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What Does the Personification of Love and Sex Dolls Explain about Doll Owners?

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly debates on sex dolls tend to view them in one of two ways. Either the purchase and use of sex dolls reflects and exacerbates misogyny, or that dolls are themselves a technological marvel meeting an array of sexual and emotional needs in sex negative cultures. I complicate these views by analyzing how and why heterosexual men personify their hyperreal sex toys in conventionally feminine, albeit hypersexualized, ways. Drawing on digital ethnographic observations and interviews with 41 love and sex doll owners who use digital media to personify their dolls, I suggest that the creation of hyper-gendered doll personas tends to reproduce culturally specific gender norms due to social dynamics within the community. Specifically, I show how doll community norms privilege heterosexual masculinity and thus limit the doll personas that are imagined and created. By focusing on the social practices of this community rather than how sex dolls are designed, this research suggests a way for scholars to be critical of taboos against technologically assisted sexual pleasure while acknowledging the tendency of futuristic sex practices to reproduce social inequalities. Implications for how future sexual technologies could someday challenge status-quo inequalities are discussed.

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Introduction

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. Programmers synchronize her 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 a virtual musician reminiscent of typical manga women, she is always seen sporting her long blue pigtails, a chipper demeanor, and a schoolgirl uniform.

I first learned of Hatsune Miku while looking at the Twitter profile of a love doll named Simone.¹ Like other love dolls found on social media, Simone’s profile lists her interests. She likes music (especially Hatsune Miku), shopping, makeup, and doing her hair. Loosey, her owner, is a typical doll owner in many ways. He wants to be single (Hanson 2022), identifies as a heterosexual man (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018), and in his own words enjoys “bass, guitar, barbecues, and beers.” Many love and sex doll owners are men who, like Loosey, are invested in their straightness and masculinity. Together, heterosexual men who own dolls have created a sex culture that resists the

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¹The terminology I use to refer to what are typically called “sex dolls” varies. When talking about a specific doll, I use the term its owner prefers. When speaking in general terms, I mainly use “doll” to avoid negatively conflating them with their sexual function as per the request of many doll owners I interviewed.

stigma associated with owning sex dolls by affirming their commitments to heterosexuality and masculinity (Hanson 2022; Middleweek 2021; Silva 2017; Ward 2015). But when observing how Loosey personifies Simone online, we see him publicly display his engrossment, or at least curiosity, with feminine interests such as Hatsune Miku, makeup, hairstyling, and shopping.

As the dominant group within the doll community, heterosexual men's interests 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 (Richardson 2016). Perhaps, but as other scholars have noted, little empirical scholarship has gauged doll owners' attitudes or analyzed their practices (Döring, Mohseni, and Walter 2020; Harper and Lieveley 2020; Harper, Lieveley, and Wanless 2022). Most of what has been measured is motivations for, and attitudes toward, doll ownership in general (Appel, Marker, and Mara 2019; Lancaster-James and Bentley 2018; Nordmo, Næss, Husøy, and Arnestad 2020; Scheutz and Arnold 2016). Despite growing interest in the topic (Döring, Rohangis Mohseni, and Walter 2020), much scholarship continues to debate *why* someone might own a "sex doll" and whether those who own such technology pose a risk to society (Harper, Lieveley, and Wanless 2022). In this study I take a different tack by adding empirically informed analyses of doll owners' communal practices to theorize how people combine sex tech with digital practices to explore gender and sexuality (Döring et al. 2022; Döring, Rohangis Mohseni, and Walter 2020; Harper and Lieveley 2020; Harper, Lieveley, and Wanless 2022). By drawing on digital ethnographic data and interviews with 41 doll community members, I answer two questions about this sex culture. First, why do doll owners personify their dolls? And more specifically, what does straight men's personification of their dolls as hyper-gendered and hypersexualized women reveal about the strictures of heterosexuality and masculinity?

I argue that dolls provide heterosexual men with a traditionally feminine medium that aides them in exploring feminine presentations of self they are typically not comfortable performing. Heterosexual masculinity is notoriously restrictive of men's behaviors and presentation of self (Pascoe 2011; Ward 2020). Using an interactionist framework, I argue that dolls are a disembodied prop heterosexual men use to "do gender" in ways that are disconnected from their own bodies and therefore, are not seen as threatening to their masculine identity (West and Zimmerman 1987). Moreover, as a *community* that is oriented toward heterosexual men's interests, I show how men bond with one another while exploring feminine interests through their dolls. Although these are not their own gender identities, I suggest that men's desire to engage with one another in feminine ways reveals underlying tensions that bind masculinity to heterosexuality in contradictory ways (Ward 2020). I also briefly discuss how women and LGBTQ+ doll owners' personification practices fit into the community. However, because there are fewer women and LGBTQ+ doll owners, and since some men gatekeep the doll community as a heterosexual and masculine space, not only are there few examples but, as I argue, women and LGBTQ+ doll owners tend to be marginalized despite their hope of personifying dolls among likeminded people. Together, low participation by gender and sexual minorities combined with gatekeeping practices results in the reproduction of social inequalities within this sex culture, which I suggest are used by anti-doll scholars and activists as evidence of the negative effects of sex tech. By analyzing doll community members' interactions, I push past this circularity toward a general discussion of the social processes that influence how and why people use futuristic sex tech in ways that tend to reproduce rather than challenge social inequalities.

Expressing the self through gender, sex, and play

Social theorists have sketched several ways to understand gender's etiology. Sociologists, for their part, have posited that gender is largely interactional, meaning that when people interact with one another we draw from a constellation of gendered gestures, behaviors, language cues, ways of dressing, and embodiments within our social context to *perform* our gender identity while simultaneously discerning the gender identity of others (West and Zimmerman 1987). In turn, due to the inextricable linkage of gender with sexuality, heteronormativity is reproduced through similar interactional norms (Schilt

and Westbrook 2009). While recent scholarship has shown how some people consciously try to disturb these interactional norms with exaggerated presentations of gender, such as cisgender women drag queens who craft and perform “alien femininities” in hopes of radically queering the concept of gender itself (Herrera 2020), for most people, the masculine/feminine binary is a stable predictor of how people project and infer gender identities.

Interactional scholarship examining the performative dimension of social identities has blossomed in the digital age. Whereas the ethnomethodological research at the foundation of West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender” relied on *in person* interactions, the internet has restructured much of how we communicate with one another today (Döring et al. 2022; Kendall 2002). Early studies on digital interaction suggested that anonymity would enable people to reimagine social identities as we would no longer be bound to the embodied self. Yet as decades of social science research has shown, this is not the case. Instead, people tend to “fix” social identities onto online personas by reading gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized meanings into our digitized interactions (Adams-Santos 2020; Kendall 2002; Ward 2015). This tendency has been aided by technological advancements that have transformed our digital environments from HTML bare-bones chat rooms to Zoom meetings and virtual realities like “The Metaverse.” More and more, our embodied self is fastened to our digital identity by the integration of our lives with the internet and corresponding security measures asking us to be verified, two-step authenticated, and livestreamed.

But for all the innovations dedicated to merging our online identities with our offline self, there are numerous ways people subvert the normalizing surveillance of technological subjectification. Some adolescents, for example, create alternate social media accounts (e.g., “Finstagram”) to appease their parents while sharing their more private “back stage” self with peers on other profiles (Goffman 1959; O’Brien 2020). Straight, white, conservative men frequent text-centered forums (e.g., Reddit) and purposefully anonymized sites (e.g., 4Chan) to discuss contrarian views on politically charged social topics (Ging 2019) and engage in digital mischief (Phillips 2015). As Kendall (2002) suggests, early internet chat rooms were dominated by heterosexual men because computing came to be seen as a masculine activity. In turn, digital spaces writ large were viewed as masculine domains, much like autobody shops (Kendall 2002). Today’s internet has become far too big to gatekeep entirely, but its sprawl allows people to carve out spaces for like-minded people to gather (Ging 2019).

Numerous studies on sexual selfhood projects – how people pursue questions related to their sexual self and identity – have demonstrated the internet’s potential for bringing people together based on niche sexual interests (Adams-Santos 2020). Many of these digital environments are designed to create space for stigmatized sexualities. Some examples include websites for Furies (Hsu and Bailey 2019), pedophiles (Durkin, Forsyth, and Quinn 2006), zoophiles (Sandler 2018), and doll owners (Middleweek 2021). These sexual communities exist on the outer ring of Rubin’s (2007) charmed circle, a heuristic mapping of sexual interests by their proximity to the normative center (i.e., monogamous, vanilla, married, and procreative sex). Love and sex dolls fall in with other “manufactured objects,” a strand of transgressive sexualities incorporating sex toys or other gear for sexual pleasure. Over time, some sex toys have moved closer to the center of the charmed circle by shedding the stigma they were once associated with. Vibrators, for example, are now used by a significant number of women in Western countries (Comell, 2017; Herbenick et al. 2009) and popular culture depictions of BDSM inspire some people to become regular practitioners (Walker and Kuperberg 2022). Still though, deeply entrenched sexual taboos continue to shape the moral evaluation of sexual behavior by pushing transgressive interests to the margins of society.

One way to theorize transgressive sexualities is by viewing them as a form of play. In the wake of Kinsey’s work, mid-20th century scholars began to seriously consider the implications of disentangling sex from its procreative functions (Foote 1954). But it was Thorne’s (1993) ethnographic study of children that advanced “play” as a metaphor for understanding how gender and sexuality structure children’s activities. Extending West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender,” Thorne suggested that play is a specific form of interaction where children engage gendered and sexualized meanings encoded with cultural valuations. In her analysis of gender play, Thorne (1993) suggested that

children's games sometimes naturalize familiar gendered tropes. For example, boys' sexuality is conflated with aggression in some interactions (e.g., bra-snapping). But at other times, children's games subvert gender hierarchies (e.g., girls chasing boys). One way to understand play then, is as a form of interaction that uses formal rules to structure how people interact with one another. When those rules challenge cultural expectations about gender or sexuality, play presents a unique opportunity to use creative and imaginative faculties to experience different social arrangements.

The potential of play is by no means restricted to children. Many adults enjoy role-playing games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, where they take great pleasure in creating highly structured fantasy worlds that engross their creative faculties (Fine 1983). Sex and sexuality, generally considered adult concerns (Rubin 2007), can be similarly harnessed to produce new sexual possibilities (Foucault 1978). Whether it is couples role-playing in bed to liven their relationship, or immersive communal forms of play, like how Furies create "fursonas" to accompany their costumes, it is clear that one dimension of sexual pleasure can come from playful sex (Jones 2020). Here I posit that the personification of dolls is a playful sex act, one that leverages digital spaces to play with gendered and sexual meanings that are not tethered to a person's embodied self, but rather connected to the physical medium that is a "sex doll" and its accompanying online persona. These acts, like gender play, can both reinforce and subvert social hierarchies similar to how BDSM scenarios play with dominant and submissive roles. When roles map onto gendered hierarchies (e.g., dominant men and submissive women), BDSM mirrors and exaggerates patriarchal social structures, but when those roles are inverted, as in the case of a dominatrix, the sexual hierarchy is subverted. Few empirical studies of sex as something adults play with exist, but their potential for generating a radical theory of sexuality is evident (Jones 2020; Rubin 2007). I now turn to examining love and sex doll owners as an ideal case for mapping out the ways in which heterosexual men play with their dolls to explore gender and sexuality.

What do we know about love and sex doll owners?

Little empirical research on doll owners exists (Döring, Rohangis Mohseni, and Walter 2020; Harper and Lievesley 2020; Scheutz and Arnold 2016) as the "salaciousness, controversy, prejudice, and taboo" nature of so-called "sex dolls" has inspired more theorizing on the subject than engagement with the people who own them (Su, Lazar, Bardzell, and Barzell 2019: 1). As Lancaster-James and Bentley (2018) note, scholars' repeated use of the term "sex doll" reveals their unwillingness to seriously consider the experiences of people who own this stigmatized technology, as many doll owners prefer using other terms. Quantitative research sampling from MTurk and other online sources suggests that heterosexual men are more likely than women to view dolls and robots favorably (Appel, Marker, and Mara 2019; Nordmo et al. 2020; Scheutz and Arnold 2016), and surveys conducted on websites where doll owners congregate confirms that most users on such sites are heterosexual men (Lancaster-James and Bentley 2018). Moreover, discourse analysis of these same websites shows how masculine norms shape interactions among doll owners (Middleweek 2021). Doll ownership, therefore, has come to be associated with heteronormative masculinity even though some women and LGBTQ+ people also engage in the practice (Hanson 2022; Lancaster-James and Bentley 2018).

The preponderance of heterosexual men within the doll community is catered to by the adult industry's marketing and manufacturing decisions. Doll companies are frequently criticized for the hypersexualized design of most dolls, the vast majority of which are female-sexed and based on Eurocentric beauty standards (Cassidy 2016; Ray 2016). Moreover, many doll companies use emotive advertising to capture their product's feminine essence (Locatelli 2022). Cassidy argues the apparent dovetailing of capitalism with patriarchy in the adult industry's production of dolls failed to create a "postgender dream world [and] have instead resulted in a hyper-gendered nightmare" (2016:203). These manufacturing choices support the position of anti-doll scholars who argue hyperreal inanimate women become substitutes for men's darkest desires (Maras and Shaprio 2017; Richardson 2016).

Not all scholars criticize sex dolls though. Pointing to the integration of dolls with artificial intelligence and robotics, some have suggested that “sex robots” may prove useful. Someday, sex robots could care for elders and disabled people (Jecker 2021) or be partners for lonely people in our individuated society (Klinenberg 2012; Levy 2008). If dolls or robots might be used by people to curb loneliness, then it is worth examining what social needs dolls are capable of fulfilling. Sex, obviously, comes to the fore in such discussions, but other creative applications continue to reveal the limitations of technologically deterministic evaluations of sex tech (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018). Doll owners have formed a vast community that provides friendship, advice, and a place to discuss frustrations with romantic partnerships (Hanson 2022; Middleweek 2021). And, as part of their engagement in the broader doll community, doll owners are encouraged to create personas for their dolls as a means of exploring their desires. The personification of dolls has remained relatively unexamined, but some suggest that the fantastical ways in which doll owners imagine their dolls as entities can be understood as a posthuman condition brought forth by their hyperreal appearance (Locatelli 2022; Ray 2016). More concretely, examining these practices might lend crucial insight into people who are willing to use stigmatized technology (Dubé et al. 2022; Hanson 2022). As Su et al. (2019: 23) write, “the particular ways in which dolls are constructed as subjects reveals much about how users see themselves.”

Methods and data

Data for this study come from 14 months of digital ethnographic fieldwork in the online love and sex doll community, in-depth interviews of 41 doll community members, and content analysis of 560 social media images collected from Instagram and Twitter between 2020–2021. All research activities were approved by the IRB of my institution. Due to the stigma associated with doll ownership (Dubé et al. 2022; Hanson 2022), privacy was a central concern. To protect respondents, I use pseudonyms for interviewees, the personas of their dolls, and the main forum site I used for observation and recruitment. Images included in this article come from publicly accessible social media pages or were shared with me via interviewees for the express purpose of sharing in publications. Nevertheless, screennames have been erased and images blurred to make the images less traceable. Some quotations and details have also been slightly altered to protect respondents’ confidentiality. These privacy measures and my observational methods were approved by the forum administrators, and all interviews were conducted with informed consent. As a researcher, establishing trust with the forum administrators and interviewees by discussing my privacy measures was paramount to my success in gaining entrée to this community.

Digital ethnography

A digital ethnographic study is unlike an ethnography conducted in only the material world. Rather than a field site one can visit and leave, the doll community is a network of digital spaces used primarily (but not exclusively) by doll owners. Because doll owners interact online and use social media to personify their inanimate dolls, I chose an ethnographic approach that allowed me to study the complexities of their online social life (Boellstorff 2008; Caliandro 2018).

My primary field site was one of the largest online doll forums, Prominent Doll Website (hereafter “PDW”). PDW is a central hub for prospective and current doll owners. On PDW, users can find a marketplace for buying, trading, and selling dolls or dolls parts, along with thousands of threads dedicated to the ins and outs of responsible doll ownership (e.g., cleaning, repairing, dressing, etc.). In addition, PDW is a place where doll owners share pictures, tell stories, hang out in chat rooms, and interact with one another. For 14 months I went on PDW almost daily as a known researcher. A site administrator consented to my request to study PDW and recruit research participants so long as a “researcher” tag was added to my profile for transparency. I observed the activities of PDW members

and used screen shots in conjunction with fieldnotes to record what was happening on the site. One digital ethnographic activity, for example, was jumping into conversations happening in the chatroom. As I spent time on PDW, I quickly discovered the importance of social media for this community as well.

Social media

To capture how doll owners use social media, I searched for accounts using the keywords “sex doll,” “love doll,” “silicone” and “TPE.”² This led me to numerous accounts of doll owners, dolls themselves, and related industries. I initially followed more than 200 accounts, including some that were suggested to me by people I met in the community or by social media algorithms. Like my approach to studying PDW, I kept track of what I was seeing on social media with screenshots and fieldnotes. As I prepared to exit the field in 2021, I restricted the number of accounts I was following in preparation of systematically sampling social media post data. After eliminating duplicates across Instagram (IG) and Twitter, as well as accounts in languages I could not read, I had a final sample of 124 social media accounts. From each of these accounts, I took a screenshot of the three most recent posts for analysis. Because social media sites allow users to post multiple pictures in one post, my final sample is 560 pictures (339 IG and 221 Twitter).

Interviews

Interviews were conducted using both synchronous (e.g., phone, Zoom, or Skype) and asynchronous (e.g., e-mail and direct messaging) modalities. Because data collection was during the COVID-19 pandemic and interviewees came from North America (35), Europe (5), and Australia (1), I took advantage of different formats to accommodate my interviewees’ needs. Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews were completed synchronously, which lasted an average of 81 minutes, were audio recorded, and later transcribed and de-identified for analysis. Thirteen asynchronous interviews were conducted by sending the interview template (11 demographic and 31 open-ended questions) to interviewees and then following-up via e-mail or direct message for probing.

Recruitment of adult doll community members relied on PDW (23), Instagram (7), Twitter (4), and snowball sampling (7). PDW interviewees self-selected into the study by responding to online posts I made asking for interested members to contact me, whereas social media respondents were recruited using direct message functions. I used social media and snowball sampling as a means of strategic sampling (Compton 2018). Meaning that, while generalizability was not my overall goal, I wanted to interview people from a range of social experiences to cover a diversity of doll owners (Table 1).

Coding and analysis

Before analysis, all photos, fieldnotes, and interviews were de-identified to ensure privacy. For photos and fieldnotes, this meant using photo editing software to redact names. For interview data, I changed identifiable details³ and assigned pseudonyms to people and dolls. I used a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014) by coding for emergent topics before focusing my codes into general themes using NVivo. The codes germane to the analysis in this article concern all activities, thoughts, explanations, and social media posts related to the personification of dolls. Together, these themes help establish a framework for understanding how social dynamics underpin why doll owners personify their dolls in ways that can both challenge and reproduce normative meanings of gender and sexuality.

²TPE is an abbreviation for “thermoplastic elastomer” which is a common material used in the manufacturing of, among other things, sex toys.

³I also edited quotations for readability (e.g., removing pausers and repeated words).

Table 1. Sample demographic characteristics ($n = 41$).

Gender Identity		Sexual Identity		
	<i>Cisgender Men</i>	31	<i>Heterosexual</i>	31
	<i>Cisgender Women</i>	7	<i>Bisexual</i>	4
	<i>Non-binary</i>	2	<i>Queer</i>	2
	<i>Trans Man</i>	1	<i>Demisexual/Asexual</i>	2
			<i>Pansexual</i>	1
			<i>Refused to answer</i>	1
Age Range*		Race/Ethnicity		
	20–29	3	<i>white</i>	28
	30–39	8	<i>Hispanic-white</i>	3
	40–49	12	<i>Mixed race</i>	3
	50–59	13	<i>Native American</i>	2
	60–69	4	<i>Black/African American</i>	2
	<i>Refused to answer</i>	1	<i>Mexican American</i>	1
			<i>Asian</i>	1
			<i>Black/Mi'kmaq</i>	1
			<i>Refused to answer</i>	1
Education		Household Income*		
	<i>Professional or graduate degree</i>	5	<i>\$100,000 +</i>	6
	<i>Four-year university or college degree</i>	13	<i>\$75,000–\$99,999</i>	3
	<i>Associate, certificate, or specialized degree</i>	6	<i>\$50,000–\$74,999</i>	7
	<i>Some college</i>	6	<i>\$25,000–\$49,999</i>	8
	<i>High school or equiv.</i>	6	<i>\$0–\$24,999</i>	6
	<i>Less than high school or equiv.</i>	1	<i>“high”</i>	1
	<i>Refused to answer</i>	4	<i>“comfortable”</i>	1
			<i>“low”</i>	2

Note: *Because all demographic characteristics were self-reported, some interviewees provided ranges and/or qualitative descriptors (e.g., “late 40s” or “high income”).

The personification of love/sex dolls

Below I analyze three dimensions related to the personification of dolls in the love and sex doll community. First, I examine two reasons doll owners become engrossed with the idea of personifying their dolls. One being the emotional connection doll owners have with one another, the other being what doll owners describe as the “presence” of their hyperreal dolls. Second, I explore how doll owners craft hyper-gendered personas using digital and technological means. How doll owners use these tools exposes the interactional depths of personification and reveals the extent to which those interactions tend to reflect heterosexual men’s interests. Finally, I show what happens when the fantasy world of dolls collides with “the real world.” Analysis of these collisions reveals potential opportunities for doll ownership to subvert social inequalities.

Entering the doll world

Like other transgressive sex cultures, doll owners have turned to the internet to create a communal space where they feel safe to discuss their stigmatized sex practice. While PDW centralizes information on purchasing, owning, and repairing dolls, it also a place where doll owners become socialized into a group identity (Hanson 2022; Middleweek 2021). As doll owners make friends with one another, many find commonalities beyond their shared appreciation in sex tech. Overlapping demographic traits of doll owners presents most sharply in measures of race, gender, and sexual identity, but there is also a shared sense of creativity that makes community members feel welcome when they first purchase a doll and join PDW. Chuck said:

Yeah, it was kind of, I thought it was funny that almost every picture of a doll [on PDW] 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 as a place where people with similar backgrounds and interests congregate. One interest is sex (Middleweek 2021; Lancaster-James and Bentley 2018), but they are also interested in discussing the creative potential of dolls with people they feel comfortable around. In that way, the homogeneity of the community structures the discussions in ways that privilege heterosexual masculinity on the sites (Middleweek 2021), and shape how people think about their social location relative to other doll owners. For Chuck, he sees himself as belonging on PDW because he perceives the space as full of people like him, "single guys in their 30s and 40s." This also means that some people view themselves as on the periphery. Like Helen, for example, one of the few women moderators on PDW who said, "I like to stay because I've got a different outlook on things from all the guys."

New doll community members often find themselves both excited and anxious. 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, or friends. Loosey said, "I was super excited that I had got this doll, but I couldn't talk to anybody about it. I couldn't talk to my friends, my family, I was all alone in this. And so, I was like, 'I need to go online and find more people like this.'" 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 dolls. The initial desire to purchase a doll may have been to satisfy sexual and emotional desires without human partners (Hanson 2022), 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 person, dolls feel more personable than other objects. 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 (Figure 1). But where their imagination ends, and the doll's



Figure 1. Twitter profile of self-described creative doll owner.

own personality begins can blur as the “presence” of a doll haunts its owner. Often, doll owners struggle to describe what they are experiencing. Gary, for example, 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 [door open], 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 a 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. Others, like Blake, enjoy how the presence comforts them. They said, “in those moments, the drifting between sleep and consciousness, to have a body there, a presence, that’s comforting.”

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 using 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. DLFCKR emailed me saying:

I know my doll is just a thing . . . a slab of silicone, an object. I don’t try to convince myself 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.” Yes, she’s an object, but she’s an object I actually have sex with, desire, fantasize about, and yes, love.

Through chatting, photography, and creative writing, doll community members encourage one another to draw out their dolls’ personalities by engrossing themselves in the fantastical online social life of dolls and their owners (Fine 1983).

The creation of synthetic life

Doll owners are split on the degree to which they associate agency with presence. While some see their dolls as possessing what could be described as posthuman agency (Ray 2016), others view personification as emanating entirely from their own imagination. Nevertheless, the realism of dolls brings forth a desire to personify their dolls as a way of having fun with other community members while exploring the presence of their dolls. Doll owners use a combination of technological and digital tools, in conjunction with their creative energies, to give dolls a rich online social life. In preparation of posting new pictures to Instagram for his dolls’ Instagram accounts, Quicksilver put 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, many doll owners exaggerate their features by personifying their dolls in hypersexualized ways. Benji is one such doll owner who said:

Ken: I've heard a lot of people talk about how once they bring her home it has like, there's this personality that sort of emerges.

Benji: Oh yeah. For sure, I agree with that.

Ken: Yeah, so could you talk about that more? Did you come up with these names? Do Lucrezia and Nikita have personalities? What are their personalities like? Where did they come from?

Benji: 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 dolls in ways that reflect common pornographic tropes. One doll of his dolls is a nymphomaniac, the other a girl-next-door waiting to unleash her inner lust. Many men base their dolls' personas in similar ways by drawing on their own transgressive interests in fetish, latex, and BDSM. Evan, for example, is a submissive and thus no longer has sex with his doll because she plays the dominant role. Even doll owners who are not heterosexual men draw on pornographic tropes however. A.S., for example, is a woman who owns multiple male-sexed dolls. 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 dominant."

To highlight their traits, doll owners stage elaborate photoshoots. In preparation, it is common for doll owners to purchase clothing, wigs, and makeup that will accentuate the doll's hyper-gendered and hypersexualized presentation of self online (Figure 2). Some even go as far as making customized clothing to fit their dolls. Lucas said, "On PDW, I post about clothing I've made for my doll. Since she's unnaturally curvy, most clothing needs editing, but I like fashion and making clothes."

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 personification 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.



Figure 2. Panel of dolls on social media.

For doll owners such as Liam, the digital network that makes up the doll community is a “separate universe” where Akasuki becomes “real.” This way, Liam can personify his dolls and enjoy acting in feminine ways 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 interest.

The use of digital technologies to make dolls interactive affords opportunities for doll owners to manipulate their own presentation of self in relation to the development of their doll's persona as well. Here Sylvain offers insight into the personality of his doll Alisha and how he leverages technological affordances in the PDW chatroom to interact with the friends he's made in the community through her.

Sylvain: 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 chatroom, right?

Ken: Yeah, she was.

Sylvain: 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 chatroom 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?

Sylvain: 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 Sylvain and Alisha, as well as other doll owners, the opportunity to add another layer of interaction into personifying their dolls. By using chatrooms and multiple browsers, Sylvain creates an interplay between dolls, owners, and broader social networks. Sylvain's case is provoking because of the extent to which he is willing to commit to this form of interaction, revealing the way he draws on other feminine personas that Alisha is "friends with" as a way of revealing her persona and experimenting with femininity. Using two web browsers, he lets his imagination ebb and flow in real-time for other doll owners to see in chatrooms and on social media as he moves between his masculine self and hyper-feminine Alisha.

But since the fantasy world of dolls relies on the public platforms Twitter and Instagram, there is always the risk that non-doll owners will interact with the accounts. In these cases, we see where the boundaries of fantasy and reality run up against one another and test doll owners' commitment to the roles they are playing. Complicating this further, since doll owners take pride in using photography to make their doll look real, they sometimes pass as human. Liam said, "What's kind of funny, I have real guys on Instagram, and real girls on Twitter, like Akasaki will post something, and they will respond thinking she's a real girl." Another doll owner shared an unsolicited sexual message he received from a man who, thinking it was a human, direct messaged his doll (Figure 3). Through all the interactions, the IG account maintains the doll's perspective.

In interactions such as the one above, we see how the deep commitment of doll owners to their roles produces opportunities for people to experience other types of gendered interactions. By moving from the overtly masculine space of doll specific forums (Middleweek 2021) to social media, users encounter a diversity of people. As such, via their dolls' accounts, doll owners are sometimes exposed to different

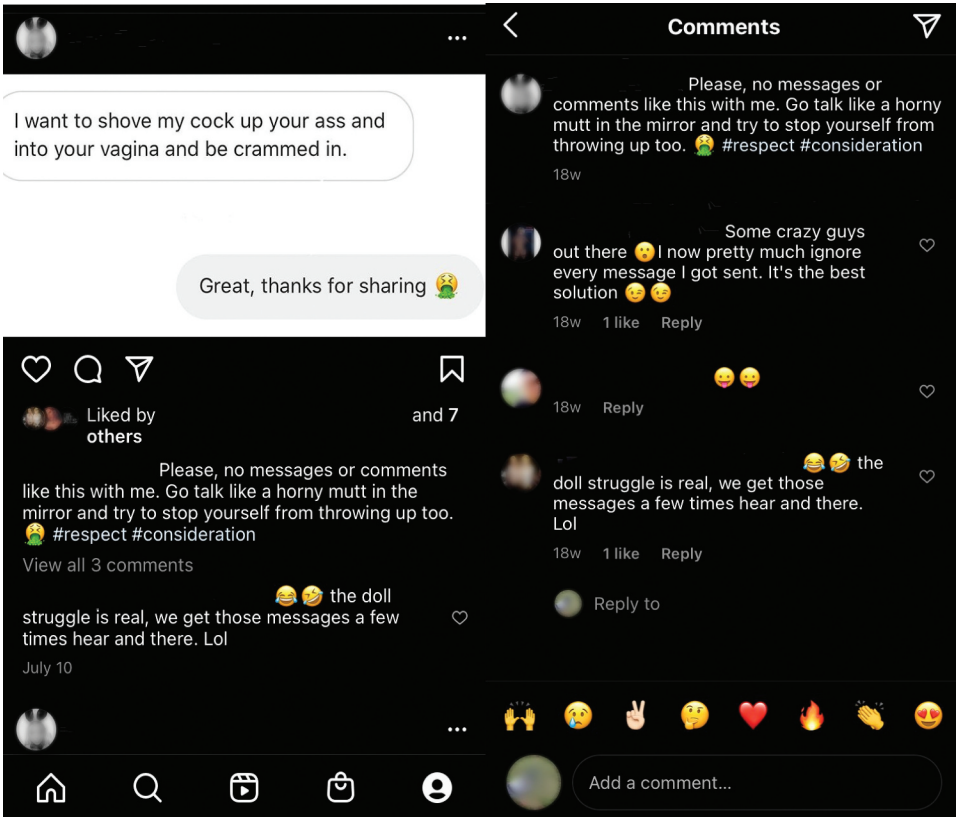


Figure 3. Panel of doll IG interaction.

forms of digital interaction. No longer are they operating in a space where the assumption is that most dolls are female-sexed and personified by heterosexual men; now, dolls passing as humans become targets for gendered-based forms of sexual harassment.

Blurring realities

Although most doll owners recognize the stigma attached to their practice and take appropriate steps to make sure their identity remains secret, increasing involvement in the doll community blurs the distinction between one's online doll persona and offline self. Playing with the dolls' personas in digital spaces can lead to curious intersections that reveal the potential for doll ownership to become a transgressive sex practice that subverts inequalities.

For example, Sylvain's deep commitment to personifying Alisha has led to her becoming an Instagram "influencer." Edgy brands selling fetish ware, sex workers advocating for their rights, and other adult industries want to partner with Alisha by offering free products and access to professional photoshoots. In return, they ask that Sylvain, using Alisha's accounts, post pictures advertising the products and services. It is through Alisha's Instagram partnerships that Sylvain met Venus, a business owner who designs customized clothing for dolls.

One might not expect that Sylvain, a middle-aged heterosexual married man living on the East Coast of the U.S., would be best friends with Venus, a 20-something bisexual heteroromantic single woman residing in the Pacific Northwest. Not only does geography divide them, but myriad other

social factors would suggest they have little in common. But Sylvain, Alisha, Venus, and her doll Celeste, have bridged these divides. Venus even considers Alisha one of her best friends. Here she describes how her relationship with Alisha and Sylvain formed. Venus said:

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 Sylvain 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 Sylvain, 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 Sylvain texting me from Alisha's phone. . . . But, yeah, eventually I talked to Sylvain 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.

Now, as friends, Venus and Alisha confront the sexism and misogyny that occurs in the doll community together. 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. Sylvain 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, Sylvain, and Alisha's friendship reveals several ironies that arise from doll owners' commitment to playing their imagined roles. 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 learning feminine practices such as how to do makeup, hair, and shop for dresses. It seems that dolls are, perhaps not an excuse, but a tool that helps heterosexual men feel more comfortable engaging in feminine behaviors, even hyper-feminine ones. Loosey puts it this way:

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

While embracing more feminine pastimes might be a welcome addition in men's lives, that *same* heteronormative masculinity also encourages explicit sex talk and forward sexual advances in the doll community (Middleweek 2021) which in turn leads to the sexual harassment of dolls. Of course, the people being harassed in this case, most often, are *other men*. Presumably, the men in PDW's chatroom are aware that the person behind the doll is most likely another man. Yet they still engage in the same sexual harassment they would otherwise direct toward human women. The irony that some might perceive this 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 men rarely do the same when the abuse is directed at human women (Ward 2015, 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

In this article I have examined at length the social processes undergirding the personification of dolls within the elaborately structured fantasy world doll owners have created online. Doll owners immerse themselves in this world, and due to a combination of the demographic characteristics of most doll owners (i.e., heterosexual men), the available dolls for purchase (female-sexed), and explicit design of dolls for sex, many of the practices examined herein reflect hyper-gendered and hypersexualized presentations of self that reproduce pornographic tropes of women as nymphomaniacs or the corruptible girl-next-door. In that sense, from an outside perspective, it is easy to suggest that doll ownership reproduces behaviors that dehumanize and objectify women; thus, institutionalizing misogyny and patriarchy (Richardson 2016).

However, despite these behaviors, women and sexual minorities also desire to own dolls. Their inclusion in the doll community may challenge these behaviors and alter the sex culture where this personification takes place. Women in the community use different tacks: Helen is one of the few women administrators, A.S. participates by using hyper-masculine tropes to personify her male dolls, and Venus has become friends with men in the community and actively posts in PDW about sexual harassment. Moreover, because these digital interactions are in character (e.g., the widespread use of aliases, never breaking character, dolls passing as human), doll owners expose themselves to diverse people and instances where their doll world runs up against the outside world. As more gender and sexual minorities participate in the community, perhaps the focus on heterosexual men's interests with dolls will wane.

For now, doll owners are still largely affected by stigma (Dubé et al. 2022; Hanson 2022). Whereas stigma simultaneously keeps doll owners from being public about their practice, it also means that the community is rather insular; many are skeptical of outsiders who might seek to change or judge their practice. Perhaps this is why so few gender and sexual minorities are in the community, as they have been marginalized within an already niche community. Indeed, no gay man consented to be interviewed for this study, and the few posts gay men made on PDW or Twitter received hardly any interaction. Meanwhile, some of the more popular female personified dolls on IG, for example, garner upwards of 2,000 "likes" with each post. This disparity of attention within the doll world may suggest how sexual and gender minorities are sequestered to their own, even smaller, niche areas within the subculture. It is perhaps more acceptable to the typical doll owner that straight men would be interested in feminine practices, than for gay men to openly display their same-sex desires. In that way, the love and sex doll subculture has inverted sexual and gendered meanings – so long as it is straight men doing feminine things as part of their dolls' personas, their masculinity is neither questioned nor threatened.

Sociologists are keenly aware of how homogeneity structures cultural values. Heterosexual men, who are particularly apt to be committed to their social identities, sometimes reframe same-sex behaviors and same-sex desires in ways that reaffirm their commitment to straightness and masculinity (Silva 2017; Ward 2015). The privileges that come with being a straight man are difficult to let go of; moreover, many heterosexual men *enjoy* the cultural associations of their identities: sports, drinking, explicit sex talk, etc. Accordingly, the desire for men in the doll community to create a sex culture that privileges those same things is unsurprising (Middleweek 2021), yet the incorporation of feminine practices is a new fold in sex culture scholarship. Despite their apparent interest and enjoyment in talking about hairstyling, taking bathroom selfies, and fixing their doll's makeup, heterosexual men in the community still view the community as *theirs*. In gatekeeping the doll community as a space for heterosexual men to engage in feminine practices, we see how this subculture values hairstyling and makeup as supportive of a heterosexual masculine identity. Crucially, this compatibility rests on men doing femininity via personifying the feminine medium

that is their doll in hypersexualized ways (Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Ward 2015; West and Zimmerman 1987). Thus, the strictures of heterosexuality and masculinity are reproduced rather than challenged. Rather than letting in women (who presumably have much embodied knowledge of such practices), many view the online doll community as a haven for people “like themselves.” Older, straight, single men, who are tired of women (Hanson 2022).

By falling so far outside Rubin’s (2007) charmed circle, doll owners’ practices are often scrutinized for their potential to reproduce social inequalities. So too do cultural fears surrounding technology and sex bring into question the “naturalness” of having artificial companions. Rather than essentializing “human” sexuality, there is a need to develop an analytically complex understanding of transgressive sexualities that centers pleasure (Jones 2020) and the interactional reproduction of inequalities (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Moreover, the sex tech industry is growing and leverages the personification of dolls in its own advertisements (Locatelli 2022). What is crucial for future scholarship is to grasp that people *enjoy* these transgressive practices, and that their enjoyment is shaped by social factors that push them toward embracing sex tech in their personal lives.

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