

The Silicone Self: Examining Sexual Selfhood and Stigma within the Love and Sex Doll Community

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While previous research has theorized the potential benefits and consequences of intimate relationships with robots and dolls, little empirical research has been conducted on today's love and sex doll owners. By drawing on digital ethnographic data and interviews with 41 love and sex doll community members, I explore how love and sex doll owners account for their transgressive sex practice. I argue these accounts reveal the underlying sexual selfhood project of doll owners, what I term the silicone self. I analyze silicone selves to show how doll community members manage stigma by emphasizing sexual individualism and drawing on pro-sex, feminist, and anti-feminist discourses. I further highlight tensions within the community that stem from conflicting views about gender and sexuality.

Keywords: love dolls, sex dolls, relationships, digital ethnography, sexuality

Some female androids seem to him pretty; he had found himself physically attracted by several, and it was an odd sensation, knowing intellectually that they were machines, but emotionally reacting somehow. (Philip K. Dick 1968, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*)

INTRODUCTION

In his 1968 science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Philip K. Dick imagined a world where androids could be so realistic that humans, and perhaps even androids themselves, would be unable to distinguish between organic humans and synthetic humanoids. Today, some people have relationships with humanoid dolls, often called love and/or sex dolls (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018).¹ Although today's dolls are not at the level of sophistication Dick imagined, their

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similarity to humans has prompted both fascination and condemnation from scholars (Devlin 2018; Ferguson 2010; Levy 2008; Richardson 2016).

Transgressive and deviant sexualities often become focal points in debates over morality and identity (Rubin 2007). In the twenty-first century, despite more acceptance of same-sex marriage (Hart-Brinson 2016), an increase in women identifying as sexual minorities (England, Mishel, and Caudillo 2016), and widespread use of vibrators and sex toys (Comella 2017; Herbenick et al. 2009; Lieberman 2016; Waskul and Anklan 2020), doll ownership continues to receive mixed assessments. The hesitancy to embrace doll ownership despite shifting sexual attitudes may stem from cultural anxieties surrounding technology and sex (Waskul 2004). Nonetheless, much of the scholarly debate to date has focused on the perceived benefits and consequences of dolls as humanlike inanimate objects. Some scholars label dolls simulacra of misogyny and the male gaze (Cassidy 2016; Ray 2016), while others view dolls as an opportunity for people to explore sexual desires free of the harms that would befall human partners (Scheutz and Arnold 2016).

Theorizing the potential of dolls has been the primary focus of scholars thus far (Döring, Mohseni, and Walter 2020; Döring and Pöschl 2018; Harper and Lievesley 2020). However, a lack of empirical data means little is known about how the inanimate quality of dolls shapes the emotional and sexual selves of doll owners. In this article, I ask two questions. First, how do doll owners account for their decision to have sexual and emotional relationships with inanimate humanlike dolls? Second, how do cultural narratives regarding legitimate and transgressive sexualities shape the doll community's understanding of its practice? To answer these questions, I draw from 14 months of digital ethnographic research and 41 interviews with doll community members over 2020 and 2021. I show how doll owners account for their practice in fluid ways that depend on the context in which they are discussing their practice. I analyze these accounts as part of doll owners' sexual selfhood projects to show how members of the community simultaneously manage their individual presentation of self and stigma associated with the community (Adams-Santos 2020). This dual impression management is a key aspect of what I call *the silicone self*, which I define as an outcome of resistance to stigmatization, accomplished in this case by community members framing doll ownership as a rational solution to the emotional and sexual shortcomings of human relationships; thus, challenging the assumption that artificial companionship is inadequate. I further discuss conflicts within the community that arise from competing silicone selves based on opposing views of gender and sexuality. In my analysis, I connect doll ownership to individualism, sex positivity, and feminist discourse as an invitation to consider the social conditions that shape people's embracement of transgressive sexualities.

DOLLS: TOYS OR SOMETHING MORE?

After several legal defeats to the Comstock Act in the United States, the adult industry expanded its production of sex toys.² Due to the pornography industry's

overwhelming focus on heterosexual men's desires, burgeoning feminist ideologies began emphasizing women's need to reclaim sexual pleasure (Miller-Young 2014; Rubin 2007). Vibrators thus came to signify the tool women could use to sexually liberate themselves (Comella 2017). Looking to distance themselves from adult novelty stores catering primarily to heterosexual men, pro-sex feminists opened their own sex toy stores with the goal of normalizing women's enjoyment of sex (Comella 2017; Lieberman 2016). The effects of this work were significant. Today, women are more likely to own and have experience using sex toys than men, and nationally representative data suggest more than 50% of women in the United States use vibrators specifically (Herbenick et al. 2009; Herbenick et al. 2017). Qualitative research suggests that of women without vibrators, a significant number hope to own one someday (Waskul and Anklan 2020). However, while women's use of vibrators has been destigmatized to some degree, sex toys for heterosexual men are often viewed as humorous jokes rather than legitimately pleasurable devices (Devlin 2018; Ferguson 2010; Moya 2006).

Sex toys designed for men are often seen as unnecessary due to the presumed simplicity of men's sexuality. Although torsos, masturbation sleeves, and inflatable dolls have existed for decades, few men report using them regularly (Moya 2006). However, today's love and sex dolls, which are made of medical-grade silicone or thermoplastic elastomer and cost thousands of dollars, have captured the interest of scholars and journalists alike (Danaher, Earp, and Sandberg 2017; Devlin 2018). While dolls are primarily (but not exclusively) marketed to men as sex toys, they are also sold as artificial companions. Thus, in addition to their sexual function, the realism of dolls motivates questions about their application beyond masturbation (Danaher et al. 2017).

Given the realism of love and sex dolls, as well as the industry's increasing use of artificial intelligence systems and robotics, much scholarship to date has focused on theoretical issues related to intimacy with sex robots and dolls (Danaher et al. 2017; Döring, Mohseni, and Walter 2020; Dubé and Anctil 2021; Harper and Lievesley 2020; Levy 2008). Some scholars critique the generally hypersexual design of dolls for reproducing normative gender expectations (Cassidy 2016; Ray 2016). Other criticisms cite the inanimateness of dolls as potentially normalizing pedophilia (Maras and Shapiro 2017), patriarchy, and misogyny (Richardson 2016). Other scholars suggest the inanimateness of dolls is beneficial. By taking the human element out of emotional and sexual relationships, dolls and/or robots might provide companionship for people who struggle to find human partners because of age and disability (Jecker 2021) or social anxiety (Levy 2007, 2008; Scheutz and Arnold 2016). Further, because dolls and robots are inanimate objects, they are not subject to the same moral reasoning as human partners (Malle et al. 2015), which may make it easier for people to have sex in transgressive ways. For example, dolls could be used by married people to fulfill extramarital sexual desires without it being viewed as "cheating" (Levy 2007; Scheutz and Arnold 2016).

But, as Harper and Lievesley (2020:54) point out, many of the arguments for or against dolls and robots “appear to represent the philosophical positions of those scholars expressing them, rather than being rooted in any objective base.” In other words, while numerous scholars have theorized the potential benefits and consequences of relationships with dolls and robots, few empirical studies exist. Empirical scholarship on *attitudes* suggests that men are more likely to have positive views of sex robots than women (Nordmo et al. 2020). The propensity of men to be more drawn to dolls and robots compared to women has been tied to Otakuism³ (Appel, Marker, and Mara 2019) and heterosexual masculinity’s emphasis on control and domination (Connell 1987; Nast 2017; Richardson 2016). Indeed, the overlap of men’s rights movements such as Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) with the doll community, suggests some doll owners are anti-feminist and maintain rigid ideas about gender and heterosexuality (Ward 2020).

Empirical studies on *current* doll owners are limited and generally take one of two forms. Scholars have conducted small-scale surveys of doll owners by sampling from websites where doll owners congregate (Ferguson 2010; Lancaster-James and Bentley 2018). And, using similar websites, other scholars have scraped post and comment data for content analysis (Middleweek 2021; Su et al. 2019). Both survey research and content analysis suggest that most doll owners are heterosexual men (Lancaster-James and Bentley 2018; Middleweek 2021; Su et al. 2019). Relatedly, gender scholars have shown how homosocial interactions in the doll community are partially organized around hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Middleweek 2021), particularly those aspects of masculinity which emphasize explicit sex talk and gender hierarchy. While we have some idea of who doll owners are, we have little knowledge of how doll ownership has impacted their concept of self. Why do people become doll community members, and what does that socialization process tell us about the decision to be part of a transgressive and stigmatized subculture? These subjective processes are familiar to scholars studying sexual selfhood projects on the internet (Adams-Santos 2020).

SEXUAL SELFHOOD PROJECTS

Studying the fringes of society allows social scientists to identify unspoken norms and assumptions regarding human behavior. One lens used to study people who fail to meet expected norms is deviance (Becker 1963; Fletcher 2019). As Goffman (1963) has shown, in social interactions the consequence of deviance manifests as stigma. Recognizing this dynamic, socially deviant people try to present themselves in favorable light by comportsing their presentation of self to minimize aspects which are likely to be stigmatized (Goffman 1959, 1963). Another way people manage deviance is by providing verbal accounts of their actions, which work to restore social order by “bridging the gap between action and expectation” (Scott and Lyman 1968:46). Post hoc accounts provide insight into the subjective process of people reframing a past action by connecting their justifications and motivations to their social context

(Goffman [1974] 1986; Winchester and Green 2019). Accounts thus reveal the social processes that underlie transgressive behaviors.

Deviant and transgressive sexualities are particularly insightful cases of sexual selfhood because of the pervasiveness of moral taboos and stigma that people manage and account for (Rubin 2007). The strength of taboos makes it difficult to study populations labeled as deviant because people are aware of the stigma and thus conceal their behavior.⁴ However, the internet provides both digital space for people to semi-anonymously explore deviant aspects of the self and increases access to hard-to-reach populations. Further, digitality and technological sophistication have widened the available “choices” people can make, sometimes known as “techno-sexualities” (Plummer 2003b; Waskul 2004). Rather than tethering the gendered or sexual self to the physical body, people can explore alternate versions of the self online (Boellstorff 2008; Kendall 1998), including “new modes of (dis)embodied sexualities such as those found in the rapidly growing world of cyber sex ... telephone sex, on-line porn, sex chat rooms, web cam erotics, virtual realities, etc.” (Plummer 2003b:525). These individualized practices highlight how the self and identity develop in online spaces. However, the digital self is still tethered to offline social forces which constrain a person’s sexual self. How people navigate the tensions that arise between their online and offline gendered and sexual selves is a sexual selfhood project (Adams-Santos 2020).

Recent scholarship on individualized techno-sexualities (Waskul 2004) and sexual selfhood projects (Adams-Santos 2020) has shown how technology and digitality structure the interactional dynamics of transgressive sexual behaviors. In some cases, people use digital spaces to find casual sex partners (Silva 2017; Ward 2015). Other times, people may seek long-term partnership (Hanson forthcoming; Kendall 2002; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). For both casual and serious relationships, people leverage technology and digital spaces to broaden their network of available partners. For transgressive casual sex, this affordance can benefit people who maintain a heterosexual presentation of self offline while seeking same-sex partners (Silva 2017; Ward 2015). For long-term partners, online dating allows people in “thin-markets” (such as LGBTQ+) to find compatible partners from the comfort of their home (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Further, digital spaces can provide a haven for marginalized people. For example, research has shown how queer youth use the internet to connect with one another across distant rural spaces (Gray 2009). Similarly, people who are stigmatized because their objects of desire are taboo (such as pedophiles and zoophiles) have created online communities to evade stigma (Durkin, Forsyth, and Quinn 2006; Sandler 2018).

Doll owners use digital spaces for a variety of reasons. Like those seeking pleasure, doll owners admire each other’s dolls, post explicit photographs of their dolls, and enjoy talking about sex (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018; Middleweek 2021; Su et al. 2019). Single doll owners are aware of the stigma that pervades their decision to forgo human relationships instead of pursuing hegemonic coupledness (Budgeon 2008), and thus rarely disclose to their family or friends that they own dolls,

opting instead to find community online. Further, doll owners are hesitant to participate in research, which has resulted in deep theorizing based on little empirical data (Harper and Lievesley 2020). While it is tempting to ponder what a future with love and sex robots might look like (Levy 2008; Richardson 2016), it is necessary to examine how people are already living synthetic lives so that we can better theorize the expanding list of sexual selfhood projects and techno-sexualities that seem to defy “human” sexuality. As Waskul (2004) notes, while new technologies invigorate questions about ethics and users, the core issue remains the same. Ultimately, it is people who give technology meaning.

DATA AND METHODS

Research Sites, Privacy, Recruitment, and Sample

Data for this study come from 14 months of digital ethnographic fieldwork. Previous research on digital subcultures has used ethnographic methods to study the complexities of online social life, interactions (Boellstorff 2008), and social media environments where users “structure social formations around a focal object” (Caliandro 2018:551). Like other transgressive communities that thrive online (Adler and Adler 2008; Durkin, Forsyth, and Quinn 2006), doll owners, manufacturers, and prospective doll owners have carved out their own digital spaces.

My primary field site was a forum and its affiliate sites, which I call *Prominent Doll Website* (PDW) to maintain confidentiality, with more than 70,000 registered users.⁵ I gained access to PDW by disclosing I was a researcher to a site administrator who vetted my credentials and research plan before consenting to my use of PDW as a field site. My digital ethnographic approach included engaging in chat rooms, commenting on posts, and as I became more established in the community, sending and receiving private messages to other users, all of whom were aware of my role as a researcher who does not own a doll. In addition to a “researcher” tag a site admin attached to my profile, I included my real name, university affiliation, and contact information in my “bio.” As part of building rapport and gaining entrée into the community, I put additional strategies in place to maintain the confidentiality of doll owners I observed and interviewed. Even though most people I met used online pseudonyms, for this article and all related research materials, I made new pseudonyms for both people and dolls. These precautionary strategies also demonstrated the care I was taking in this project as an outsider studying a stigmatized community.⁶

Although PDW is the primary online space where many doll owners connect with each other, a significant number also use social media platforms to share pictures of their dolls and connect with other doll owners. Thus, I also followed the social media accounts of doll owners, dolls,⁷ manufacturers, and vendors as part of my digital ethnographic fieldwork. In total, I followed 124 social media accounts (71 Instagram; 53 Twitter) for 12 months. I took a cross section of the three most recent posts from each account for analysis shortly before exiting the field in 2021 ($n = 560$ images; 339

Instagram and 221 Twitter).⁸ In this paper I do not analyze post data; however, it was only via engaging with social media posts that I was able to develop rapport with doll community members and recruit some of my interviewees.

I primarily recruited interviewees from PDW, where I posted two identical calls (one in the general discussion thread and one in a thread for “male doll owners”) that explained the purpose of my research and asked for interested people to contact me. While I “liked” social media posts as part of my participant observation, my recruitment on social media was done entirely through direct messages to maintain confidentiality. Although my goal was not statistical generalizability, I wanted to interview doll community members from a range of demographic groups to enrich my data (Compton 2018). Past research on doll owners has focused on heterosexual men even though women, gender variant, and nonheterosexual doll owners are present in the community (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018; Middleweek 2021). Thus, my post in the “male doll owner” thread, as well as strategic sampling on Instagram and Twitter via direct messaging, focused on recruiting difficult to reach populations within an already stigmatized community (Pfeffer 2014). In total, I recruited 23 people from PDW, 7 from Instagram, 4 from Twitter, and the remaining 7 from snowball sampling ($n = 41$).⁹

I conducted 41 semi-structured interviews with adult doll owners and other community members, including vendors, sales associates, and a doll brothel owner, who all self-reported their demographic information.¹⁰ Relationship history and current relationship status were atypical given that many doll owners have nonhuman intimate relationships. One interviewee declined to provide their relationship status. Of the 41 interviewees, 12 (29%) were married or in a committed relationship to a human. Of those 12, four were couples within the sample. Of the remaining 28 interviewees, 15 (37%) have chosen to be single on a permanent basis. The remaining 13 (32%) single individuals are open to new relationships. Of the 28 currently (or permanently) single interviewees, 26 had been either divorced or in committed relationships that ended. Only one participant had no relationship experience, and one had only casually dated. As for their dolls, 33 had exclusively female-sexed dolls. Two had both female- and male-sexed dolls, and one couple had a female-sexed doll with a “trans insert.” Only one person had exclusively male-sexed dolls. Three interviewees were still deciding which doll they wanted to purchase at the time of their interview. Of the 38 people I interviewed who owned a doll, 26 owned more than one doll, with a range of 1 to 17.

Interviews

I leveraged the benefits of digital research methods to adapt to the challenges of conducting qualitative research during the COVID-19 pandemic. I completed 28 synchronous semi-structured interviews over the phone, Zoom, or Skype, which lasted an average of 81 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The synchronous interviews used a protocol template that allowed for

probing as necessary. The interview protocol contained 11 demographic questions, 31 open-ended questions about knowledge base, opinions, and experiences with dolls (e.g., Can you tell me when you first heard about love/sex dolls?), an opportunity to discuss each doll's persona, and three debriefing questions. For a variety of reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., people working at home with their children nearby who did not want to talk about their dolls out loud), 13 interviews were completed asynchronously. Asynchronous interviews were conducted over email and direct messaging by sending the same interview template to interviewees to answer at their leisure. I then sent probing emails or messages after receiving their response. All interviews were conducted with informed consent.

Data Analysis

I created a qualitative dataset in NVivo for analysis. The dataset included my transcribed and deidentified fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and social media posts. My fieldnotes included observations of PDW, notes on my participation in the community, and social media posts. As I became familiar with the community norms, I regularly wrote memos about what I was seeing in the field for analysis. Writing memos synthesized my thoughts on the community and my methodological process.

Analysis was driven by a grounded-theory approach (Charmaz 2014; Glaser and Strauss 1967). First, the data were open coded to identify emergent themes. After examining the emergent codes, the data were re-coded with a focus on how doll owners accounted for their decision to purchase dolls. The codes were collapsed into the following themes: relationship dissolution; modern dating and feminism; exploring deviant/transgressive desires; sex toys; and individual rights. While my analysis was driven by a grounded-theory approach, I was also cognizant of previous literature and stereotypes. Thus, I resisted analyzing the data in ways that collapsed the complexity of doll ownership into psychopathology (Ferguson 2010). Instead, I adhered to the strengths of digital ethnographic data collection, which are mapping the digital practices and norms of online communities (Caliandro 2018).

THE SILICONE SELF

Desiring the Inanimate

For the typical doll owner, their decision to purchase a doll comes after a series of long-term relationships. After having been in multiple relationships, some people decide that rather than continuing to date, they would prefer to be single and cease pursuing romantic partnership. Thus, for the majority of doll owners, the desire to own a doll rarely stems from a lack of intimate experience; rather, it is a *refined desire* shaped by, what Ulysses calls, “the relationship hamster wheel.” He said:

Well, it's kind of hard to put in context without the background of my relationship history ... I had a lot of early experiences interacting with women, which

helped me a lot later because I've had many, many relationships, everything ranging from one-night stands to marriages lasting 12 or more years. So, I went through my second divorce, and I was going through this long separation, I moved, and I came out here, dated a bit, you know, and I met some women, but it seemed like the same old thing over and over again. I got tired of the relationship hamster wheel.

Similar experiences over the life course were found among heterosexual men who owned dolls. On PDW, many posts detail a person's lifetime of relationships before purchasing their first doll. In so doing, these posts account for the decision to remain single and own dolls *in lieu* of human partners. As Loosey Goosey said, "By choice I decided to be single as of February ... I chose to be a single man just because I wanted to." Framing the decision to purchase a doll as a choice, rather than due to a lack of sexual and romantic experiences, is one way doll owners develop a silicone self to resist being stereotyped as lonely people who are unable to attract partners. For heterosexual men, this also accounts for the masculine expectation of sexual activity (Connell 1987). Further, by expressing their desire as a choice, these heterosexual men reinforce hegemonic masculinity while resisting the stigma of singleness (Budgeon 2008). Instead, they account for the decision to be single by reframing their masculine identity around individual choices that privilege personal pleasure (Plummer 2003a).

The decision to forgo relationships is painful for people who desired a life without dolls. 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 market (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). For example, Blake, who is Native American, trans, nonbinary, 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 of the doll community, it is important to discuss MGTOW doll owners.¹¹ 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 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 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 is 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 idollaters¹² 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. 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 publicly identifying as a doll owner in hopes of destigmatizing doll ownership. His silicone self connects his online presence and offline presentation of self by being one of the few publicly open doll owners. 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 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?"

Desiring Humans and Dolls

Not all doll owners have forgone human relationships. Some people use dolls to supplement sexual and emotional needs within relationships or on a temporary basis. In these cases, relationships with dolls rely on their inanimateness in ways that show how people can fulfill multiple desires that challenge heteronormativity and monogamy. For example, a couple who use a joint account on PDW to post pictures of their doll Jen, decided to buy their doll rather than pursue group sex. In a group discussion, they said:

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 gotten older, 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).

In addition to partners using dolls together, it is possible for dolls to be used in ways that supplement a relationship by providing sexual experiences for one person. 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 nonbinary, knew their husband Sean desired a feminine partner. Thus, they consented to Sean having his doll 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), primarily 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 nonbinary, 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.

An additional benefit Sean identifies is his doll's inability to become "jealous." He views Gracie as a sexual partner that does not emotionally complicate his relationship with Ophelia.

In addition to Gracie's lack of emotions, Gracie can be used 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 humans. Sometime after speaking with Sean, he sent me a picture of Gracie with a penis attachment, showing how dolls can easily change their sexual capabilities.

Like Sean, many doll owners alter their doll to meet their own shifting needs. Venus's brief sexual relationship with her doll Celeste is an illustrative example. 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 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.

Although dolls are inanimate, the emotional comfort they can provide should not be understated. Many doll owners accounted for owning dolls because of their therapeutic potential. For example, A.S., who is married, accounted for her decision to purchase multiple dolls by describing the emotional and mental health benefits she receives. 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 presence of MGTOW doll owners.

Just a Doll

Many doll owners personify their dolls to some degree (Middleweek 2021; Su et al. 2019). This often includes naming and attributing personality traits to their dolls. This personification helps doll owners give meaning to their relationship beyond the doll’s sexual function. However, doll owners sometimes account for their practice by relying on the fact that dolls are inanimate objects. Bringing attention to the fact that dolls can be categorized as sex toys mitigates stigma by aligning doll ownership with pro-sex discourses that celebrate women’s sexuality, the use of vibrators, and the rights of sexual minorities (Comella 2017; Liberman 2017; Waskul and Anklan 2020). Logan, who is both a doll owner and vendor, 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,” Logan resists stereotypes of doll owners as pedophiles (Maras and Shapiro 2017), misogynistic (Richardson 2016), or pathological (Ferguson 2010). Instead, Logan reframes dolls in terms of their potential as merely a “device” that is given meaning by the people who use it (Waskul 2004).

Of course, one of the most common reasons people own dolls is for sex (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018). Because dolls are stigmatized and primarily marketed to men, some doll owners make comparisons to the relatively common use of dildos and vibrators as evidence of a gendered double standard within pro-sex discourse. 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.

Benji draws on the symbolic weight of vibrators to frame dolls as legitimate sex toys (Comella 2017; Liberman 2016). He compares the stigma of doll ownership to the general acceptance of women using vibrators, and thus concludes that technologically assisted masturbation should be normalized for men, too (Herbenick et al. 2009; Herbenick et al. 2017; Waskul and Anklan 2020). Similar arguments are even expressed by women in the community. For example, A.S. has other sex toys and her dolls. She said, “I think it should be more acceptable to have something

anatomically correct that resembles a legal adult human body than to have a body part.” By focusing on how a dildo or vibrator can be penis facsimile, A.S. draws into question the presumed strangeness of a “whole” body rather than a body part. Further, by making sure to qualify dolls as a facsimile of a *legal* adult, A.S. resists the pedophilia stereotype (Maras and Shapiro 2017). Thus, she accounts for doll ownership by framing them as, perhaps, *more* normative than some other sex toys available for individual pleasure (Plummer 2003a, 2003b; Waskul 2004).

As for the future of the community, doll owners often speculate about the next stage of their practice. While some work against current threats to normalization, such as MGTOW, others envision a natural progression of sexual liberalism by drawing comparisons to feminism and the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights (England, Mishel, and Caudillo 2016; Hart-Brinson 2016). 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 accounts for her doll ownership as having the potential to be accepted if and when a cultural shift occurs (Hart-Brinson 2016). Thus, Helen's silicone self resists the stigma of singleness and doll ownership by likening it to a marginalized identity worthy of social legitimacy (Budgeon 2008; Gray 2009; Plummer 2003a).

DISCUSSION

In this article I used qualitative data to show how doll owners account for their transgressive sex practice and have developed a subcultural community based on a shared appreciation for sexual individualism despite sometimes opposing views on gender and sexuality. Examining doll owners' accounts reveals several social expectations they fail to meet. First, single doll owners account for their decision to forgo human relationships, which defies the expectations that all people seek romantic partnership (Budgeon 2008) and that single heterosexual men desire regular sexual activity with women (Connell 1987; Silva 2017; Ward 2015). For partnered doll owners, their accounts challenge heteronormativity and monogamous coupledness; instead, they view dolls as something that can fulfill emotional and sexual desires not met within the confines of a relationship. This true as well for single doll owners who still seek human partnership but find themselves currently single.

In analyzing the sexual selfhood projects of doll owners (Adams-Santos 2020), I argue that each doll owner develops a *silicone self* that manages the stigma of desiring inanimate dolls while presenting the community in a way that challenges the stereotypes perpetuated by largely theoretical, rather than empirical, scholarship and journalism (Becker 1963; Harper and Lievesley 2020). I suggest the silicone

self stems from two social processes. The first process is one's reflexive evaluation of their past romantic relationships. While some have argued that heterosexual men desire dolls because they want to exert control over women (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 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 destigmatize 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 of 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 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 2004). 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 so doing, 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.

CONCLUSION

In this digital ethnographic study of the love and sex doll community I showed how this subculture frames the transgressive desire for inanimate dolls as normative by emphasizing sexual individualism and highlighting the emotional and sexual shortcomings of human relationships. I developed the concept of the silicone self to analyze how stigma shapes doll owners' self and examined how broader social trends of individualism, liberalism, and sex positive feminism are shaping sexual selfhood projects in online spaces (Adams-Santos 2020).

Future empirical studies on the love and sex doll community can build on the limitations of this study. Although some sexual minority doll owners were interviewed, the sample examined here lacks data on the experiences of gay men who own dolls. Despite efforts to recruit gay men for interviews via purposeful sampling in the "male doll owner" thread on PDW (which caters to both heterosexual women and gay men), no gay man consented to be interviewed. Yet, I observed gay men actively posting on PDW and social media. Moreover, most interviewees were white. No research has seriously considered how race operates within the doll community.

Finally, while the silicone self was developed in the context of love and sex doll ownership, it is possible that people using sex tech and even people who own robots for nonsexual reasons experience stigma. Developments in the sex tech industry regarding virtual reality, digitally immersive sex work, and teledildonics are relatively unexamined (Waskul 2004) despite rapid growth in this multi-billion-dollar global industry. Further, while many of the aspects of the silicone self examined here are constituted by sexual and emotional desires, as Jecker (2021) has argued, dolls and robots have potential benefits for elderly populations as caregivers and alert systems. Perhaps future research on dolls and robots can connect the sexual and emotional aspects of the silicone self to the health and safety benefits that come from artificial companionship.

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NOTES

1. There are several definitional difficulties with regards to the appropriate terminology for love dolls, sex dolls, dolls, artificial companions, and sex robots. First is the distinction between robots and dolls. Although these terms are often conflated, *dolls* are not mechanized. Therefore, “robot” is inappropriate. Second, the modifier before “doll” is a site of symbolic struggle within the doll community. While “sex doll” is the colloquial term, many community members prefer “love doll.” The use of “love” is a deliberate attempt to destigmatize the practice and highlight nonsexual reasons for doll ownership. Some community members prefer the unmodified “doll,” but without a modifier, this may confuse readers who think of dolls as children’s toys, such as Barbie. See Lancaster-James and Bentley (2018) for an extended discussion of this issue.
2. The Comstock Act (passed in 1873) was an anti-obsenity law that prohibited the sale of explicit materials and items in the United States. This act stunted the production and distribution of pornography and “rubber articles for masturbation” (Lieberman 2016:403). Although vibrators were sold as consumer appliances while the Comstock Act was in effect, its defeat opened the door for significant expansion of the adult industry (Comella 2017; Lieberman 2016).
3. Otakuism is defined by Appel et al. (2019:569) as “a term for Japanese youth culture that describes secluded persons with a high affinity for fictional manga characters.”
4. Because of the moralizing way in which “deviance” has been used, in this study I prefer to discuss these practices as transgressive. This framing suggests that while doll ownership is not a normative practice, it is neither inherently problematic nor liberatory.
5. Researchers interested in learning more about where and how to ethically study this community are invited to contact me.
6. Because of past experiences with journalists and academics, many doll community members only consented to interviews after vetting me for themselves, including questions about my sexual and relationship history. I surmise that despite not owning a doll, the fact that I am a man was critical for gaining entrée into this community.
7. On social media, some doll owners create accounts for their dolls and run the account from the perspective of the doll. This is one way people personify their dolls.
8. The total number of pictures is greater than threefold the number of profiles sampled because both Twitter and Instagram allow users to post multiple pictures within a single post.
9. This study was altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I initially planned to attend adult conventions where doll manufacturers gathered and “doll meets” in North America as field sites. Due to travel restrictions, health, and safety, this study became a digital ethnography. All protocol revisions were approved by my university’s Institutional Review Board prior to altering research activities.
10. The gender identities, sexual orientations, and racial identities of the interviewees are as follows: 31 men, 7 women, 2 non-binary, 1 trans; 31 heterosexual, 4 bisexual, 2 queer, 1 demisexual, 1 pansexual, 1 asexual, 1 refused to answer; 28 white, 3 Hispanic-white, 3 mixed race, 2 Native American, 2 African American, 1 Mexican American, 1 Asian, 1 Black/Mi’kmaq, and 1 refused to answer. Because some interviewees provided inexact age information, all ages are reported within a range: 3 (20–29), 8 (30–39), 12 (40–49), 13 (50–59), 4 (60–69), 1 refused to answer.
11. Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) is one of the loosely connected Men’s Rights Activists (MRA) groups that congregate online. 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). While not all MGTOW (or MRA) members own dolls, there is noticeable overlap.
12. “Idollater” is an identity label used by some doll owners. It is a pun on idolatry, a sin in many religions.

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