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The ‘perfect’ partner: Understanding the lived experiences of sex doll owners

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Abstract

The ownership of sex dolls has become an increasingly discussed phenomenon in recent years, with legal scholars and legislators calling for increased regulation and criminalization of such articles. In doing so, they promote an implicit assumption that the ownership of dolls increases a risk of sexual offending, which has been questioned in recent survey-based psychological analyses. However, the literature is currently lacking a phenomenological exploration of the experiences of individuals who own sex dolls. In this study, we interviewed nine owners of sex dolls to investigate their motivations and experiences. Two main themes were elicited from the data: “*the ‘perfect’ partner*” and “*sex doll or love doll?*”. In understanding doll ownership in this way, we hope to add to ongoing social discussions about the types of people who own dolls, why they do so, and how dolls act as a function aspect of the sexual (and nonsexual) lives.

Keywords: sex dolls; relationships; love dolls; sexuality; qualitative research

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Introduction

In 1996, doll creator company Abyss Creations created their first RealDoll. This was lauded as a revolutionary product that exemplified a development in the production of realistic masturbatory aids, with older and relatively inexpensive rubber dolls being replaced by realistic dolls made from flesh-like silicone or thermoplastic elastomer. Although ‘sex dolls’ are not limited to dolls which are manufactured into the female form, these are the most common ranges that are purchased (Ferguson, 2014; Valverde, 2012). they also include male, intersex and transgender dolls highlighting the variation of doll available. The increasing demand for dolls over the past two decade has led to many technological advances and customizability options (Lancaster-James & Bentley, 2018), with many adult performers assisting in the manufacture and sale of anatomically correct silicone forms of themselves to satiate their fans. More recently, dolls with inbuilt artificial intelligence have afforded owners with a more interactive experience (Carvalho Nascimento et al., 2018; Galaitsi et al., 2019; Samhita, 2010), with the highest-quality dolls costing anywhere from \$3,500-\$10,000 (Ferguson, 2014; Valverde, 2012).

Despite the time that has passed since the first RealDoll, and the development of a multi-million-dollar industry in the sale of realistic sex dolls (Valverde, 2012), relatively little empirical attention has been paid to the topic of doll ownership. In this paper, we document what we believe to be the first phenomenological analysis of sex doll ownership and begin to sketch a psychological profile of men who own such dolls.

Sex Doll Controversies

Sex doll ownership has been cited as having dangerous consequences. For example, sociological and legal scholars have argued that doll owners are more likely to hold negative

attitudes towards women, to objectify them, and be at an increased risk of sexual aggression (Cox-George & Bewley, 2018; Danaher, 2017; Eskens, 2017; Ferguson, 2014; Puig, 2017; Ray, 2016; Richardson, 2016; Sharkey et al., 2017). Most of this work is theoretical, hypothetical, and rhetorical in nature, in that it emerges from sociological and legal scholarship with authors explicitly taking a moralistic perspective about the potential harms of doll ownership. Despite such claims, the only current review of the literature on doll ownership finds a total lack of empirical data in support or opposition to these claims (Harper & Lievesley, 2020). Within the context of widespread movements to legislate on the status of sex dolls (Danaher et al., 2017; Prostasia Foundation, 2021), this lack of empirical research highlights a need for peer-reviewed data to be shared about these topics.

Thinking more imaginatively about the potential uses of sex dolls, Torjeson (2017) indicated that sex dolls may also have a role in sex therapy for sexual dysfunction and anxieties about sex. That is, men with erectile dysfunction that is brought about by performance anxiety (see Döring & Pöschl, 2018; Eichenberg et al., 2019) might use a doll to assure themselves about their erectile abilities before engaging with a living partner. Along similar lines, doll therapy has been introduced to dementia populations where dolls have been found to offer a continuous companionship which increases positive social interactions and wellbeing amongst patients (Ellingford et al., 2007; Mackenzie et al., 2007), while therapists working with HIV patients have suggested a potential use of dolls as a safe sexual outlet to achieving satisfaction while reducing disease transmission (Morgan, 2009).

Uses of, and Experiences with, Sex Dolls

Although social discussions surrounding doll ownership and the broader use of dolls evoke strong feelings, very little is known about such practices, and comprehensive analyses of doll ownership and use are almost completely absent from the peer-reviewed literature (for a review, see Harper & Lievesley, 2020). Most of what is currently known comes from

relatively small-scale analyses completed as MSc-level theses which, although instructive, have not undergone the levels of rigorous evaluation that research usually endures on its way into the literature. These studies typically report primarily sexual uses of dolls (Ferguson, 2014; Valverde, 2012). However, many doll owners also report their doll to be cohabiting partners that offer a degree of companionship in addition to being used for sexual gratification (Langcaster-James & Bentley, 2018; Valverde, 2012). In his book, *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*, Levy (2007) even argued that love can exist between humans and robotic dolls through repeated interactions, which in turn transforms the doll from less of a physical commodity to something more important within an owner's life, akin to an intimate relationship. Thus, owners who interact with their doll frequently might be expected to develop strong attachments akin to romantic love, with such feelings of attachment being associated with higher levels of general wellbeing measures and life satisfaction in traditional relationships (Guarnieri et al., 2014; LaGuardia et al., 2000; Wei et al., 2005). In this regard, dolls may represent a surrogate form of an intimate relationship where living partners are either unobtainable or undesirable (Burr-Miller & Aoki, 2013; Ferguson, 2014; Ray, 2016).

As with information about the motivations for sex doll ownership, there is a lack of available data about how doll owners feel about their experiences. In Valverde's (2012) work, 37% of participants reported how they felt emotions such as guilt, shame, and embarrassment related to their ownership of dolls, perhaps emphasizing the existence of social stigma that has been internalized. associated with doll usage and how it deviates from social norms. Of the limited research that has been conducted to date, perceptions of social stigma appear to be relatively accurate. The aforementioned social discussions about potential dangers associated with doll ownership have led to formalized campaigns against the ownership of sex dolls and robots (see Prostasia Foundation, 2021; Richardson, 2016), while empirical studies into

attitudes of doll ownership suggest that community members' attitudes may be related to perceptions of the immorality (i.e., dangerousness) and psychological dysfunction of doll owners (Harper et al., 2021). The extent to which doll owners actually harbor immoral views or experience psychological or interpersonal skill deficits has not been explored from a phenomenological perspective (though for psychometric evidence of a lack of psychological disturbance or sexual risk among doll owners, see Harper et al., 2022).

The Current Study

As alluded to above, research into human-doll interactions is increasing in terms of its extent and scope, but this work typically adopts relatively limited methods to explore the demographic characteristics of doll owners, the basic functions of doll ownership, and the physical characteristics of these individuals' dolls. Most of this work adopts quantitative designs, and few studies have made their way into the peer-reviewed literature. Those studies that have used qualitative methods to explore doll ownership have used public domain data, such as online testimonials or forum posts (Ciambrone et al., 2017; Su et al., 2019), or have included short open-ended questions embedded within online surveys (Ferguson, 2014; Lancaster-James & Bentley, 2018). As such, we sought to explore the motivations for doll ownership, experiences of having a doll, and the various effects that ownership has had on the lives of men who own sex dolls. We selected men as a sample in this work in response to the gendered nature of both social debates surrounding doll ownership, as well as the apparent dominance of male owners (and female-appearing dolls) within the commercial market. In conducting this research, we do not seek to place judgment on the value doll ownership in any particular direction. Instead, we wish to give voice to men who make up this marginalized community, and to present their stories and experiences.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised of nine adult males who owned at least one sex doll (see Table 1 for further participant information) enlisted through opportunity sampling. The sample ranged in age from 21 to 68 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 49$ years, $SD = 12.95$ years). Three participants were based in the USA, three were from the UK, with the remaining participants living in New Zealand, Canada, and the Netherlands.

Table 1. Participant information

Participant number	Number of dolls	Ownership duration	Relationship status
1	1	Under 1 year	Dating
2	3	13 years	Single
3	4	19 years	Single
4	1	1.5 years	Single
5	2	Under 1 year	Single
6	5	10 years	Single
7	1	Under 1 year	Single
8	2	5 years	Single
9	17	6 years	Married

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the research was reviewed and approved by Nottingham Trent University Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited via adverts posted on social media forums and online chat spaces for individuals who own sex dolls. To preserve the anonymity of individual participants who may be identifiable in such spaces we informed participants that we would not reveal their specific places of recruitment. Anyone interested in participating was required to contact the research team and were subsequently provided with an information sheet detailing the aims, objectives and procedures involved in the research. It

also covered topics of data storage, limits of confidentiality, and highlighted the potentially sensitive nature of the research. It was made clear that participation was voluntary. Following this, any potential participants that wished to participate were required to provide written consent before an interview was scheduled. By consenting, participants agreed to their interview being recorded and direct extracts being used in the write up of the research.

Informed consent was again obtained at the beginning of each interview, with these conducted using Skype audio ($n = 8$) or email ($n = 1$). Both interview methods are recognized as beneficial for interpretative researchers due to them allowing participants to provide rich accounts of their experiences (Curasi, 2001; Smith et al., 2009). Indeed, some methodologists suggest that email interviews should be considered as a more comfortable method for participants with anxieties about participation in research (Hawkins, 2018; Mason & Ide, 2014; Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014). One participant was invited to take part via email after reporting discomfort when informed about our standard approach (i.e., recorded audio interviews). Each participant was interviewed once, with a mean interview duration of 84 minutes (range = 31-155 minutes), with the audio interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim. The email interview followed previously published guidelines, meaning that a typeset version of the interview schedule was sent to the participant once they provided their consent, and additional questions were sent to the participant to follow up on their answers or to request clarifications upon receipt of their reply (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Meho, 2006). This process was repeated until we had no further questions. Following the interviews, participants were debriefed and given details to access support if required.

The interview schedule was developed to cover four broad areas: sex doll use, romantic relationships, social relationships, and societal views. We adopted a semi-structured format which allowed us to explore specific topics of interest while simultaneously providing some additional flexibility to explore specific themes as they arose (Smith, 2015). In conducting the

interviews, our aim was to have a conversation that allowed participants to provide their personal insights without the participant being directed by too many questions from the research team (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Analytic Approach

This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) due to its ability to explore the personal accounts and lived experience of participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This is necessary due to the limited amount of research currently available that explores the experience of doll ownership from the owners' perspective. IPA is also considered the most effective qualitative method when researching topics that are under-researched, novel and emotionally sensitive (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In IPA, the phenomenological focus allows understanding of experiences, insights and meaning, with the participant viewed as an expert that can provide the researcher with a first-hand viewpoint on the phenomenon in question (Larkin et al., 2006). IPA adopts a double-hermeneutic approach during interpretation which involves the participants' interpretation of their world and experiences, followed by the researcher making sense of these interpretations (Smith et al., 2009).

The analysis was guided by previous precedents (see Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). Firstly, all interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were read multiple times for data familiarization with initial thoughts noted. Interviews were then annotated individually with more detailed observations noted on content, language, emotions and concepts identified within the transcripts. Next, re-reading of each transcript occurred with further notes added to link concepts and identify emerging themes within and amongst transcripts. These emergent themes were developed under subordinate headings. Next, using abstraction (Smith et al. 2009) these emergent themes were grouped together to develop super-ordinate themes. This was an iterative process, moving between the themes and the transcripts to ensure the final set of themes were grounded in the data and a true representation of participant accounts. To

ensure some form of inter-rater reliability, the two lead authors analyzed the transcripts independently and interpretations were then checked by the third co-author to assess the validity of the interpretations being made (Willig, 2008).

Results and Discussion

Two superordinate themes were identified through the process of analysis (Table 2). These and the associated subthemes are now discussed in detail.

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
1. The ‘perfect’ partner	1.1. Deficits in real people
	1.2. Deficits in self
2. Sex doll or love doll?	2.1. The line between partner and object
	2.2. Living with stigma

Superordinate Theme 1: The ‘perfect’ partner

This theme represents how the doll has come to be accepted as an alternative partner. It captures how the doll provides a standard of relationship which participants cannot obtain in real life and real people fall short of.

Theme 1.1. Deficits in real people

Participants spoke about characteristics real people have which make them less desirable as partners. These are perceived as unavoidable and contribute to the participants retreating from relationships with real people.

I know my dolls will always be there for me. They will never be critical, never be snappy, they’ll never talk about me behind my back, they’ll never cheat on me. It’s the fact you’ll always have someone who is always in your corner no

matter what. It is an incredibly powerful feeling that is rare to get from an organic partner.

(Participant 3)

I can just sit here and relax and walk around without having to worry about a real woman being negative with me and saying stuff, they don't criticize you, they say nothing about you.

(Participant 5)

Here, the potentially negative behaviors that a real partner may demonstrate are evidenced. Participants describe real partners to be critical and the silence of the doll to be an advantage. The doll is thus seen as consistently supportive through its inability to comment, something unattainable in a real relationship. It is interesting that a lack of criticism is perceived as support, with this maybe reflecting a history of poor-quality relationships among doll owners (see Harper et al., 2022). In this regard, women may come to be perceived as simply unknowable or deceitful, and therefore the predictability of the doll brings with it a degree of security. Along these lines, Participant 3 describes real partners as distrustful, in comparison to the doll which is seen as a secure alternative through its inability to cheat on or betray him. He proceeds to state the doll 'will always be in your corner'. Although this represents the doll being a supportive, non-judgmental partner, it is also perhaps ironic that this represents a sense of psychological security as the doll cannot leave due to its inanimate nature, and perhaps is symbolic of a fear of abandonment (i.e., the doll's lack of agency means that it will always be around). For Participant 3, this elicits an 'incredibly powerful' feeling which is 'rare' to experience with a real partner, capturing the euphoria of positivity experienced because of the relationship with his doll.

Although the doll is an artificial person, the participants in our sample may be experiencing outcomes likened to having a secure attachment to a real intimate partner.

Examples of such outcomes include stress management, perceived support, increased emotional wellbeing, and greater life satisfaction (Guarnieri et al., 2014; LaGuardia et al., 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pietromonaco et al., 2013; Waldinger et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2005). In a recent quantitative analysis of sex doll owners, this group were found to a secure attachment style to a lesser degree than non-owner comparison group (Harper et al., 2022), and as such the doll may serve an adaptive function in both learning and achieving a level of attachment – a stable base – that all people strive for (Crowell et al., 2002). With a real partner, there is the risk of these benefits being lost through the above-mentioned processes of abandonment, with participants experiencing negative consequences as a result of this. The doll provides a safe alternative:

Literature knows the “ferne Geliebte” who can be loved freely because she cannot disappoint. A doll cannot either. She doesn’t even get older.

(Participant 6)

Referring to a composition by Beethoven (translated to mean ‘distant beloved’), Participant 6 emphasizes the ease of being with a doll compared to a real partner. As alluded to in previous extracts, the doll cannot disappoint him due to the fact that it is not a free-thinking agent that has the ability to make wrong decisions. This allows participants to love the doll without disagreements occurring, which in real relationships can breed dissatisfaction, resentment, and eventual dissolution of relationships. In this sense, having a doll as an intimate partner allows our participants to experience intimate bonds without the threat of abandonment or criticism, perhaps bolstering once again their sense of self and their perception of control in the relationship. This may be particularly important for doll owners, with this group appearing to have a higher odds of prior relationship dissolution through separation or divorce, as well as more skeptical views about women and less secure attachment styles (Harper et al., 2022). Such narratives thus strengthen the case that doll

owners may through their past experiences, grow resentful and further distrusting of women, with dolls being viewed as an ideal solution to this issue.

The reference to a dolls' lack of ability to age speaks more centrally to the sexual aspects of its relationship with its owner and highlights the importance of attraction and arousal in such interactions. A youthful appearance among women confers many evolutionarily based advantages on the mating market, with this being a salient sexual signal of fertility and femininity (Bailey et al., 1994; Deusch et al., 1986). A doll's beauty is frozen in time compared to real women, whose appearances age with their chronology. Consistent with emergent analyses of doll ownership (Harper et al., 2022; Valverde, 2017), most participants in this sample are middle aged, and thus women of this age are likely to be unattractive in comparison to the ostensible youthfulness of a doll (Lassek & Gaulin, 2019).

We know from the existing literature that the primary function of dolls, as reported by their owners, is sexual in nature (Ferguson, 2014; Harper et al., 2022; Lancaster-James & Bentley, 2018; Valverde, 2012). Against this context, it is unsurprising to see that dolls satisfy their owners' ultimate fantasies, and reflect what they find most attractive:

She originally had green eyes but I changed them to blue eyes because I like blonde women with blue eyes and big breasts.

(Participant 5)

She's got long legs, long arms, she's basically got that classic... what would you call it, classic movie star look.

(Participant 9)

As highlighted in the above extracts, the doll is able to be altered to maintain ultimate sexual attraction for the owner, which for Participant 5 involved changing the eye color. Ray (2016) describes this customizable beauty to give the owner the ability to concretize their ideal and sexualize it. In relationships, partner physical attractiveness predicts male

satisfaction for long-term relationship outcomes (Meltzer et al., 2014), which indicates that sexual attraction needs to be maintained for men to stand a greater chance of remaining satisfied within their relationship. When applying this to participants, the ability to change the appearance of the doll to fit their ideal is likely to contribute to them remaining satisfied with the doll as an alternative partner, especially when this appearance does not change over time or decline with age. Consequently, doll owners may not feel the need or inclination to seek a real partner as the doll amounts to more than real life can offer:

Maybe I can't believe that such a woman exists, or that, if she exists, I can never meet her or marry her. I appreciate the doll being better than life.

(Participant 6)

Participant 6 indicates that he believes that the beauty the doll has is unlikely to exist in real life. Because of this preconception, he accepts the doll as an alternative partner with little desire to seek a real alternative. Hernandez (2018) explained sex dolls generalize the idea of female beauty, and that this is dangerous for society as it could lead to disinterest in real women. This is consistent with what Wolf (1991) termed 'the beauty myth' – the idea that women are only valid as members of society if they live up to societal or cultural expectations of physical beauty. However, studies into human attraction have found that men find prefer certain features such as facial symmetry (Abend et al., 2015; Hume & Montogomerie, 2001; Perett et al., 1999) and a waist-to-hip ratio of around 0.70 (Saad, 2017) which is instantly achievable with a doll. Thus, the doll sets a standard for those who use them where potential future partners do not compare due to the sexual arousal and satisfaction that the newfound standard brings:

I guess there's a higher standard that I put organic women to as compared to synthetic women.

(Participant 3)

The dolls...they are idolised. Very few could hope to look like them if you know what I mean?...they're...so perfect.

(Participant 4)

Participants emphasize the inferiority of humans in comparison to the sex doll in terms of physical attraction. By stating real people to have to meet higher standards than sex dolls to be considered a potential partner confirms the fears of Hernandez (2018). Dolls may set an ideal that real people often fall short of, and it is difficult to see this trend reversing among doll owners due to the customizability of their dolls (Ray, 2016). Thus, the exposure to a sexual stimulus that projects a perfected version of female beauty may cause participants to be dissatisfied towards real women's appearance, causing them to be rejected as potential partners.

Theme 1.2. Deficits in self

Although participants outlined qualities in real people that are unappealing compared to the doll, they also discussed their own personal characteristics that might have hindered the progression of relationships with real women. In this sense, participants exhibit perceived deficits that others could reject them for, while the doll inherently accepts these qualities. In the fashion of a self-fulfilling prophecy, this contributes to the doll being viewed as a model partner and a satisfying alternative.

Introvert would be the best way to describe me. I prefer being by myself and having friends to be with whenever I want to, as opposed to being around them all the time. Cause it's kinda draining. I think that's the primary reason that attracted me to dolls because I can have a partner where I know I will always be with someone, but then I can also be alone if I want to. But, I'm never lonely.

(Participant 3)

I'm introverted and don't know how to talk to people. So, having someone that I don't really have to talk to directly, who I can be with and talk to when I feel like, is a little more stress reducing.

(Participant 1)

These participants identify themselves as introverted. Introversion is a personality characteristic proposed by Eysenck and Eysenck (1975) where someone is quiet and reserved in nature (Gudjonsson et al., 2004). Introverts strive to be independent of others due to becoming over-stimulated in social contexts (Zelenski et al., 2014), reinforced through Participant 3's description of socializing as 'draining'. Here, the doll is perceived as an ideal partner as socialization can be controlled by the participant. There are no demands or expectations that are likely to be found within a real relationship and the participant is able to be alone if they wish. Solitude is a primary characteristic of introversion (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Leary et al., 2003) and while these participants exhibit a preference for being alone, the doll protects them from the harmful effects this could bring such as an increase in the depressive symptoms associated with loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Hyland et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2005).

Socialization is described by participants as being a strain due to their introverted character. Participant 1 illustrates how they lack communication skills and is likely to inhibit them developing a relationship with a real person. In the absence of social connections to other humans, Epley et al. (2007) theorized how individuals create replacements from nonhumans to satisfy an internal drive for social connection, even if such a connection is one-sided. Through participants expressing concerns about their social ability, the doll may be serving a therapeutic function. This has been cited as a potential benefit of doll ownership by some within the medical community (see Cox-George & Bewley, 2017), where individuals can practice developing their social skills without judgment, thus allowing confidence to be built where it may currently be lacking (see also

Ferguson, 2014; Ray, 2016).

For someone who has the perception that their social skills are under-developed, interpersonal exchanges may be intimidating, especially where meeting potential sexual or romantic partners is involved:

I was just having trouble talking to people and talking to people of the opposite sex because there was just so much of a burden there. Like, what should I say? What should I do? What should I wear? How should I look? How should I stand? Should I talk to them today, tomorrow or the next day?
(Participant 2)

The excessive questioning exhibited by Participant 2 emphasizes the stress and anxiety that is experienced when considering interaction with the opposite sex. This is consistent with analyses of the psychological characteristics of doll owners, with this group demonstrating lower levels of sexual self-esteem in comparison to non-owner comparators (Harper et al., 2022). This lack of confidence hinders the possibility of a relationship developing as literature states social dominance to be an important mate choice criterion for women, particularly in relation to short-term sexual partnerships (Ellis, 1992; Valentine et al., 2014). This is because it indicates an ability to protect, and thus may confer socially competitive advantages for offspring (Snyder et al., 2008). From this, the doll owner is subject to potential rejection by real women in favor of other sexual partners. This may be a contributing factor to the acceptance of cohabitation with a doll. Although framed as a choice, the decision to form an intimate relationship with a doll may be influenced by the inability (or perceived inability) to be desired by real women.

For some participants, negative experiences, or anticipations of negative experiences, contributed to preferred relationships with a doll over real women as they are perceived to be more accepting:

The big thing with paralysis is you lose control over your bladder and bowels...It absolutely destroys your personal, social, professional and your intimate life...but I still like to engage in sexual activity but I just can't find a human being who would be willing to be with me with all of this baggage. The doll is the solution to that.

(Participant 7)

...even when you're having fun with them they don't say things like "you're bad at this!". They don't say anything.

(Participant 5)

As seen in both of the above extracts, participants' low levels of self-esteem – particularly in relation to sexuality – contribute to anxieties about engaging with real women. For Participant 5 his lack of sexual confidence leads him to believe that real women may explicitly label him a poor lover, and that seeking solace in his doll relieves him from this stress while also affording him the opportunity to achieve sexual satisfaction. The story is a little different for Participant 7 who has a physical disability that he believes would be too much 'baggage' for a real woman, and therefore he has withdrawn from the mating pool. These sentiments center around the importance that men place on their sexual prowess as a source of positive self-image, with favorable self-evaluations being associated with higher rates of mental health and relationship satisfaction (Antičević et al., 2017; Syme et al., 2013). In our sample this is placed in competition with the need for some form of sexual satisfaction in participants' lives, with this being viewed as an essential need in the absence of a real partner.

The experience of failed relationships has caused considerable pain in participants' lives. This is consistent with other analyses of doll owners' romantic histories and associated psychological presentations (Harper et al., 2022). As a consequence of this, they are guarded:

A lot of guys when they go through the things I've gone through and suffer that kind of damage due to failed relationships, they just completely wall off their hearts. They pour concrete into them and surround them with barbed wire and you can't help anyone that manages to get in there...She's [the doll] safe for me emotionally.

(Participant 4)

Participant 4 states how they have experienced a significant amount of relationship break downs that have left them emotionally damaged. By stating 'she's safe' the participant emphasizes the ability to protect himself emotionally. Through his elaborate use of imagery ('they just completely wall off their hearts. They pour concrete into them and surround them with barbed wire and you can't help anyone that manages to get in there'), he depicts the significant amount of effort required to protect himself from heartbreak. The generalization to 'they' in some way serves to further distance him from the pain and recognition of this response, before reverting to 'me' when discussing the personal relationship with his doll. The choice of 'concrete' and 'barbed wire' as methods to protect his heart illustrate the difficulty a potential partner would have in getting close, and anyone that attempts this will risk becoming harmed themselves as he is no longer able to open up. The relationship with a doll is therefore a safe alternative where participants do not need to worry about themselves or others getting hurt (see also Ciambrone et al., 2017).

Superordinate Theme 2: Sex doll or love doll?

This theme more centrally addresses the sexual elements of doll ownership among our sample, and how such potential motivations become a focus for social attitudes.

Theme 2.1. The line between partner and object

Throughout the narratives, participants discuss how their relationship with their doll extends beyond sex, with the doll described as a 'companion' (Participant 8), 'partner'

(Participant 9), and ‘wife’ (Participant 3).

Really, it's like erm companions...I think 'ahh I can't wait to see her' you know what I mean. It's more loving, like cuddling with her stuff like that. I mean sitting her beside me when I'm watching TV, that kind of thing.

(Participant 8)

She feels really nice to cuddle with. She's got this warm personality. Silent at times, but she smiles all the time.

(Participant 1)

As can be seen in the above extracts, participants often anthropomorphize their doll when discussing how it takes on a role as an alternative romantic partner. This is the tendency to imagine behavior of non-human agents with human like characteristics and emotions (Epley et al., 2017), especially in the context of a lack of other companionship. Through this process, the doll changes from an object to a ‘she’ which is key to the relationship becoming more meaningful for participants. Stating how the doll is a ‘companion’, has a ‘warm personality’, and ‘smiles all the time’ speaks to the non-threatening and inviting character the owners create for their dolls. This is not merely a surface-level projection of warmth but may be beneficial for them as owners against a backdrop of perceived intimacy deficits and perceptions of themselves as ‘lonely’ (Participant 5). In this sense, the doll is treated with respect, likened to a real person, and is viewed as deserving of reciprocal care and compassion. Despite this, when participants refer to sexual situations, this anthropomorphism is often no longer exhibited:

I can get what I want immediately versus having someone be nudgy budgey. Because with someone else you have to respect them. Where if it's a doll, it doesn't have feelings. It can't do anything, it's just me. I can do whatever I want to it.

(Participant 1)

...there's no objection to doing anything. I enjoy doing anal sex but I've never had experience with any women who have wanted to do that where obviously with this, it's not a problem.

(Participant 7)

You can do what you want, with people you have to have consent if you want to do something naughty...I have done that to my dolls...I pissed all over it.

(Participant 2)

Referring to the doll as 'it' implies the doll is viewed equal to an object and a transition has occurred. The personality previously created is now absent and the doll is no longer humanized. Akin to Burr-Miller & Aoki (2013)'s findings, the power in the relationship between the owner and his doll is truly one sided due to owners being in control. Participant 1 recognizes that he can get sex 'immediately' with a doll which is contrasted against interactions with real women which involve a negotiated consent process. For participants here, viewing the doll as having no feelings and not requiring respect is important as this removes the possibility of participants feeling guilt towards their treatment of and interactions with the doll.

This resembles the neutralization theory proposed by Sykes and Matza (1957), and more recently corresponds to the means-goal conceptualization of objectification advanced by Orehek and Weaverling (2017). From a neutralization perspective, individuals relieve themselves of moral constraint when taking part in something unconventional or delinquent using techniques such as a denial of responsibility or a denial of a victim being associated with particular actions. We see the potential for such processes in Participant 1's statements of 'it can't do anything, it's just me' and 'it doesn't have feelings'. In stating 'I can do whatever I want to it', the doll is further seen as a means to an end, or a way of achieving a personal goal, consistent with objectification theory.

From a forensic perspective, these processes may appear worrying, with viewing women as sex objects and possessing sexual entitlement being two of five implicit theories that are supportive of sexual aggressions (Polaschek & Gannon, 2004; Polaschek & Ward, 2002; Szumski et al., 2018). In previous themes we also see evidence of a two further implicit theories – viewing women as unknowable, and the world as dangerous or hostile – suggesting that offense-supportive cognition is high among doll owners. This corresponds to recent quantitative work, which found higher levels of such implicit theories among doll owners than in a sample of non-owner comparators (Harper et al., 2022). However, in this quantitative work there was also, perhaps counter-intuitively from a theoretical perspective, a significantly lower proclivity of sexual aggression among doll owners.

The narratives presented here may shed some light on the context of this ostensibly paradoxical finding. Although doll owners do appear to have higher levels of implicit theories related to viewing women as unknowable (possibly due to repeated failed relationships), exaggerated levels of sexual entitlement, and viewing women as sex objects (possibly due to the on-demand nature of sexual gratification with their dolls), there is a very clear distinction being drawn between acceptable conduct with dolls versus real (living) women. This is perhaps best captured in the extracts from Participants 2 and 7, who express interests in urophilia and anal sex, respectively. These narratives highlight the necessity of consent from living partners to engage in such sexual activities, and that without this consent they have not been able to live out their fantasies. However, dolls offer the possibility to indulge potentially paraphilic fantasies, and to achieve full sexual satisfaction without harming others through coercion. That is not to say that doll owners desire coercion and that dolls are protective against otherwise inevitable sexual aggression. However, it may be indicative and supportive of the view that doll owners acknowledge the rarity of niche sexual interests and opt for commercially available alternatives as a way of

achieving sexual satisfaction. This is similar to the literature related to the use of pornography by men with niche interests or difficulties in accessing and maintaining satisfying intimate relationships (Bártová et al., 2021; Kohut & Campbell, 2019; Štulhofer et al., 2010). This supports the view that dolls do not appear to be risk enhancing, but rather may be owned and used functionally for emotional and sexual gratification, as required.

Theme 2.2. Living with stigma

Participants all shared similar experiences of stigmatization in relation to their ownership of dolls. Due to the doll being created for sexual purpose, there is an assumed belief by others that the function is purely related to this, which fuels negative stereotypes towards the owners.

The people I know, like my friends at church if they knew they would think I'm a dirty sinner...they would see it as a sin issue. Because of its purpose, they would hold it to the same tier as pornography and marriage before sex. I don't see the doll as the same thing because I bought it for the intention of having someone there [participant begins to cry].

(Participant 1)

Here Participant 1 shares his belief that his social group would view him as 'a dirty sinner' for his doll ownership. The use of 'dirty' in reference to the participants religious background is likely to hold connotations of impurity and deceit. The participant here is part of a Christian culture where virginity is viewed as sacred before marriage (Cornelius, 2015). Thus, if anyone was to find out about him owning a sex doll, they would likely view him as contravening a fundamental part of his faith. Through the interaction being akin to a 'sin' suggests the doll is perceived as harmful and an offence against God. This illustrates the risk the participant faces if his peers find out about his doll ownership. Consequently, he is likely to be ostracized as punishment for going against God's intentions. Participants exhibit

anticipated stigma, which is presumed to consist of the negative treatment they believe they will receive if others find out about their lifestyle, as they are aware of the negative stereotypes people hold already. Research has found that anticipated stigma is a strong predictor of psychological distress (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009) and decreased self-esteem (Berger et al., 2001), indicating that the effects of stigma are felt even if the individual is not personally targeted in a direct manner. This is evidenced when the participant becomes upset when reasoning with why they have the doll, stating how it was not for sexual function but to have ‘someone there’, echoing the previous theme and showing the ability of the doll to be a companion (see also Lancaster-James & Bentley, 2018; Levy, 2007; Valverde, 2012). It could also highlight how the participant feels lonely in their life, the church may be their only social group. Thus, the possibility of losing this group holds great risk for Participant 1. For other participants the effects of stigma were less specific, and more related to a perception that others might view their ownership of dolls as a perversion:

My dad said he found it disgusting. I don't know if it's the context he can only think of them as sex dolls and doesn't think of where people can have them as companions and lovers, or if he's just thinking "my son's just fucking this rubber woman" but he will not discuss it, and that in itself is really painful.

(Participant 3)

Participant 3 describes his father as rejecting of his doll usage through the perception of repulsion and disgust. The inference that his father thinks that he is ‘just fucking this rubber woman’ implies the belief that people might view his ownership of a doll as a form of sexual deviance. Such a perception may not be completely unfounded, with a range of academic literature viewing doll ownership through this lens (e.g., Danaher, 2019; Eskens, 2017; Richardson, 2016). The perception of repulsion causes emotional despair for Participant 3. Describing his father’s lack of engagement with him about his doll ownership

as ‘painful’ suggests that the participant feels misunderstood due to the view that his usage is purely sexual. This is particularly salient for Participant 3, who describes his relationship to the doll akin to marriage. As such, his father’s rejection and preconception of the doll is just a ‘rubber woman’ for sexual gratification downplays the significance that Participant 3 places on the relationship between himself and his doll. Family acceptance is critical in the process of accepting one’s own sexual identity (Shilo & Savaya, 2011) and has been found to be protective against depression (Ryan et al., 2010). This demonstrates how participants are more at risk of a diminished well-being by being stigmatized by others.

One guy at work actually thinks I’m a pervert. He goes “you’re a pervert for buying a sex doll!” and I’m like “why?” he goes “because you can’t go out and meet a real girl so you have to go out and buy a sex doll”. I was like “screw you buddy.”

(Participant 5)

The participants co-worker exhibits a stereotype found amongst literature where doll owners are perceived as socially inept and unable to form meaningful relationships with real women (Ferguson, 2014; Ray, 2016), as well as being sexually deviant (Danaher, 2019; Eskens, 2017; Richardson, 2016). Through calling the doll owner a ‘pervert’ illustrates the stigmatization occurring as a direct consequence of the dolls sexual function. That is, it is seen as abnormal, and so the doll owner is perceived in this way as a consequence. This serves as a contemporary example of how society is unaccepting of sexual diversity outside of the norm, with ‘doll owners as dysfunctional’ being found to be one factor underpinning social beliefs about the ownership of sex dolls (Harper et al., 2021). A range of emotions are stirred within an individual when experiencing stigma, including anger, hurt, and feelings of being degraded (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). This can often lead to aggressive responses, as evidenced Participant 5’s response of ‘screw you’.

Interactions such as these can have profound social implications, particularly in workplace contexts. If an individual is continually subjected to stigma from co-workers, there is an increased potential for deepened hostility, experiences of low job satisfaction, and increased psychological distress (Sloan, 2012). This is due to the fact people rely heavily upon the workplace to fulfil social needs (Morrison & Nolan, 2007). For the participants in our sample, hiding their lifestyle was seen as one way to protect themselves from the mistreatment of others:

I don't tell...all those sly comments you'd probably get because that's why straight away I was like...right that's it I'm not telling anybody. If someone comes I'll hide her.

(Participant 8)

The doll to me, tends to be very clandestine because a lot of guys have been dodged or suffered abuses because of the words of other people.

(Participant 4)

The desire to keep doll ownership a secret occurs through observation of the treatment of others. Although these participants have not directly experienced stigma, they choose to keep their dolls a secret from those that they know. This is perceived as an easier option due to the negative implications experienced by others where, as Participant 4 suggests, they have 'suffered abuses'. This is likely to represent physical, verbal, and online abuse indicating the extent to which doll owners are outcasted by society. By hiding their identities, these participants can be in a position where they can directly witness the disparagement of their stigmatized group (Wahl, 1999). It is therefore unsurprising many choose to remain silent about their lifestyle as they are aware of the potential consequences.

Conclusions

In this paper we have presented what we believe to be the first phenomenological analysis of the ownership of sex dolls. In doing so we have been able to begin to formulate an initial profile of sex doll ownership that is concordant with emergent survey-based work. Among our sample, doll ownership appears to have been a functional response to perceived deficits in both owners and real partners. As outlined in the first superordinate theme, this leads to dolls being perceived as the ‘perfect’ partner, which is non-threatening, accepting of self-perceived inadequacies among owners, and reflective of the ideals of sexual attractiveness. Consistent with Harper et al. (2022), the doll owners in our sample had a tendency to have a history of poor quality or broken relationships. Specifically, seven of the nine participants were single at the time of their interview, with three of these reporting divorce. Participants saw real women as being difficult to understand and hostile, which led them to seek safety in dolls. Coupled with their habitual use of dolls for sexual gratification, participants also reported anticipated discomfort with the notion that real women could be sexually attractive to them, especially in light of the customizability of dolls with regard to their physical appearance (see also Hernandez, 2018; Ray, 2016).

Importantly, though, is the observation that participants did not simply blame women for their past difficulties. In their narratives, the men in our sample highlighted perceived deficits within themselves (e.g., interaction difficulties, and low sexual self-esteem) that led to them struggling to maintain intimate relationships. As such their dolls became a surrogate for intimacy, and a non-living partner for them to practice building such skills with (Epley et al., 2007). In the second superordinate theme, we were able to elicit how owners draw a distinction between their dolls and real women. This is at-odds with legal and sociological arguments that suggest doll ownership as a risk-enhancing behavior associated with sexual objectification and aggression (Carvalho Nascimento et al., 2018; Danaher et al., 2017, 2019;

Eskens, 2017; Puig, 2017). Although there was some degree of objectification of dolls in relation to sexual gratification in participant narratives, the men in this sample were explicit in their statements about this not extending to real women, and cited the need for consent in such sexual interactions with living partners. In some cases, the ownership of a doll was again a functional response to a lack of available consenting partners to engage in specific (sometimes paraphilic) sexual behaviors. As such, we do not find any evidence in the data in this study that supports the view that doll ownership is supportive of sexual aggression or the objectification of real women (see also Harper et al., 2022).

None of our analysis suggests that doll ownership is exclusively positive. Indeed, it is possible that the engagement with dolls may worsen participants' actual or perceived social inadequacies and exacerbate their difficulties when interacting with real women. This may occur through the further avoidance of real socialization due to the illusion of having a substitute for sexual and intimate satisfaction (Facchin et al. 2017), with the subsequent effect of increasing social isolation through a self-perpetuating cycle. However, although this may not be viewed as an exclusively positive pattern of ownership, it does appear to be functional for those in the current sample. These relationships may support the use of dolls in therapeutic contexts to build up social competence and sexual self-esteem (see also Eichenberg et al., 2019).

The study is not without limitation, primarily related to the reliance on self-reported experiences to understand doll ownership. In this context, it is possible that the experiences reported by participants may be influenced by biases related to social desirability. This is particularly the case in relation to socially-maligned phenomena such as the ownership of sex dolls. However, such concern may be alleviated by the honesty of participants in relation to their interactions with both their dolls and real women. We were also unable to see participants through our use of anonymous interviews (i.e., audio-online Skype calls, and

email). This poses difficulties in some of the more interpretative elements of the method we use as we were unable to pick up on non-verbal cues in participants' behavior. Nonetheless, this was a necessary trade-off in relation to accessing such a sample for this initial exploratory study, and methodologists working on IPA have suggested that visible cues are often not necessary for maintaining data quality in such interviews (Curasi, 2001; Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

In closing, this analysis sheds new light on the experience of sex doll ownership that is either missing from legal and sociological rhetorical arguments, or not possible to elicit from the use of standardized psychometric testing via surveys. Our data fit with a functional account of doll ownership, with dolls helping their owners to achieve a sense of emotional and sexual satisfaction that they perceive as being unattainable through other means. We further find no evidence of increase sexual risk among doll owners, with them making a clear distinction between the need for consent for sexual activity with a living partner and a doll. Future research should explore these concepts more comprehensively, and through longitudinal designs. That is, although we believe that dolls may be serving a useful function in relation to emotional and sexual satisfaction, we can only make that conclusion with longitudinal data showing a change over time that is associated with the purchase of a doll. Moving forward, we ultimately hope to see more evidence-based discussions about the functional use of dolls, rather than the academic and legal impulse to make moralistic arguments based on the potential effects of dolls on sexual and emotional functioning.

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