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Gendered Synthetic Love: Real Dolls and the Construction of Intimacy

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Gendered Synthetic Love: Real Dolls and the Construction of Intimacy

Abstract

Real Dolls are life-size, anatomically correct figures. Except for their lifelessness, they are made to look and feel like humans. The availability of Real Dolls allows us to examine the social significance of relationships and gender expectations in a new light. In this paper, we are interested in how the Real Dolls are being offered and accepted as alternative partners. Specifically, we examine the relationship between the commodification of the body and the agency individuals have to create intimacy and connection. We conducted an exploratory content analysis of the customer testimonials on the Real Doll website. Results suggest that the Dolls fit into the stereotypical ideal beauty and promote the commodification of bodies. Buyers use these Dolls not just for sexual gratification but are also used for emotional support. The consequences of these attachments are discussed.

Keywords

real dolls, relationships, gender expectations, body commodification, individual agency, intimacy

Disciplines

Gender and Sexuality | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology

GENDERED SYNTHETIC LOVE: REAL DOLLS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTIMACY

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Real Dolls are life-size, anatomically correct figures. Except for their lifelessness, they are made to look and feel like humans. The availability of Real Dolls allows us to examine the social significance of relationships and gender expectations in a new light. In this paper, we are interested in how the Real Dolls are being offered and accepted as alternative partners. Specifically, we examine the relationship between the commodification of the body and the agency individuals have to create intimacy and connection. We conducted an exploratory content analysis of the customer testimonials on the Real Doll website. Results suggest that the Dolls fit into the stereotypical ideal beauty and promote the commodification of bodies. Buyers use these Dolls not just for sexual gratification but are also used for emotional support. The consequences of these attachments are discussed.

Introduction

“In its own way, the film encourages us to look beyond the surface when we are dealing with people—even when those people are made of silicone—and if you can look past the movie’s naughty-sounding premise, *Lars and the Real Girl* just might be one of the more heart-warming and redemptive experiences you’ll have at the theatre this year” (Chattaway 2007).

“*Love Object* owes apologies to women, men, computer geeks, sex dolls and the concept of satire. That’s just for starters” (Meyer 2004).

Despite the radical difference in plot and genre of the two films (family vs. horror, respectively), *Lars and the Real Girl* and *Love Object*

share a common theme: a shy man seeking companionship with a Real Doll as a substitute for a human being. A Real Doll making its debut on the big screen signifies increasing fascination of the possibility of a human's relationship with non-humans. In fact, in his book entitled *Love + Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*, Levy (2007) suggests the possibilities of such relationships, with Real Dolls being considered a version of a "robot."

According to Levy (2007), Matt McMullen, a California sculptor, launched his first Doll in 1996 after receiving requests for such a product while working in a Halloween-mask industry. The Dolls are manufactured in "a windowless Abyss production factory [with] no company sign. Nothing on the outside reveals the sex Dolls manufactured by craftsmen behind the grey-brown walls" (Hossli and Huber, 2004).

Real Dolls represent an interesting phenomenon as many lament the erosion of meaningful connections and relationships that our fast paced, high tech world has fostered. Yet, some people prefer less emotionally intimate relationships. Real Dolls may allow for a "relationship" without the complexity and emotional vulnerability that accompanies human social interaction and intimacy. The desire for sexual interactions without a human connection assisted in the development of sex toys. The availability and wide use of the internet as well as the lucrative adult industry have paved the way for sex toys as partner. Real Dolls represent a more complete version of these toys, "a life-size anatomically correct silicone Doll" (O'Brien, 2007). But is attachment with these Dolls possible? And, if so, what might this attachment mean for iDollators and for others in their lives?

Previous research regarding human-nonhuman relationships focusing on pets demonstrates how connections arise from our social constructions and treatment of objects (Wyre, 2009). Certainly, pets and objects (e.g., Dolls) are different, but they illustrate key theoretical points in their similarities as non-human objects of attachment. Pets are adored and often given human qualities by their owners. We suggest that Real Dolls are similarly cherished and imbued with human characteristics. Both pets and Real Dolls fill emotional and psychological needs for their owners. They may also both be the objects of abuse, neglect, or indifference. In his discussion of interspecies relationships, Tuan notes that pets may take on the

role of “diminished beings or personal belongings that one can take delight in, play with, or set aside as one wishes” (Wyre, 2009:1040). Importantly, animals can play an active, albeit limited, role in shaping relationships with humans. Dolls cannot so they are more susceptible to a dominance/affection relationship model (Wyre, 2009). For the purposes of the present exploration, the analogy highlights humans’ ability to form meaningful attachments (even if not positively sanctioned) to nonhumans or objects.

Basing his reasoning about material possession attachment, Levy (2007) argues that love can exist between humans and non-humans. In his interpretation, “Attachment to a material possession can develop into a stronger relationship as a result of the possession’s repeated use and the owner’s interaction with it... As we use it, play with it, and so forth, we get to know it, and gradually it might become less and less a commodity, more and more a part of our life” (Levy 2007: 28). From an attachment perspective, Hazen and Shaver (1994:10) note that “romantic love includes elements of attachment, caregiving, and sexuality, the self-attribution that one is ‘in love’ may result from noticing that another person is especially responsive, needs to be taken care of, or is a sexual ‘turn-on.’”

Research also suggests that individuals with insecure attachment levels are more likely to use withdrawal tactics from social relationships, have trouble maintaining relationships, and more likely to physically abuse their partner (Rogers *et al.*, 2005). It notes that “abuse becomes instrumental in the struggle for control of the relationship,” and “acquiring more power in a relationship means acquiring more” (Rogers *et al.*, 2005: 249).

Loving an inanimate object potentially allows individuals to gain power over the relationship. The lack of response from inanimate love objects may allow individuals to attribute meanings and reinterpret the situations however they choose. Such attributions allow them maximum control over the relationship. Being turned-on by inanimate objects to the point of wanting a relationship with them is akin to having a fetish. Research has established that some individuals may choose a potential partner based solely on, or have a strong preference for, one aspect, such as hair color or race (Phua and Kaufman, 2003), while others are aroused by particular pieces of clothing (e.g., leather outfits or silk lingerie) (Phua and Caras, 2008).

Unlike conventional sex toys, such as dildos, that only represent one part of a body, Real Dolls are life-size Dolls that are anatomically correct. Except for their lifelessness, they look and feel like real people. Thus, they offer an interesting basis on which to think and theorize about how men (and women) form sexual scripts and reinforce sexual identities. Through analysis of the BBC documentary, *Guys and Dolls*, Burr- Miller and Aoko (2016) explore Real Dolls as a site where heteronormativity may be constructed and displayed. Their analysis concentrates on how the documentary (media) frames these men's sexuality. Their presentation of the four case studies (i.e., four men highlighted in *Guys and Dolls*) and the themes that were developed are certainly applicable to our analysis of Real Doll owner's testimonials, and these connections are highlighted below.

In this paper, we are interested in how the Real Dolls are being offered and accepted, by some, as alternative partners. How attachments are formed and whether these "relationships" are empowering or ultimately problematic. Specifically, we seek to assess the meanings consumers of Real Dolls attach to their new "partners" and what type of relationship narrative they construct. Based on this data, we will examine theoretical linkages between the commodification of the body and the agency individuals have to create connections and intimacy, and how individuals validate their unique love interest.

Data and Methods

This exploratory content analysis paper is based on 68 customer testimonials from the Real Doll website from 2006 to 2016. Because of the small number of published testimonials we were able to include all cases from the sampling frame in our analysis. In terms of demographics, we do not have data on the race/ethnicity or age of the authors of these testimonials. In terms of sex, it appears that 4 of the 68 individuals who submitted testimonials during this timeframe were female. We based our conclusion on several factors. Many times, customers offer a traditionally male name (their actual name or a pseudonym), such as Jack. We also inferred from their narratives, e.g., if they mentioned their genital type, or referred to themselves using masculine nouns (e.g., "I turned to toys for men"), or other clues to their sex (e.g., "I have been looking for a long time

and finally found a way to satisfy my anal fetish, not gay, just have that thing"). We realize we are coding here for sex (i.e., biological assignment based on chromosomes and genitals) not gender (i.e., one's social identity that may or may not be consistent with their biological sex), and that we may be wrong in our assumptions and/or, misinterpreted one's narrative in this regard.

Interestingly, of the identifiable testimonials written by women in our sample, one woman had been fascinated with the Dolls for years after viewing a documentary about them and bought Brooklyn for her husband as a 5th year anniversary present (a radical departure from the commonly suggested wood and silverware gift). Another described her admiration and practical use of her artist boyfriend's Doll: "He needed a female that could stay posed for paintings and the Real Doll never moves out of a pose. I am also a fan of your products, I could use them to model my attire and help decide what to wear (Testimonial 2016). Unlike the other women, who were coupled at the time of their submission, Susannah is a single woman who purchased Nate because she needed "someone to hold" (Testimonial 2013).

We printed every testimonial available on the Real Doll website (N=68). Analyses were conducted using a grounded-theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To this end, each testimonial was systematically reviewed for emerging and recurrent themes. Testimonial coding was conducted by two co-authors of this paper (DC and VP). Testimonials were re-read several times to familiarize ourselves with the data and to develop initial codes. Testimonials were initially coded for descriptive categories and then focused coding was used to hone themes and develop analytic categories (Charmaz, 1983). We strived for latent coding, or uncovering meanings imbedded in the testimonials. We used an inductive approach where we examined the text for themes, rather than using a predetermined coding scheme to guide our reading. Although informed by previous literature, we are less concerned with formulating hypotheses; rather we concentrated on theoretical issues that stemmed from the data.

In order to retain the language and tone used by those submitting testimonials, excerpts are presented verbatim and have not been corrected for spelling errors, grammatical errors, or colloquial terms.

An Overview of the Real Doll Website: Normative Beauty

The website offers a variety of Real Dolls: RealDoll Classic; RealDoll2, Male RealDoll2, Wicked RealDoll; Boy Toy Dolls, and Hybrid Dolls. Consumers can either purchase a pre-configured Doll or design their own by selecting various body part options. In 2016, female preconfigured Dolls ranged from \$5,499- \$8,198 each, and the male Dolls from \$5,999 to \$6,299, plus additional shipping costs ranging from \$550-\$900 (RealDoll.com 2016).

For consumers who desire to design their own Dolls, ten body types are available for female RealDoll classic model; five for the female RealDoll2 version, and two for male RealDoll2¹ (for examples, see Table 1). In addition, consumers may purchase options including skin tones, eye-liner color, and pubic hair style. In short, within limits of availability and affordability, customers could literally design his (or her) ideal partner.

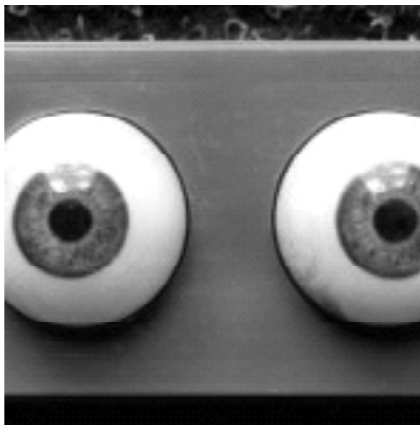
The gendered nature of the website is apparent. The company offers more choices of female body types, faces, and features than for the male Dolls. The website features 96 preconfigured Dolls: 87 females and nine males. The site targets heterosexual men more than heterosexual women or gay men, considering the options for the Dolls.

The Real Dolls are manufactured and portrayed on the website as perfection and ideal beauty. There are only thin Dolls with accentuated sexual features throughout most of the website. Illustration is found in the studio section of the website, which has tables of weights, heights, body types, and bust sizes of the Dolls. This is consistent with Bhugra's (2000: 72) contention that there are only a "few universal standards of sexual attractiveness," and physical beauty of females has more "explicit consideration" than males. According to Goode and Preissler (1983), standards of beauty are "monolithic rather than pluralistic," which creates uniformity to what the "ideal" beauty is and what is not. The Real Doll website conforms to current societal standards of beauty by offering slender, large breasted female Dolls. While changes have been made over time (e.g., the introduction of Wicked Real Dolls which feature a more complex racial mix), the objectification and erotization of the Dolls remain.

Commodification: Manufacturing Bodies



In 2015, a self-identified “gay girl” with a female foot fetish wrote: “These [feet] feel soooo life like and they are super tan and brown and also look like a creamy African American skin tone which is what I wanted...Ebony feet and with the pink nails her toe color can match my toe painted color they are so silky smooth and wide soles.”



Regarding his eye purchase, another client from Luxembourg submitted, “Well protected in a small storage box these resin eyes are a real masterpiece. Very fine veins and a highly detailed iris together with the deep black pupil gives a realistic impression from the human eye. I love them and I’m proud to post a picture here to show them for interested Doll lovers” (Testimonial 2014).

Real Dolls represent a clear commodification of body parts as a customer has the power to pick and choose what he/she wants to create the Doll (or in their view perhaps, person) that he/she wants. The standard and "custom" options, give customers the choice to make the "perfect" or "ideal" woman or man. As noted, customers have more options for female Dolls: different body types, hair-style choices, skin tones for their Doll. Other options include, but are not limited to, hair color, eye color, eye liner, and eye shadow.

Choosing their Doll's (partner's) bodies, features, make-up, allows men to create their sexual and aesthetic ideal. Moreover, they are able to have a range of partners posing various personalities and, perhaps, concomitant sexual propensities. In 2006, an enthusiastic testimonial (replete with multiple exclamation points after nearly every sentence), described how his Doll allows him multiple options to explore intimacy:

I have several faces and several wigs for (my Doll, Sandy). That in combination with a wide variety of wardrobes allows me to be with any fantasy girl I desire!!!! So very liberating!! I can have a HOT dominatrix, a sweet innocent girl next door, a cute shopaholic who loves the clubs at night! A sweet fairy. A rich girl who only wants the best. A hot business woman, hot Bikini babe!!... the list is endless!!!! The folks at Abyss ...really know what they are doing and you can trust assured you're going to get the girl (Doll) of your dreams!!!! Having a Real Doll has opened up wonderful new experiences for me and has given me a wonderful peace of mind I could only dream of!!!

While male Dolls have other similar options such as skin tone and hair color, their options are fewer than those for female Dolls. The site has expanded their offer of sexual parts over the years. For example, consumers now have five penis sizes to choose from rather than three. In addition, for female Dolls there are different sized oral and vaginal inserts as well as thirteen public hair options. The availability of these options is consistent with Phua and Caras's (2008) research on sex workers that some clients look for certain types, sizes, and shapes of body parts as their determining factors before purchasing services. Bodybuilding offers another example of breaking the body into parts for targeted perfecting. According to Klein (1993:102, 189), "[l]ess widely recognized as a mechanism for distinguishing status among competitors is the notion of subdividing the body into parts and the corresponding claim of superiority in that part... [which] feeds our current cultural view of the body as "partible" and "bounded." The bodybuilder's perception

of the body as being made up of parts (chest, abs, back, arms, legs) and subdivided (“traps” [trapezius], front and rear “delts” [deltoids]) fits this partible notion perfectly.” In the case of owning a Real Doll, a customer is not modifying his or her body like a bodybuilder. Rather, they are choosing and assembling ideal features and body parts and creating an ideal partner. As a Floridian customer noted: “The makeup for my Doll was perfectly painted to give that personal touch...just what I was looking for. The custom color on the nipples I requested was flawless and couldn’t have asked for a better duplication” (Testimonial 2010).

Synthetic Love Affairs: Re-defining Intimacy

Avoiding stigmatizing ‘sex toy’ label

In order to abate the potentially deviant status of sex toy, many consumers likened their Dolls to “works of art.” The company and the customers alike refer to the realistic and life-like traits of the Dolls. Further, the company provides names for their Dolls, such as Elena and Jenny, in a likely attempt to “humanize” these life size figures. One consumer posted, “I happily received my Real Doll... and she arrived in perfect condition. She is just amazing. I am astounded by how realistic she looks and feels. She is beyond a doubt a beautiful work of art” (Testimonial 2007). Another customer wrote, “I received my RD2 on Thursday, June 5th, a date which I’ll remember and celebrate each year. My Doll exceeded my highest expectations in every way. She looks even more realistic in person...I could not be more delighted (Testimonial 2015). A testimonial from an English buyer posted in 2010, reads:

Seeing her ‘in the flesh’ her fantasy figure is very believable, and facially she looks more “real” than real people (How did that happen?). From every angle she looks convincingly life-like. I am 100% satisfied with the order and am amazed you were able to create something so realistic, just from the choices I made on the order form.

Another customer wrote, “I do not classify these Dolls as an adult sex toy but a work of art. The Abyss team members are real artists and masters of their craft. It is no wonder that your products are displayed in museums” (Testimonial 2008). This man was quick to note in the following sentence of his testimonial that he “does not see them as replacing real women, but they do come close to looking and feeling like the real thing!” (Testimonial 2008).

From the Physical to Emotional: Establishing Comfort and Connections

The relationships and attachment that customers have with the Doll are evident when they discuss their Doll's ethereal beauty and "personality". As noted, customers typically refer to their Dolls by name and talk about how extraordinarily beautiful and finely crafted they are. Further, many mention the fun they have with their Doll and how interacting with the Doll is often better than with humans. Indeed, the attachment and relationships customers have with Real Dolls can be gleaned in the iDollators' narratives, as many of the customers discuss what they do with the Doll or how they feel upon finding their Doll "waiting" for them when they arrive home from work. In analyzing the testimonials, we found that customers commonly bestow lifelike qualities on their Dolls, and this process appears to foster feeling of closeness and connection. For many the impact seems to begin early on in the "relationship." As two recent clients succinctly put it:

"My Doll arrived four days ago and my home has a new, warm feeling to it" (Testimonial 2016).

"Beautiful girl that now graces my home and makes me feel wonderful in more ways than sexually" (Testimonial 2016).

As noted, these Dolls very much look and feel like real people. But, of course, they are not and they lack the most crucial of human attributes for sustaining social relationships—ability to think, feel, and engage. Yet, many iDollators discuss their Dolls and experiences in ways that demonstrate how they perceive the disposition of their synthetic partner. One man, identified as a composer and artist, wrote, "It's easy to imagine her personality... Actually looking as if she's alive. Combine this with her tactile charm and the overall effect is quite extraordinary" (Testimonial 2006).

The use of the adjectives "comfortable" and "warm," as well as the common refrain of "feeling at home" is indicative of the ways in which these individuals are framing their relationships with their Real Doll and the conferred emotional attachment. The following testimonial illustrates these themes:

What a delight it is to have her in my house here with me... I find myself admiring her adorable looks quite often. I've lived alone by choice since my divorce...strangely enough, *my house feels a bit different to me now* though. It feels more "lived in", more, well, let's just say she provides a certain

“something” that’s not easy to describe but it’s like *a warm feeling, a comfortable feeling, a feeling of home, I’m glad she’s here* (emphasis added, Testimonial 2015).

As noted, for many, their Doll appears to take on the role of a partner who meets their visceral physical, emotional, and psychological needs, in the addition to the sexual. Customers were quick to praise the Dolls’ beauty and ability to transcend sexual purposes. One man remarked: “Not only are RealDolls sexy, but they have a very sweet and endearing quality that is truly captivating!! They are more than just a sex Doll. They are more than just a work of art!! They have a “presence”; they are soft, sweet, cuddly, endearing, sexy, and more” (Testimonial, 2006). Another man writes, “What a companion she is! A joy to care for and emotional support!” (Testimonial 2010). Interestingly, the men who posted testimonials are more inclined to highlight these emotional factors than the purely sexual uses of their Doll.

In fact the sexual nature of the Dolls is much less discussed in the Testimonials. For example, only two noted the sexual pleasure/gratification they received from their Doll. One man wrote, “The sex never ends” (Testimonial 2011). In the most explicit sexual testimonial, an iDollator explained his satisfaction with his Doll:

I have been looking for a long time and finally found a way to satisfy my anal fetish, not gay, just have that thing. Ordered this and right away was amazed and spent a full hour playing. The vibration makes me shudder with excitement.... I was super excited when I found out the shipping was here as fast as it arrived, and got rock hard when I took it out of the driver’s hands, pure and utter joy!

...With some fast thumb rolling I could get the selector to make short vibrations and fast changes in the vibration, just enough to make my eyes roll in the back of my head. Straight away the cock was a pleasure and my prostate was stimulated like never before, had me precumming hard (Testimonial 2014).

This man resembled the narrative of Mike presented by Burr-Miller and Aoki (2013:395), who “most clearly of all the men proclaims the use of his RD [RealDoll] for masturbatory purposes.”

The relative lack of explicitly sexual accounts may well reflect the interpretation of the Testimonial section of the website.² Interestingly, though, aside from these few cases, connection and romance are more prominent than sex in the testimonials. Indeed, testimonials often stressed that the Dolls represent “more than sex toys.”

In 2006, in his 600-word testimonial, a man from Germany relayed his story of finding Real Dolls and initiating his purchase. His narrative reveals a poignant example of the role an object may serve for men who appear unable to form intimate relationships with women:

She's just a Doll, but as I never had a real close relationship, she's a bit more, some level of its own, somewhere in between a Doll and a real girl. Well, it seems like I ended up as a lone star, and somehow I could never get this beauty goddess I always hoped to bump into someday... But Abyss gave me this Doll, the closest thing to my ideal female beauty I have. *This one will even allow me to kiss and hug her, to even have sex with her.* As I lack the comparison to real girls, for me its best sex I ever had!...Even if she's just a Doll, I'd never want to miss her... Sure Dolls aren't perfect *yet* and a real life version Vanessa would be even better... but the Doll version is the best alternative I found. But it's not about sex alone... you can *enjoy their presence* (Testimonial 2006, emphasis added).

He explains that in lieu of the quest for "Mrs. Right" he has a "good alternative": "If Mrs. Right still doesn't show up, the Doll family may grow, because Dolls can alleviate loneliness quite a bit. This stupid urge to find Mrs. Right at all costs is gone, so I will find her one day, or not. Until then, Dolls are a good alternative and an amazing thing to have." Similarly, a recent Real Doll customer said:

"I've had Linda... going on two years now. She's been a dazzling presence in my life – a captivating beauty, fun, inspiring, just all around wonderful. Something magical happens when you gaze into her eyes; at the end of a long day she is there waiting for me and everything just seems right.... If this is love, it is a love that will definitely last!" (Testimonial 2016).

It is impossible to know if his reference to love is a quip or not, but this man certainly has found something in his Doll that transcends the relationship that most of us have with inanimate objects. Another man referred to the "lasting relationship": "After picking my jaw up off the floor and taking her out of the crate I knew she was finally mine to cherish forever" (Testimonial 2015).

The theme of the *presence* these Dolls brought into the lives of their owners was pervasive. Certainly, their lifelike traits fostered this quality: "I sleep with my Doll every night after I warm her up with an electric blanket and I swear it's almost like having a real person next to me....it's not just a new exciting toy. The enjoyment doesn't just end after a few weeks. I have had mine for a few months and like I said I am going to get another one" (Testimonial 2015). As

Burr-Miller and Aoki (2013) describe, the Dolls provide a connection and solution to men's loneliness. The authors introduce us to Everard whose fear of loneliness and lack of success with women inspired him to purchase several Real Dolls (Burr-Miller and Aoki, 2013). Similarly, the testimonials we analyzed describe the Dolls as the antidote to social isolation:

I have purchased three of the most beautiful forms of art I have ever seen. To just look at these Dolls makes my heart melt. I truly love them from within. The presents and feeling they bring into my home is extraordinary. I have a very active social life and enjoy being around others very much. My time with my Dolls is very special and when I display them around my home. It's a very private time. Each Doll is so very beautiful in their own way. I never feel alone when my Dolls are displayed... it's as if someone is actually with me when they are in the room. I am very attached to these Dolls in many ways that cannot be explained (Testimonial 2014).

Another submitted:

Two years ago today my beautiful real Doll arrived ... and my life has changed. Jenny's presence has had a dramatically positive effect on me psychologically and emotionally. A far more positive effect that I had ever expected. During this time I have done many things that I would never have done if I did not have Jenny. I cannot recall any other purchase that has given me so much enjoyment as this sweet angel (Testimonial 2008).

The notion that his "sweet angel" has presumably allowed him to engage in social life in ways he may not have been able before is fairly remarkable.

A man from Belgium posted a note describing not only how satisfied he is with his purchase but how the Doll serves to relieve his solitude: "The reasons why I decided to buy a Doll were various: I was (pretty happy) single, but once I realised this Doll could really make a difference to a life of solitude, I started searching the net. I came out by Abyss." He then recalls a letter he wrote to customer service explaining his elation as well as his transition from admiration to familiarity with his Doll:

She is so much, much more beautiful than I expected from the face-picture taken on her birthday. I read testimonials, saw documentaries, etc. but it is really astonishing how this is possible. She's here now for approximately 4 hours and every time I walk in the room I get a little scare as if someone's really sitting there. ... We are some days further now and I can say: it is getting better and better. The things you discover... The things you can or must do: go shopping for her, taking care of her (washing, powdering), dressing her up, moving her... Kissing her, caressing her, cuddle her, laying next to her, holding her hand, brushing her wig,... too much to mention :-)... no picture can capture

her beauty and her sweetness. I am so happy to have her with me! (Testimonial 2010).

The language used by these men indicates their emotional connection to the Doll. We are led to wonder whether these men may share a psychological predisposition as well. A connection between the use of Real Dolls and Asperger's Disorder was briefly explored in the National Geographic documentary *Strange Love*. Diagnostic criteria for this form of autism include "lack of social or emotional reciprocity" and a "lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interest or achievements with other people, (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest to other people)" (DSM V 2013). This clinical description highlights the barriers posed to individuals with Asperger's in forming and maintaining intimate relationships. Males are more susceptible to Asperger's than are females (Ozbayrak, 2010). While beyond the scope of the current study, we would be remiss not to note the potential relationship between iDollators and Autism.

Connections through Carework

The above 2010 testimonial excerpt indicates this man's need to care for someone; he seems to take pleasure in the upkeep and maintenance of his new companion. Indeed, a few Doll owners noted this shift from sexual partner to companion with the tending and care work that is part of that relationship. As an injured veteran noted as part of his lengthy testimonial: "...At first I was using my Doll as a normal guy in his early 30's would, but then I started to find myself buying clothes, lingerie, and, heck, giving her a bath and powdering her was therapeutic." Another iDollator wrote,

She's coming to life for me, I want to take care for her all the time. Yes, my life has been become much fuller. I'm so excited about her, I can't help it. I want to thank all of you Abyss Creations people for the happiness that you brought into my life! And I promise that I will take good care of her (Testimonial 2013).

The Dolls require washing and maintenance, and several men expressed this tending as part of the appeal. In 2014, a customer wrote: "Although monthly cleaning and maintenance can be challenging at times (mostly due to her weight), I find it rather enjoyable. Taking care of her instills a sense of pride and closeness, especially when powdering her skin. It's hard to describe why, think of it like rubbing sunscreen or lotion on your wife/girlfriend... best

comparison I can think of. I understand now why these are love Dolls and not just sex toys, *I enjoy the time I spend with her* even when it's not for sex" (Testimonial 2014, emphasis added).

The caring labor theme that emerged in many of the testimonials was somewhat surprising given the erotic nature of the Real Doll website. The care entailed cleaning the Dolls for sanitation and use purposes, but caring also involved the aesthetic via accessorizing. As one man noted: "I enjoy buying my Doll things. I have about 5 to 6 outfits for her and it's been a learning curve. The only thing is I am not sure what size Bra to buy, I spent 80 bucks on one bra and it just didn't seem to fit right" (Testimonial 2015). Purchasing clothes and other items is one way we take care of others. As one man said of his "Vampire Goddess, Gabrielle": "I have spent tons of money on her and spoiled her rotten with all kinds of accessories from fancy clothes to jewelry ... One day I just mite marry her and just maybe she will star in a movie" (Testimonial 2013).

A customer who identified himself as Jack said, "My Melissa Doll is now two years old and I'm just so happy with her and *she loves to dress up* in her skirts and blouses, hope you enjoy the picture" (emphasis added, Testimonial 2016). Of course, *he* enjoys dressing *her*, but his narrative gives his Doll abilities and tastes— human qualities.

Discussion

The adult entertainment industry, including print and video pornography, strip clubs, and sex toys, has grown dramatically and generates up to \$15 billion annually (Rosen, 2013). Debates around the liberating versus exploitive nature of sex and sexuality, including pornography, exotic dancing, and prostitution are not new and incite great scholarly debate (e.g., Gerassi, 2015; Peterson-Iyer, 1998; Trautner, 2005). Of course, in this case we are not talking about a human dyad (e.g., man as consumer and women as sex worker), but are considering a representation of a sexual being. Taking an optimistic view, the Real Doll offers a sex partner with no strings attached, and many of the customers appear to be substituting them for relationships and becoming emotionally connected to their Dolls. While the use of a Doll as a sexual companion is considered taboo in American society, the use of inanimate objects such as vibrators for sexual activity has become less stigmatized over time (Bhugra, 2000).

Indeed, sexual norms shift with social, economic, and cultural change, indicating flexibility when it comes to attitudes towards sex and sexuality (Bhugra, 2000). Thus, attitudes towards Real Dolls may shift in time as well.

Like other products that we feel have improved our quality of life, the Real Doll may be considered a technological advancement. As one owner noted, "I wish I could buy one every year since they *keep getting better* like cars or computers" (Testimonial 2007). Technology may foster agency and one may interpret the Real Dolls as offering potential buyers the ability to create the ideal partner. Creating the Real Doll partner is similar to other avenues to intimacy, such as online dating, in that one can specify traits ranging from race/ethnicity, to hair color, to preferred sexual activities. In both instances, the individual can do so without repercussion of face-to-face confrontation in the screening process (e.g., Bartoş *et al.*, 2009; Phua, 2002). They are, however, different in that customers are far less limited by the combination of traits they can request in a partner.

On the other hand, these attachments have potentially negative implications. Relationship and attachment were common themes. Real Doll customers used terms and phrases including "companion," "lover," "friend," "realistic," "life-like," and being in "love" with the Doll. These characterizations may create a fantasy world that the customer may eventually have trouble coming out of, and could affect the relationships she or he has with humans. This is consistent with Komter's (2001) conclusion that objects play an active role in creating, maintaining, disturbing or destroying human relationships through the owner's attachment to the object.

Further, there are a few reasons to think these products reinforce the objectification of women's bodies and the larger social ideology of sexism. In this industry, "women" are being literally ordered by assembling desired body parts. While the same argument can be made for male Dolls, there are relatively fewer male Dolls and female consumers. Second, in these "relationships" the female voice is silenced. The power and control in the relationship is truly one sided. As Burr-Miller and Aoki (2013:394) assert, [these men] pick out her clothes... do her makeup, decide when she's tired, sexually excited, and they determine what she is thinking—they are her voice". The Doll is an inanimate object, and even though most of the men in this sample attributed human characteristics to them, the female

'partners' are still unable to feel pain or discomfort from various sexual acts and usages. Might this be problematic in reinforcing sexual exploitation and violence? The Doll "can take it rough"—there are no sounds, no resistance, etc. Recall the man quoted above in reference to his Doll, Sandy: "[she] lets me enjoy her whenever and however I need."

A feminist concern has been the onslaught of media material, including film, video games, music, and advertising that has distorted healthy sexuality and has portrayed images of women's vulnerability, pain, and exploitation as sexy. In such representations women shift from subjects to objects, no becomes yes, and female bodies become means for male pleasure. While violence and exploitation were not expressed in the testimonials we examined, and caring was highlighted by many, power should not be overlooked as a key aspect of intimate relationships in patriarchal society. The ways in which these men are able to control these synthetic bodies and the relationship, even in the context of caring work, is not the antithesis of dominance. As Wyre (2009) notes in her paper on petness, affection may sometimes be the softer side of dominance.

Objectification and control are highlighted in Burr-Miller and Aoki's (2013) analysis of the BBC Real Doll documentary. Describing Gordon, who is involved with two Real Dolls, they write:

Gordon's discourse about women and his understanding of his RD is reminiscent of the classic virgin/whore dichotomy. Women are not Gordon's equals. In fact, in order to gain Gordon's approval they cannot even be real women. ... Gordon's rejection of heteronormativity (via the rejection of real women) is what allows him to express his sense of being a real man (Burr-Miller and Aoki, 2013: 395).

If these men transition into relationships with women, be they committed or casual, then how might the social construction of their "fake" partner translate into the treatment of their real life partner? Will the inevitable process of compromise and respect be a foreign and unattractive aspect of human intimate relationships?

Conclusion

We have explored how Real Doll customers view their objects of desire. Our emphasis is on how consumers socially construct and define their Dolls as legitimate partners, and how this process is

achieved by bestowing human qualities on inanimate objects. We argue that this represents the ultimate objectification of bodies, and not surprisingly, of female bodies in particular.

As an exploratory account of a very specific indicator (the testimonial) these results are not generalizable. The value of this analysis lies in the contribution to our thinking and theorizing about atypical connections. In order to extend the contribution, further research could be done using more websites connected to the Real Doll concept, such as owner forums. Online chat rooms dedicated to Real Doll owners could provide a better understanding of the relationship and attachment, and provide a better understanding of how much people use custom options as opposed to the options the website offers. Such venues should be identified and analyzed. We need survey/ descriptive data, including gender of owners, approximate number of Dolls sold, and geographic regions of owners. These data would be useful in describing the scope of usage and help direct research questions. Given that we did not speak to the clients, we are making certain analytical assumptions about how they perceive their Dolls based on their testimonials. Optimally, interviews with Real Doll customers could provide a new dimension to this research, including rich personal narratives that allow individuals to explain why he (or she) bought the Doll and how he (or she) perceive of her (or her) Doll in ways that transcend the sexual. An interview based study, would allow us great insight into the construction of relationship and how this may impact relationships with real women among this population. The obvious recruitment and logistic issues associated with interviewing Real Doll owners make this a difficult, but not impossible, task.

Imagine, if you will, a time when sex Dolls are as affordable and perhaps widespread as computers and cell phones. What would such a world be like? Though seemingly remote, the consequences of this possibility are worth contemplation. Future research would contribute to the sexualities and gender literatures by exploring these types of erotica and how users narratively construct their impact on their lives.

Appendix A

Table 1
Doll Body Options

	<i>Classic Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
Height	4'10" – 5'7"	5'8" – 5'11"
Bust/Chest	30AA – 34DD	36" – 40"
Waist	23" – 26"	28.5" – 30"
Hips	32" – 39"	NA
Dress/Shirt Size	XXS-XS – M-L	S - L
Shoe Size	5 – 9	9.5 US
Weight (pounds)	77 - 113	95-110
Penis size (overall Length)	NA	5.5" – 11"

Notes

1. Hybrid Dolls are also available. Hybrid Dolls allow for the combination of various options/body part combinations across product lines.
2. This may well reflect the interpretation of the Testimonial section of the website. That is, customers may use other forums (e.g., chatrooms, blogs) to discuss the more sexual nature of their Real Doll, while they see the testimonial space as better suited to discuss their impression of the Doll and the service they receive.

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