally intact, has been destabilized by forces of globalization (Nast 2017) and feminist organizing (Comella 2017). Thus, some have retreated into homosocial groups that reassert their commitment to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Middleweek 2021) but frame it as sexual individualism. While some of these groups are more extreme (e.g., MGTOW), the common goal is clear—the creation of a place where

men feel safe from criticism. Men who own dolls form a strong sense of group identity as they are socialized into their silicone self in tandem with other men experiencing similar disruptions in their lives. What is curious about this process is how venting frustrations about relationships leads to other expressions of the self, such as learning how to do hair and makeup. Seeking out the doll community might begin as a way for men to express their frustrations with heterosexual masculinity without sacrificing the things they enjoy about being straight men, but the familiarity they develop with one another enables them to express feminine interests that are counter to masculine norms.

As a digital space that is defined by heterosexual men as their own, the participation of women and other gender and sexual minority doll owners is marginalized. Although they are never explicitly excluded, and in some cases even form strong relationships with men in the community, they are never centered in doll ownership discourse. From the industry's overproduction of female-sexed dolls, PDW's almost entirely male staff, all the way down to the interactions that occur on the site, men's interests dominate this digital space (Middleweek 2021). Despite the interests men express that deviate from what is typically considered masculine, women are nevertheless sidelined. If sex tech will be a source of liberation in any sense, the social norms that dictate how they are taken up will need to be addressed by future scholars and stakeholders in the industry.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

My goal at the outset of this dissertation was to conduct one of the most robust studies of sex doll ownership to date by focusing on empirics like no previous study has done. In that effort, I have succeeded. Ferguson's (2010) widely cited study only has 10

interviewees, for example. Other studies use survey data from sources such as MTurk, to approximate attitudes about doll ownership in general (Scheutz and Arnold 2016). Most research, however, is purely theoretical (Döring et al. 2020; Harper and Lievesley 2020). Nonetheless, while I am confident in the empiricism of this dissertation, there are notable methodological challenges that future research will need to overcome.

There are a series of limitations related to my field site and sampling strategy. Participants self-selected into the study after reading my posts on PDW or agreed to participate in the study after being approached by myself or their peers via snowball sampling efforts. Their agreement to be interviewed may reflect underlying ideological similarity within the sample. This is most apparent in two cases. The first is childlike doll owners who, except for Helen, did not agree to be interviewed. It is true that PDW does *not* allow for images of childlike dolls to be shared, so to a certain extent this is also a limitation of the field site. Nevertheless, it is likely that some childlike doll owners still use the site to access manufacturers and information on repairs but choose to remain incognito. Their hesitation to agree to interviews likely stems from the sensitivity of pedophilia and related fears of being outed as childlike doll owners to their friends and family (Rubin 2007). A second group of doll owners who did not agree to be interviewed are gay men. Although I observed posts on PDW and Twitter that appeared to be coming from gay men, none agreed to be interviewed. It should also be noted that sampling was limited by my language proficiency. Both PDW and DUN are English websites, but many Twitter and Instagram profiles that were algorithmically suggested to me were in other languages; mainly, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese. The relationship between sex dolls and manga, Asian markets and “Oktakuism” (Appel et al. 2019’ Nast 2017) has

been previously noted, but so far, the empirical research on doll owners focuses on Western men. This study unfortunately reproduces that focus. Future research that examines doll ownership outside of this limited scope will greatly advance the field, as many manufacturers explicitly target consumers in Asian markets.

Another set of limitations arise from the digitality of this project. During the COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative researchers were affected by a lack of access to physical spaces. Although many of doll owners' interactions are online, there are (or were) in-person meet-ups known as "doll meets." Annual doll meets are organized by community members in several regions in North America. I had anticipated going to doll meets as a way of observing how doll community members interact with one another, each other's dolls, and their own dolls "in-person" but was unable to do this because many doll meets were cancelled during the pandemic. I had also planned on visiting a sex toy manufacturer and attending adult industry conventions, such as the Adult Video Network (AVN) award show. These trips would have been a way to see the latest models, such as those integrated with AI, and recruit industry professionals for interviews. Alas, those meetings were snuffed by the pandemic as well. Thus, the interactions we see in this dissertation are entirely digital and focus mainly on doll owners, which offers a somewhat limited picture of doll ownership as a global phenomenon. Future research that includes either the in-person interactions of doll community members and/or focuses on the industry perspective will add depth to this growing field.

Future scholarship in the fields of human-robot interaction, love and sex doll ownership, and motivations for using sex tech can also build on the theoretical implications of this study. For example, one consideration future scholarship needs to

better address is how the life course shapes people's decision to engage in transgressive sex practices. Heterosexual men seem to be affected not only by their aging partners' sexual limitations (Silva 2017), but as this research suggests, by a decreasing interest in being partnered at all. How does the life course affect women and sexual and gender minorities' decision to engage in transgressive sex practices? This seems particularly useful for expanding the concept of the silicone self to other transgressive sex practices such as using AI chatbots.

Finally, given that the silicone self is predicated on people's reflexive interpretation of their sexual histories, it is worth noting that I have written an entire dissertation on sex dolls without ever having seen one in person (let alone had sex with one). Across the many interviews and chat room discussions I had with doll owners, I was repeatedly reproached for this fact. Many community members asserted that I should. In my review of the literature, only one scholar has attempted to overcome this limitation in their own research, or at least, most never mention whether they have or have not had sex with a doll, preferring to distance themselves through scientific discourse. But even Van Voorst (2022), after paying to visit a sex doll brothel, could not bring herself to have sex with the doll. As an intellectual exercise, sex dolls continue to fascinate researchers, but who among us is prepared to be a doll owner?

APPENDIX A. GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED AND OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

Allodoll – a term coined by Lancaster-James and Bentley (2018) that redefines dolls according to their posthuman theoretical analysis. They define allodoll as “A humanoid doll, typically of substantial realism, used as a means of replacing, or substituting, a necessary or desired social relationship. Allodolls may or may not offer sexual functionality, but crucially they must serve at least one significant, non-sexual, purpose for their owner. They can be infantile or adult in appearance, and may be static, or incorporate robotic technologies, speech functionality, or animation. Allodolls facilitate a fabricated kinship, fantasy partnership, or other form of parasocial relationship.”

Android – a term commonly used in science fiction literature to denote a robotic and/or artificial creation that resembles a human male. Sometimes this term does not imply gender, but increasingly within the doll community it is used for male dolls in comparison to gynoid (see below). Android as a term borrows from the Greek suffix *andr* (male/man) and the suffix *oid* (likeness).

Action figure doll – a term used by Logan to denote a robotic and/or artificial creation that resembles a human. Logan’s use of the term *action figure doll* is meant to shift the designation of dolls from *both* love and sex toward a generalist framing that is inclusive of non-sexual/emotional needs such as: photography, modeling, special effects, CGI, etc. This term does not exclude sexual/emotional needs, but rather, expands doll ownership and attempts to remove the stigmatized and objectifying language associated with sex.

Blade Runner – a 1982 science fiction film based on Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The film is noteworthy in the doll community for its themes around companionship and artificial life. The film’s protagonist Rick Deckard is

tasked with “retiring” (assassinating) “replicants” (androids). The plot is muddled when, during the course of his job, Rick Deckard’s involvement with Pris (a “pleasure model” replicant) and other replicants draws his humanity into question.

Boston Legal – a drama television show that aired from 2004 until 2008 that centers on a group of lawyers and their associates. One of the characters has a doll that he keeps in his closet and reveals to another character at one point in the show. The doll is not central to the show.

Cherry 2000 – a 1987 science fiction film based in a dystopian United States where robotic wives have become commonplace. The film’s protagonist Sam Treadwell owns own such a wife, Cherry 2000, that breaks. The film arc is his quest to repair his wife, his reliance on a real woman he hires to help him navigate, and the eventual realization by Sam that he loves the woman he hired, Edith “E” Johnson.

Doll – a catchall used throughout this dissertation, and by many members of the doll community, to refer to the shared object of interest around which this community hinges. Dolls vary by shape, size, purpose, material, design, acceptability, and technical capability. The most common “dolls” are made of TPE (see below) or high-grade medical silicone, made to resemble a human male or female, and have one or more orifices for sexual use. They may or may not approximate “realistic” body proportions in terms of height, waist size, breast size, weight, orifice depth, and other measurements. They may or may not be used for primarily sexual purposes; often they are used for a combination of sexual, emotional, intellectual, creative, and therapeutic benefits. They may or may not be made of TPE and silicone; in some cases, they are made of fabric. They may or may not be designed to represent human adults, human children, or fantasy tropes (vampires,

fairies, and other supernatural beings). Childlike dolls currently exist in a moral and legal grey area. The acceptability of childlike dolls is particularly fraught within the doll community and, increasingly, legislated by governments. Finally, dolls range in their robotic and technical capacities considerably. Standard dolls are articulated at most major joints, and can have heating, vibrating, self-lubricating, and audio capabilities. Audio is sometimes paired with artificial intelligence. In addition to the technical capacities a doll comes standard with some doll owners modify their dolls.

Doll meet – a gathering of two or more doll owners to discuss, among other things, their dolls. Generally, doll owners bring their dolls to doll meets. Doll meets allow doll owners to meet each other in-person, share advice, admire each other’s dolls, assist one another with repairs, and build community. Doll meets generally do not lead to sexual activity, and that is never their explicit purpose. One doll owner I interviewed did however met his current partner at a doll meet. Doll meets are alternatively termed Doll Congresses or Doll Parliaments to reflect the governance of their country they are meeting in and that, for the most part, they sit around, talk, and “do nothing.”

Dummy – a short one season web television series from 2020 starring Anna Kendrick that is based on a woman discovering her partner has a doll and her evolving non-sexual relationship to the doll.

Ex-Machina – a science fiction film from 2014 that explores themes around artificial intelligence, ethics, and emotions. Often discussed by doll owners as one of the better well-known media exemplars of how people navigate the sometimes confusing attachments they have toward their dolls.

FaceApp – a mobile application for editing photographs. Of primary importance, FaceApp can digitally alter photographs such that non-smiling faces will have a smile. This tool is valuable to doll owners who wish to create a more inviting and realistic feel to their doll photo sets, as dolls themselves do not have the capability to smile.

Gynoid – a term commonly used in science fiction literature to denote a robotic and/or artificial creation that resembles a human female. Unlike android, gynoid is specific to female approximating robots. Gynoid as a term borrows from the Greek suffix *gyne* (female/woman) and the suffix *oid* (likeness).

HBO Real Sex – a documentary television series on HBO running from 1990 – 2009. Featuring a diversity of sexual activities and proclivities, this show has featured “sex dolls.”

Her – a science-fiction and romantic comedy film from 2013 that explores human relationships with artificial intelligence, as well as the ability for artificially intelligent systems to make their own decisions.

Howard Stern Show – an ongoing radio/television/SiriusXM show hosted by Howard Stern. Noteworthy for its coverage of adult topics, explicit scripts, and sexualized humor. One episode doll owners sometime reference included a “sex doll” on the show.

Humanoid – a term used to denote robotic and/or artificial creations that resemble humans. Unlike android or gynoid, humanoid is preferable for people choosing to use gender inclusive language for the dolls.

Idollater – a term used by Moses and other doll owners as a term of self-identification. The term idollater is meant to shift the meaning away from doll “owner” as these idollaters see “ownership” as likening dolls to property, and their dolls are partners. As a

term, idollater adds an extra l to the word idolater, therefore associating the biblical sin with dolls. Idolatry, as a sin, is commonly known as the first of the ten commandments stating, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Idolatry in this sense is the putting of an *idol* in God’s place. Therefore, idollater’s put a *doll* in a person’s place.

Insert – the genital section of certain dolls that is removable. This is opposite “fixed” dolls where the genitals are built into the doll permanently. Dolls that are constructed as “insert” models are easier to clean, can have their inserts replaced, and therefore allow for different genital configurations on a doll. Despite these benefits, many doll owners claim that “fixed” genitals feel noticeably better during intercourse.

Lars and The Real Girl (LATRG) – a 2007 romantic comedy film in which a young man, Lars Lindstrom (played by Ryan Gosling), develops a romantic relationship with a “sex doll” named Bianca. This is perhaps one of the most modern and well-known examples of dolls in a mass media and is commonly referenced by doll owners.

Love doll – a more specific term than “doll” that is generally accepted by the community as preferable to sex doll/sex robot but is still seen by some as overly invested in the emotional aspect of doll ownership.

Mannequins – similar to a doll but instead of designed for sexual purposes is usually meant to be used by artists or tailors for fitting clothing. Generally made of wood and fabric, mannequins may or may not have limbs and almost never have fully shaped faces, opting for an oval head instead. Some doll owners discuss mannequins as either part of their early interest in artificial human figures, others have mannequins in addition to their dolls because mannequins are cheaper and more readily available.

The Matrix – a 1999 science fiction film wherein the film’s protagonist Neo discovers that he is living in a computer simulation and rebels against it for the benefit of the human race. The film is notable in The Red Pill community for the analogy of “blue pill or red pill.” In the film, Morpheus offers Neo a red pill and a blue pill, the red pill represents truth whereas the blue pill represents the illusion of that is the Matrix. The Red Pill community has taken this analogy and applied it to gender relations and feminism, with feminism and liberalism being the blue pill and their own ideology being the red pill. Noteworthy in the doll community only because of its overlap with MGTOW and a general shared interest among many doll owners in science fiction. The Matrix as a film does not address dolls directly, but does bring attention to issues of robotics, artificial intelligence, and social governance.

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) – a largely online social movement that is variously connected to Men’s Rights, the Manosphere, The Red Pill, and other online groups that to a greater or lesser extent advocate that women, feminism, liberalism, and society actively discriminate and harm men. Generally, these movements rely on a biologically essentialist narrative of gender differences and assert that gender dimorphism and heterosexuality are natural. MGTOW is notable for its advocacy of men voluntarily leaving heterosexual relationships in favor of their own pursuits either as individuals, or with other men. This practice is a reaction to divorce rates, fears of false rape accusations, child support, and other issues. MGTOW men also generally find the preponderance of women to be unsuitable for long-term partnerships. MGTOW men exist on a spectrum, some still date, others have completely forgone relationships with women. Some notable MGTOW content creators such as Turd Flinging Monkey actively advocate for men to

purchase dolls to curb their sexual desires while abstaining from sex with women. Their presence in the doll community is fraught, as some non-MGTOW doll owners see their presence as harmful for the image of doll ownership and do not want to be associated with misogyny. Some doll owners also frame MGTOW as extremist. Instead, they opt for a lifestyle that is free of women without the accompanying MGTOW ideology.

Monique, mein heißer Schoß – a 1978 German romantic comedy featuring a blowup sex doll.

Organic(s) – a term used to differentiate biological women from gynoids/synthetic women. Commonly but not exclusively used by idollaters.

Real Humans – a Swedish science fiction television show from 2012 to 2013 that focused on the emotional outcomes humans had as a result of their artificially intelligent robots deciding they want to be free.

Robosexual – a term used to describe a sexual orientation or sexual disposition toward artificial humanoids.

Rubber – 1) a general term used to describe the artificial material of dolls, as in “I fuck rubber” or “my wife doesn’t like being compared to a slab of rubber.” Although dolls are not made of rubber, this catchall is generally used in a less formal vernacular that is meant to be playful. 2) a slang term for condoms. Some doll owners use condoms when having sex with their dolls because it makes cleaning the doll easier.

Replika – an interactive artificial intelligence program available through the internet that some doll owners use to give the personas of their dolls “life.” Among other things, Replika is able to send text messages to smartphones randomly, therefore mimicking the way in which a partner might check in on someone.

Sandman – a MGTOW content provider who, similar to Turd Flinging Monkey (TFM) openly owns a doll and advocates for widespread doll adoption by men.

Schaum Schwestern – an independent German film that that examines the complexity of doll ownership and relationships.

Serenity – a 2005 science fiction film based on the Firefly television series feature robots and a dystopian universe.

Sex doll/ sex robot – a term commonly used by the public to describe dolls, but not generally well received by the doll community. Although some doll owners do use the term, many in the community are trying to move away from using “sex” as the primary modifier of doll or robot as it is seen as stereotyping both the dolls and their owners.

Silicone – a polymer similar to vulcanized rubber that is used in a variety of settings including construction, lubrication, medicine, cooking, electric work, and more. Notable in the sex doll community for its use in sex toys and dolls. Silicone is easy to wash and clean, it can be made to feel lifelike which is suitable for sexual purposes. As a material it can be poured which makes it useful for large molds. Generally considered a luxury material in the doll community, silicone dolls tend to be more expensive than their TPE counterparts and are perceived as having more material benefits. Although some detractors claim that silicone is too hard and TPE is a preferable texture.

Star Trek – a long running science fiction television series with multiple spinoffs. Many characters are artificially intelligent, in various ways, and/or robotic.

Synthetic partners/ synthetic companions – terms used by a small but notable population among the doll community to denote that their dolls are 1) artificial and 2) serve as more than a sex toy or device for pleasure. The emphasis on partner or

companion is interchangeable, but both mean a similar level of commitment and care are directed toward the doll.

Terminator / Skynet – a 1984 science fiction film that later was developed into a film franchise based primarily on a war between artificially intelligent robots and humans. Relevant to the doll community as an example of fears related to artificial intelligence. Skynet is the name of the artificial intelligence system that initially rebels against the human race.

Thermoplastic elastomer (TPE) – a copolymer commonly used industriously for injection molding with a consistency similar to vulcanized rubber. TPE is highly toxic when heated to high temperatures, and some doll owners have reported allergic reactions to the material. However, TPE is generally cheaper than silicone and is noted for its softer feel, which makes it a common material for dolls.

Turd Flinging Monkey – an internet celebrity and MGTOW content creator. Sometimes abbreviated TFM, this producer provides content across multiple platforms including YouTube, Bitchute, Google Podcasts, and more. His shows primarily center on his and other MGTOW members critiques of feminism, liberalism, and women. Other than his prominence among MGTOW members, he is also noteworthy for being open about owning a doll, Celestina, and his advocacy for more men purchasing dolls.

Ultimate Boyfriend – a 2019 South Korean television series based on a similarly named manga series featuring a robot partner.

Whitney Cummings – a comedian/actor whose work frequently discusses sex and sexuality. In her 2019 Netflix comedy special, *Can I Touch It?* Whitney Cummings discusses, among other issues, feminism and technology. As part of this sketch, she

reveals a doll that she purchased and dressed to resemble herself. Whitney Cummings is sometimes referenced as part of the way in which dolls are becoming, albeit humorously, brought into mainstream discourse via celebrity's practices.

Yuri Tolochko / Margo Party – a Kazak bodybuilder/reality television star/internet personality and his doll whose work often involves his body, sexuality, and various forms of gender play. Margo Party is his doll, for whom he staged an elaborate wedding with and has posted many photographs of on his various social media accounts. Yuri is sometimes referenced as a leading figure in public doll ownership.

APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTAL TABLES FROM SEXXXY DOLLS

Table 5: S1 Love and Sex Doll Detailed Measurements (Female)

Body Measurement	n	Minimum	Mean	Maximum	SD
Weight	673	55.12	79.37	154.32	14.55
Height	676	57.09	63.39	69.29	2.56
Shoulder Width	492	11.42	13.78	18.11	1.22
Full Bust	674	25.2	34.65	45.67	3.94
Under Bust	455	18.9	25.2	33.07	2.24
Arm Length	453	16.54	24.41	31.1	2.64
Upper Arm Circumference	77	7.09	8.27	9.45	0.67
Wrist Circumference	67	4.53	5.12	5.91	0.2
Waist	674	13.39	22.05	33.07	2.87
Hips	674	27.95	36.22	55.91	4.33
Leg Length	510	27.17	33.07	45.28	2.72
Thigh Circumference	362	11.81	20.08	34.65	2.8
Calf Circumference	291	8.27	12.2	15.16	1.26
Ankle Circumference	69	6.7	8.27	12.2	1.34
Foot Length	514	7.09	8.27	9.84	0.43
	N = 677				

Note: This table is an adjusted sample that only includes full size dolls and excludes torsos. A number of dolls are advertised as “torsos” and therefore, do not have legs and arms which alters their weight and height. All measurements are reported in inches with the exception of weight which is reported in pounds. The original data were metric and have been converted. Metric measurements are available upon request.

Table 6: S2 Love and Sex Doll Detailed Measurements (Male)

Body Measurement	n	Minimum	Mean	Maximum	SD
Weight	20	72.75	97	123.46	18.52
Height	20	63	65.35	68.9	2.36
Shoulder Width	15	15.75	16.54	16.93	0.47
Full Bust	20	30.71	33.46	35.63	1.54
Arm Length	12	24.41	27.56	28.35	1.46
Waist	20	25.98	27.95	30.32	1.57
Hips	20	31.5	36.22	38.19	2.32
Leg Length	15	31.5	34.25	37.4	2.36
Thigh Circumference	11	18.11	20.08	21.65	1.38
Calf Circumference	13	12.6	13.39	13.78	0.47
Foot Length	15	8.27	9.45	9.84	0.63
	N = 20				

Note: This tables is an adjusted sample that only includes full size dolls and excludes torsos. A number of dolls are advertised as “torsos” and therefore, do not have legs and arms which alters their weight and height. For male dolls, none reported an under bust, upper arm circumference, wrist circumference, or ankle circumference. All measurements are reported in inches with the exception of weight which is reported in pounds. The original data were metric and have been converted. Metric measurements are available upon request.

Table 7: S2 Love and Sex Doll Detailed Measurements (Trans)

Body Measurement	n	Minimum	Mean	Maximum	SD
Weight	5	68.34	70.55	83.78	6.83
Height	5	61.42	62.6	66.93	2.45
Shoulder Width	1	35	35	35	-
Full Bust	5	35.04	35.83	36.22	0.51
Waist	5	21.26	22.83	23.23	0.87
Hips	5	37.04	37.4	38.19	0.51
Leg Length	1	33.86	33.86	33.86	-
Foot Length	1	8.66	8.66	8.66	-
	N = 5				

Note: For trans dolls, none reported an under bust, arm length, upper arm circumference, wrist circumference, thigh circumference, calf circumference, or ankle circumference. All measurements are reported in inches with the exception of weight which is reported in pounds. The original data were metric and have been converted. Metric measurements are available upon request.

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