

**“I know just what she wants”: Constructing Gender, Sexuality, and Relationships on
The Doll Forum**

By

Meaghen Boiteau

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Sociology
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg

© March, 2011 by Meaghen Boiteau

ABSTRACT

Abyss Creations has been creating and selling extremely life-like silicone dolls designed primarily for sex known as Real Dolls since 1996. Since 2001, The Doll Forum has provided an online space where users of Real Dolls are able to connect with one another and discuss a myriad of issues relating to the use of Real Dolls. This thesis explores the specific ways in which members utilize The Doll Forum as a space to discursively construct gender, sexuality, and relationships as they pertain to the use of Real Dolls. Utilizing the theory of performativity, I engage in a Critical Discourse Analysis of one month of posts from The Doll Forum. I argue that through the discussions and images which members post within The Doll Forum, they discursively work to both reinforce and challenge current constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships. By doing so, members of The Doll Forum use the space to normalize their sexual behaviour, as well as reinforce the performative nature of these constructions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have to first and foremost thank my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Comack, for all of her help throughout this project. Her extreme patience and guidance has been a true blessing, and while words do not quite seem enough to express my gratitude, I am extremely thankful for everything she has done. As well, I have to thank my committee, Dr. Sonia Bookman and Dr. Susan Frohlick for their amazing support and guidance. This project would not be what it is without all of the amazing feedback and help I received.

I have to thank the entire staff and faculty in the Department of Sociology. The time that I have spent at the University of Manitoba has been some of the most memorable of my life, and the guidance, support, and assistance of everyone will not be soon forgotten. I will be forever grateful for the wonderful opportunities and experiences I have been given.

This journey would not have been as enjoyable as it was, or at all possible to complete, without the unending support of many friends as well. I especially have to thank: Shannon Robertson, Sarah Mitzner, Sheena Conrad, Brittney Trubyk, Alicia Sosa Lerin, Natasha Stecy-Hildebrandt, Joelle Shelton, Colleen Pawlychka, and Brianne Goertzen for many hours of support. I love you all and am truly blessed to have friends as wonderful as you.

I also would not have been able to complete this journey without the unending love and support of my family. My parents, Shirley and Gerald, my sisters Kara and Emily, and all of my extended family who were always willing to let me go on random tangents, as well as feed me many wonderful meals. I don't know what I've done to deserve such an amazing family, and I love you all very much.

Finally, I have to give a special thank you to all of the members of The Doll Forum. This project would not have been possible without your amazing community.

CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
List of Images.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Theorizing Gender, Sexuality, and the Internet.....	9
Gender and Performativity.....	10
Regulatory Frameworks and Power.....	18
Hegemonic Masculinity/Subordinate Femininity.....	21
Normalization and Fluid Sexuality.....	24
Community and the Impact of the Internet.....	30
Concluding Remarks.....	36
Chapter Two: Methodological Considerations.....	37
The Doll Forum.....	37
The Data Set.....	40
Virtual Analysis.....	42
Critical Discourse Analysis.....	45
Researcher Positionality.....	50
Concluding Remarks.....	50
Chapter Three: Repeat After Me: Constructing Gender and Sexuality on The Doll Forum.....	52
Overview of The Doll Forum.....	52
Appearance.....	55
Body and Face.....	57
Aesthetic Customization.....	59
Physical Customization.....	63
Taking Care.....	66
Sexual Desire.....	69
Concluding Remarks.....	74
Chapter Four: Relationships on The Doll Forum.....	76
Real Doll Agency and Masculine Identity.....	76
Dynamic Relationships.....	79
Object Relations and Plastic Subjectivity.....	82
Normalization and Fluid Sexuality.....	85
Concluding Remarks.....	96
Conclusion.....	98
Bibliography.....	103

LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1: ‘Real Doll Spec Sheet’	56
Image 2: ‘It’s official! I can finally post pics in a thread!’	58
Image 3: ‘The Doll Closet – Dresses’	60
Image 4: ‘Lucie’s done a few more photos ... for anyone interested’	61
Image 5: ‘A Happy Accident’	63
Image 6: ‘The Doll Closet’	65
Image 7: ‘Real Dolls 2: The Review’	66
Image 8: ‘Enjoying a day off in a busy life’	70
Image 9: ‘three more from Lucie’	70
Image 10: ‘Gabe got a gig singing with a Pink Floyd cover band’	71
Image 11: ‘Her name is Tamasha (RealDoll 2)’	92
Image 12: ‘Weena has arrived’	93
Image 13: ‘A Bud girl in a bar, a stereogram’	94

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the exciting world of RealDoll! Since 1996, we have been using Hollywood special effects technology to produce the most realistic love doll in the world. Our dolls feature completely articulated skeletons which allow for anatomically correct positioning, an exclusive blend of the best silicone rubbers for an ultra flesh-like feel, and each doll is custom made to your specifications. We offer an extensive list of options, including 10 female body types and 16 interchangeable female faces. RealDolls are completely customizable, all the way down to the makeup and fingernail colors. If you've ever dreamed of creating your ideal partner, then you have come to the right place. (www.realdoll.com)

Recent decades have witnessed a shift in the commerce of sexuality, including a proliferation of various sexual services which are now more readily available than in years past (Bernstein 2001). Technological and market changes have greatly affected the ways in which individuals experience romantic love and sexual desire, most notably through the ease of access and anonymity afforded by the widespread availability of the Internet (Bernstein 2001; Attwood 2006). Feona Attwood (2006) argues that with these advances, there has been a marked increase of a sexualized culture in the latter part of the 20th and the early part of the 21st century, influencing many of the discourses that are presented around sexuality.

One of the most notable shifts is the emergence of post-modern narratives, in which “sexuality is articulated in more uncertain, variable and self-conscious ways” (Attwood 2006: 80). Attwood further argues that because of this articulation, individuals are more likely to borrow understandings of sexuality from those presented within various forms of media and communications. Along with the blurring of ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces that has resulted, there has also been an increase in the ‘pornographication’ of culture, whereby “the iconography of pornography has become commonplace, and ... [there is] a more widespread fascination with sex and the sexually explicit in print and broadcast media” (Attwood 2006: 81-2). In the midst of

these developments, Real Dolls have emerged as one of the ways in which individuals are now able to articulate and explore their sexuality.

Abyss Creations has been producing Real Dolls since 1996. Located in San Marcos, California, the company manufactures and delivers Real Dolls to consumers all over the world. While the Real Doll™ is the original doll, there have since been many other varieties created, including Boy Toy™ and Wicked Real Dolls™ which are also produced by Abyss Creations, as well as similar dolls from other companies. Real Dolls continue to be the industry leader, however, with Abyss releasing a ‘second generation’ Real Doll 2 in 2009.

Real Dolls are available in both female and male models, each of which comes with many customized options. In addition to the 10 body and 16 face options for the original female Real Doll, two more body options are available with the female Real Doll 2. Consumers can also choose from many make-up, hair, and accessory options, as well as ‘expression’ faces. The male Real Doll has 3 faces and 2 bodies to choose from. As well as the original Real Dolls and the newer Real Doll 2, Abyss recently launched a ‘Wicked’ Real Doll line, which are “licensed high-end, fully articulated and completely realistic representations of the Wicked Girls and other premier adult stars” (www.wickedrealdoll.com). Purchasing a Real Doll is an expensive venture. An average Real Doll can cost around \$5,999 USD, with customization adding on to that price, as well as delivery. The Wicked Real Doll starts at \$6,999 USD.

While the phenomenon of Real Dolls has not been studied academically, there has been an increasing awareness about them on the Internet in the past few years. A 2004 piece on nerve.com featured a writer recounting his use of a Real Doll (Stoddard, ‘I Did It for Science,’ www.nerve.com). In 2005, Meghan Laslocky wrote a piece for the online website salon.com entitled “Just like a Woman” which featured interviews with four men who referred to

themselves as “iDollaters” (Laslocky 2005). In the article, Laslocky spoke with men who engaged in relationships with their Real Dolls that were much more than based solely on sex, which—as “the most realistic love doll in the world”—is the primary purpose for which Real Dolls are designed. Along with this article, the BBC made a 2007 documentary entitled *Love Me, Love My Doll* that followed the same four men featured in Laslocky’s article. Real Dolls have also been featured in such media series as The Howard Stern Show, HBO Real Sex, Playboy TV and Nip/Tuck, among others (www.realdoll.com).

Perhaps the most well-known media appearance has been the film *Lars and the Real Girl*, written by Nancy Oliver (2007). The film features a young man who purchases a Real Doll and explores how his small community reacts to her presence. The narrative of the film focuses not on the doll as a sex object, but rather on the place that the doll has in serving as an aide in the main character’s emotional development, and how the community works to incorporate the doll into their activities.

Beginning in 2001, The Doll Forum emerged on the Internet as a site of discussion and community-building among individuals who use or admire Real Dolls (www.dollforum.com). Within The Doll Forum, members engage in various discussions around their use of Real Dolls and other similar dolls, including such issues as introducing new dolls that members have received, and dealing with mechanical and technical issues or other various product inquiries. Along with the discussions, members are also able to post images within the forum, and there are separate areas within the site in which members create photo albums devoted to their dolls. The Doll Forum currently has over 32,000 registered members from all over the world, although it appears that most are from North America and Europe. There are currently over 343,000 individual posts that have been contributed to over 30,000 topics (as of September 17th, 2010).

The forum is broken down into many separate ‘sub-forums,’ so that each brand of doll is given its own discussion space.

As changes in communications technologies and media have contributed largely to shifting understandings of sexuality, the Internet has been extremely instrumental in providing a space whereby many alternative sexualities and expressions are able to be discussed and explored anonymously, with very limited restrictions based upon access or cost (Quinn and Forsyth 2005). However, the existence and use of Real Dolls has not occurred solely through the awareness that the Internet has allowed for in terms of sexual behaviours. Given the increased sexualization of contemporary culture that Attwood discusses (2006: 87), there has been a marked shift towards what can best be described as ‘autosexuality’: “sex as self-pleasure – as indulgence, treat, luxury and right.” Within this framework sexuality is based upon individual experiences and desires, separated from explicitly heterosexual, partnered relationships. The use of Real Dolls, therefore, can be seen as one of many expressions of this ‘autosexuality,’ with the Internet providing a space where discussions and ideas surrounding sexuality can be freely explored (Attwood 2006).

My first encounter with Real Dolls occurred when I came across the BBC documentary. It had been linked to a rather popular feminist blog (www.feministing.com) and my immediate response, as well as the responses most commenter’s were expressing, was rather negative, situating the users of Real Dolls, and their behaviour, as unquestionably deviant. The post also linked to the article by Laslocky, and it was after reading that article that I became more interested in the motivations of the individual doll users, as well as why it was that their behaviour had elicited such a negative response from myself and others. In the sexualized culture that Attwood explores, why was the first response to immediately interpret the behaviour of doll

users as ‘deviant’? With shifting understandings of sexuality and increased awareness and access to alternatives, can we continue to define sexuality in terms of what is ‘normal’ or ‘deviant,’ or are we becoming more aware of the fluidity of sexuality? What space does the use of Real Dolls occupy in this era of post-modern sexualities?

After finding The Doll Forum through a simple Google search I soon came to understand that there was more to this community than could be explained by simply situating their behaviour within a framework of ‘normal versus deviant’ sexualities. Reading the posts and discussions on the forum, it became clear that while users of Real Dolls are engaging in a sexual behaviour (having sex with an inanimate object) that is not readily understood as ‘normal,’ the ways in which posters discussed and described their relationships and interactions with their dolls were very much in line with more typical discourses regarding gender, sexuality, and relationships. This observation led me to question: What can the use of Real Dolls, and the presence of The Doll Forum, contribute to our understandings of gender, sexuality, and relationships as experienced in the 21st century?

The main objective of this thesis, therefore, is to explore the ways in which members of The Doll Forum engage with discourses of gender, sexuality, and relationships in their discussions of their use of Real Dolls. More specifically, I ask: To what extent do these discussions reinforce normative constructions of gender and sexuality? In what ways does the use of Real Dolls by these forum members constitute a challenge to the binaries of gender (male/female) and sexual behaviour (normal/deviant) in ways that expand our definitions and understandings of each, thereby signifying just how fluid these designations are? Of particular interest will be to explore the various ways in which forum members discursively reinforce or redefine patriarchal understandings of gender, sexuality, and relationships while discussing their

use of Real Dolls. To what extent do their posts constitute a challenge or resistance to these constructions? How do the members of The Doll Forum utilize various constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in their discussions in order to make their behaviour ‘normal’? To address these questions I undertake a Critical Discourse Analysis of one month of posts from the Real Doll forum.

Chapter One provides an overview of the theoretical framework that informs my analysis. While there has been no academic research on Real Dolls, there is a rich literature on gender, sexuality, and the Internet, and it is these works that will serve as my primary theoretical backdrop. Beginning with an overview of the work of Judith Butler, I explore the theory of performativity and how it can be used to explain the view of gender as a constructed and fluid performance. I then draw upon the work of R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt to explore the theory of hegemonic masculinity. Current work on sexuality and the heteronormativity of sexual relationships is introduced to address the question of why it is that having a relationship with a Real Doll elicits such a negative response. Lastly, I briefly explore some of the research that outlines the importance of the Internet in community building. Since this community has emerged through the Internet, it is important to provide some context as to the potential this venue raises for groups cast as ‘deviant’ to challenge that designation, as well as redefine what is considered ‘normal.’

Chapter Two considers the methodology used for this study. Critical Discourse Analysis, as outlined by Norman Fairclough (1992), offers a method for reading the posts produced by forum members, and provides the tools for critically examining the discourses at work in these posts. I also briefly explore some of the specific issues that arise in research conducted on the

Internet, as the use of online groups for research poses some unique benefits and challenges that are not found within other research methods.

In Chapter Three, I begin with a detailed description of The Doll Forum and then turn my focus to an analysis of the specific ways in which gender and sexuality are discursively constructed on The Doll Forum. I do this by highlighting the specific constructions that members of the forum use in their discussions to characterize gender and sexuality. It is primarily through a focus on appearance and ideas surrounding sexuality that members work to performatively engage with their Real Dolls. In terms of appearance, a specific focus is given to Face and Body type, aesthetic appearance, as well as physical customization and upgrades within the discussions. Through these features of appearance, members work to create an image of femininity that both reinforces and at times challenges normative constructions. In discussions of sexuality, members draw on many competing discourses related to feminine sexuality that prevail in the wider society. In so doing so, members utilize these competing discourses to create a version of feminine sexuality that is unique to the Doll Forum.

In Chapter Four I explore in more detail the relationships that users have with their Real Dolls. Specifically, I pay attention to the unique ways in which members' relationships with their dolls have a larger influence on conceptions of relationships within the forum. I also explore the notion of fetishism as conceptualized by Jean Baudrillard (1981), as well as embodiment, in order to examine in more detail how the relationships that individuals have with their Real Dolls can result in the production of objects with plastic subjectivities that bear upon not only the relationships members have with one another within The Doll Forum, but also how these relationships influence broader constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in general.

The chapter concludes with an examination of the specific features of members' discussions that serve to normalize their behaviours.

The conclusion provides a brief summary of my key findings, as well as some suggestions as to the directions that future research of this unique group could pursue.

The Doll Forum provides one of many ways in which the Internet is being increasingly utilized as a site for social transformation. As an open and extremely available space, individuals from all over the world are able to connect and interact with others who share similar interests. Although their interest in Real Dolls may seem initially troublesome, the fact that there are so many individuals currently registered on the forum speaks to the fluid nature of 'deviant' behaviour, and especially the fluidity of sexuality. In this thesis, therefore, I argue that through their discussions within The Doll Forum, individual members largely serve to reinforce contemporary definitions of gender and relationships, while contesting constructions of 'normal' sexuality. While The Doll Forum members are working to push the boundaries of accepted sexuality, they do so within the confines of already present constructions of gender and relationships—confines of which they are clearly aware. Members of this particular group, therefore, draw from already present constructions of gender and relationships in order to normalize their behaviour, while also working to expand definitions of 'normal' sexual behaviour.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORIZING GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE INTERNET

The primary aim of this project is to uncover the discourses regarding gender, sexuality, and relationships that members of The Doll Forum engage in their discussions. In doing so, I am seeking to understand the place that the use of Real Dolls has in representing the fluidity of gender and sexuality, and how the discussions within The Doll Forum work to both reinforce and challenge the dominant constructions of gender and sexuality that are currently found within society. In order to examine how forum members utilize those discourses to reinforce and challenge current constructions of gender and sexuality, it will be most helpful to first explore the broader constructions users of Real Dolls are working with. Members of The Doll Forum are not using Real Dolls in a social or cultural vacuum, and therefore the ways in which they align their behaviour with present constructions of gender and sexuality must be understood as much as the ways in which they are working to break down and expand those constructions.

In order to explore the ways in which gender is discursively constructed, I draw upon the works of Judith Butler (1990; 1993), Michel Foucault (1977; 1978), and R.W. Connell (1995). I utilize these main texts, along with others regarding gender, with a view to uncovering the ways in which femininity and masculinity are constructed and currently understood within society, and how it is that these definitions have come to stand in as the dominant accepted forms.

Along with exploring the social constructions of gender, this chapter also seeks to explore the ways in which heterosexuality has been set up as the dominant, 'normal' form of sexual relationships. How have the definitions of 'normal' and 'deviant' sexual relationships been constructed? What are some ways in which others have sought to understand or contest these definitions? The work of Deborah Brock (2003) will be used to provide context to these

questions as well as a brief exploration of ‘fetishism’ in order to situate the use of Real Dolls within a wider framework of understanding sexual behaviour.

Finally, it is important to understand the context in which The Doll Forum operates, and the impact this context has on the individual users’ ability to both reinforce and challenge definitions of gender and sexuality. Therefore I conclude the chapter with an examination of the importance of the Internet in community building, and the importance the wider online community bears in the formation and increasing acceptance of alternative communities.

1.1 Gender and Performativity

A key feature of the use of Real Dolls is the fact that many of their ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ traits are largely based upon characteristics chosen or applied by the users of these dolls. As such, it is helpful to explore the issue of performativity as a way of conceptualizing how members of The Doll Forum engage with their dolls, as well as their community.

Judith Butler (1993; 1999) wrote a great deal about the issue of gender, and was one of the first theorists to discuss the issue of ‘performativity.’ While ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ have typically been defined as two separate things, one biological and the other cultural, gender has also been commonly conceptualized as the social description of sex. In contrast, the concept of ‘performativity’ is designed to showcase the ways in which *both* sex and gender are socially created. Butler (1990: 6) argues that it is “impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” and we therefore must be aware that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established

as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts” (Butler 1996: 11).

Butler (1996: 10) argues that it is important to understand gender as “the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes.” In this sense, gender is proscribed upon bodies through various means. However, it is not only gender that is socially constructed, as Butler goes on to question how the body as ‘sexed’ comes into being. Indeed, she questions that “If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender” (Butler 1990: 10). It would make sense to infer that if what we use to symbolize one’s sex is understood as a cultural construction, it would follow that how we understand ‘sex’ itself is constructed to allow for a strict binary classification system to be maintained. Essentially, Butler argues that we must not only understand ‘gender’ as a constructed, discursive category, but also ‘sex’ as one. Gender is therefore enacted upon ‘neutral’ bodies, thereby assigning them both ‘gender’ and ‘sex,’ and making it seem as if those designations are ‘natural.’ In arguing that gender is ‘discursive/cultural’ Butler here seems to be situating discourse with culture, meaning that gender is culturally designated through discourse. Language is the means by which we shape gender and sex, and by which we assign these categories onto individuals.

Butler (1990: 43-44) further elaborates on this point by stating that gender is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” To understand gender, we must understand the ‘regulatory frame’ which designates what is characteristic of each gender, and thus what is characteristic of each sex.

It is later in *Gender Trouble* that Butler introduces ‘performativity,’ the term for the constant production of gender. Gender becomes ‘performative’ in the sense that:

.... acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler 1990: 173)

Gender, then, is performative as it is constructed through acts, gestures, and symbols that are produced on the surface of the body.

It is important to note the distinction between ‘performance’ and ‘performativity.’ As Chris Brickell (2005: 28) notes, “While the term *performance* implies enactment of doing, *performativity* refers to the construction of regulatory notions and their effects.” It is in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) that Butler further expands on the idea of performativity. She understands ‘sex’ as not only constructed (along with gender), but also as a ‘regulatory’ ideal, as “part of a regulatory practice which produces the bodies it governs” (1993: 1). In this sense sex becomes understood as part of a larger system of power whereby it is used to construct—through gendered discursive practices—bodies that it also governs through its definitions. Bodies are governed in the sense that their movements and images are restricted by the definitions of ‘sex.’ Therefore, ‘woman’ has different features than ‘man,’ and different representations of ‘woman’ that are acceptable. Representations that diverge from what is understood to be ‘acceptable’ are subject to regulation.

Performativity, then, is understood to be “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler 1993: 2). Therefore, discourse provides the definitions of ‘woman’ and ‘man,’ and performativity is how individuals take on those definitions, what they do in order to act as a woman or a man, the tools used to perform ‘woman’ and to perform ‘man.’ This idea is further discussed by Brickell (2005: 29) as he argues that

“performativity usefully suggests that masculinities appear within language and society as effects of norms and power regulations rather than presocial biological essences.” In other words, gender appears and is created as an effect of already present characteristics, recreated by individuals as drawn from society.

Following on Butler’s insights about gender and performativity, then, we can ask: how is gender constructed within The Doll Forum? While the users have some degree of choice in the characteristics of the dolls, it is important to note that this choice is not free ranging, as consumers are limited or regulated by the specific body types and characteristics that are made available by the manufacturer. What forms of femininity are being offered to consumers by the manufacturer? How is femininity and masculinity realized within the forum, both in text as well as by users’ visual representations of their dolls? What kinds of femininity and masculinity are being performatively constructed and how do these constructions within the forum serve to reinforce and/or challenge those presently understood within society at large?

While the dolls do contain some predetermined feminine characteristics, the users do have quite a bit of choice in how to further represent their dolls as female or male. In this regard, parallels may be drawn between Doll users and the experiences of drag performers and transsexual individuals. Butler (1993: 125) argues that “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.” Drag in this sense shows the extent to which gender is performatively engaged with. Eve Shapiro (2007) interviewed individuals who engaged in ‘drag kinging’ and found that many of the individuals she interviewed began with a female identity, but through performing drag their gender identity changed as well—to ‘genderqueer,’ ‘female-to-male,’ and ‘transgender’—further highlighting the fluidity of gender

identity in what ‘labels’ are available to individuals. In fact, most of the members that Shapiro interviewed described gender as “a conscious act” (2007: 259).

Somewhat similar to drag performance is the experiences of transsexual individuals. Tam Sanger (2008) explores narratives of individuals who identify as transsexual. Through the interviews s/he noticed two themes: Individuals discussed how they felt as if gender was regulatory and how they attempted to undo gender, for example, many recalled gender assignment at birth as restrictive but they still felt a desire to conform and fit-in; and they would rearticulate hegemonic discourses to make room for their own experience, so they would engage in deconstruction and recognition of gender/alternative genders. Douglas Schrock, Lori Reid, and Emily M. Boyd (2005) interviewed transsexual individuals on their experiences in embodying femininity, focussing on the importance that the body plays in individuals’ definitions of self. The respondents they interviewed noted the importance of the body in understanding gender. The respondents discussed how they spent a lot of time training their bodies and decorating their bodies. Clothing, for example, helped to “transform the physical body into a gendered vessel” (Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005: 324).

A key feature that stands out in this literature is the emphasis on the body as an important site of gender. Niels van Doorn, Sally Wyatt, and Liesbet van Zoonen (2008) explore this issue in examining specifically gendered interaction on the Internet, and how body-part vocabulary takes on importance in users’ descriptions of themselves as gendered beings. The authors found that binary gender systems were reified online—women were described in relation to men, and many of their descriptions were drawn from stereotypical definitions of masculinity and femininity. For example, the authors list one exchange in which a nickname adopted by a user can be understood as ‘female,’ and the user goes on to explain that he is a male, despite the use

of the nickname 'AzureCat' (van Doorn, Wyatt, and van Zoonen 2008: 364). The authors also note an exchange regarding the description of a masculine, heterosexual body where an individual's friend who has both ears pierced is defended as not being gay by his friend, saying that 'he gets more women than i used to' (van Doorn, Wyatt, and van Zoonen 2008: 367).

Heiko Motschenbacher (2009: 2) expands on this idea in discussing the ways that gender is created through discourse, arguing that "the way the body is talked about in public has consequences for how the body is subjectively felt by individual people." Employing a framework developed by Hellinger and Bussman, Motschenbacher discusses three types of gender: lexical, social, and referential. Lexical gender is that which is "about categorizing the gender continuum into two, and only two binary micro-categories, 'female' and 'male.'" (2009: 3). Social gender involves "entrenched social stereotypes that tie certain role scripts to women and men" (Motschenbacher 2009: 3). And referential gender depends on "whom a particular personal noun actually refers to in a given context" (Motschenbacher 2009: 3). Due to constant re-citation, Motschenbacher (2009: 7) argues that "certain body-part terms have reached the status of powerful indexes of the gendered body." Essentially, certain body parts come to stand for a specific gender, differing between men and women.

Motschenbacher looks especially at advertising and the way that body-parts are used to distinguish between ads geared towards females and those for males, noting that much of this gendering is done through 'social' gender, with female representations being more objectified than male: "Stereotypically female body parts are more likely to (i) be located on the surface of the body and (ii) to play a role in the aestheticization of the body... Stereotypically male body parts, on the other hand, are more likely (i) to lie within the body and (ii) to be of functional value" (2009: 18). Advertisements geared towards women featured discourses focussing on body

figure, personal hygiene, skin, and the face; however, some of these were on specific features of the face, most notably lip and lash, which only occurred in advertisements towards women. As well, parts such as breast, cleavage, and butt are featured for women. Motschenbacher found that in many of the advertisements for women the focus was on framing parts as in need of repair, as a point that is problematic. For men, however, there was a focus on physique—muscles such as abdominals, quads and biceps—and athleticism, with the focus for men being on training and strengthening one's body.

While Motschenbacher (2009) looks at the ways in which body-parts are implicated in gendering bodies in advertisements, Susan Bordo (1993) examines the various visual presentations of gender in her book, *Unbearable Weight*. Bordo (1993) argues that in recent years the goal body-type for many women to attain is one that is tight and taught—not flabby or loose in any way. Much of this emphasis on slim bodies emerged as a result of a society of overabundance, where status became tied to how much women could control their bodies. In this sense, then, a tight body is a controlled body, and a sign that an individual has control over her bodily form. In developing her analysis, Bordo reveals the ways in which women's bodies are portrayed in advertisements. They are largely situated as slender, tight, with no excess fat or bulge to be seen. They are also not muscular, and even if a woman in an advertisement is portrayed as a professional, working woman, the emphasis is on her appearance and how she can best control it. The text within these advertisements serves to emphasize the images, with terms such as 'wiggly' and 'shape your life' used. In this way, women are being told that their bodies are deficient, and in need of improvement. Improvement and discipline over one's body becomes the ultimate goal of femininity, in order to create a perfect, tight, trained, disciplined body.

These writers point to a very important feature of femininity: the fact that it requires constant work. Indeed, the notion of performativity as it applies to gender itself connotes the constant use and appropriation of defined features of femininity and masculinity by individuals. Sandra Lee Bartky (2003) explores the discipline involved in being feminine. Using a Foucauldian framework, Bartky argues that there are various regulatory frameworks that women engage in to maintain being 'feminine.' Various disciplines such as wearing make-up, dieting, types of clothing, and how much space one can take up serve to make femininity a constant project for women. In terms of dieting, for example, women are encouraged to maintain a thin, tight body at all times, with women's magazines constantly running articles for 'fat burning' and providing 'sleek down strategies.' Dieting involves constant monitoring of the food that one consumes, requiring women to ensure that they adequately discipline their hunger (Bartky 2003: 28). Furthermore, there is a specific ideology as to how a woman should look that requires constant work on her skin, hair, and overall appearance: "A woman must learn the proper manipulation of a large number of devices—the blow dryer, styling brush, eyelash curler, and mascara brush. And she must learnt to apply a wide variety of products—foundation, toner, covering stick, mascara, eyeshadow, eyegloss, blusher, lipstick, rouge, lip gloss, hair dye, hair rinse, hair lightener, hair 'relaxer,' and so on" (Bartky 2003: 33).

For Bartky (2003: 33-34), the disciplinary project of femininity "is a 'setup': it requires such radical and extensive measures of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail." Indeed, Anne Balsamo (1998) explores the extreme lengths women may go to in order to fit into feminine frameworks, focussing on the rise of cosmetic surgery. According to Balsamo (1998: 225), "cosmetic surgery *literally* transforms the material body into a sign of culture." Essentially, women are encouraged to undergo

cosmetic procedures in order to be feminine—as the feminine body is understood as constantly flawed and in need of repair. The female body then becomes a site of inscription, “a billboard for the dominant cultural meanings that the female body is to have in postmodernity” (1998: 231).

Butler draws on the work of Foucault extensively in conceptualizing performativity. His work is also useful for examining not only the importance of discourse in creating gendered identities, but also in recognizing the power that is inherent in the creation of regulatory frameworks of sex and gender.

1.2 Regulatory Frameworks and Power

An essential feature of performativity is the discursive construction of gendered bodies. Through discourse individuals are able to enact and practice various forms of gender; however, as Butler and Bartky note, discourse is limited by various ‘regulatory frames.’ In order to understand regulatory frames better, it is best to consult with Foucault’s work in *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

Foucault (1977) begins by discussing ‘docile bodies.’ A docile body is a body “that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (1977: 136). In order to create docile bodies, various practices emerged that worked to control the body, and to ensure constant subjection. These practices were called ‘disciplines.’ Foucault argues that disciplines relating to the creation and maintenance of docile bodies emerged throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, through schooling, the army, justice, and sexuality. However, Foucault does not discuss gender explicitly. Despite this omission, Bartky (2003) argues (as discussed previously) that gender can be seen as a disciplinary practice in the sense of continued regulation of ‘female’ bodies. Discipline is “a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its

elements, its gestures, its behaviour” (Foucault 1977: 138). As according to Butler, gender is comprised of acts, gestures, and movements that signify a body as ‘female’ or ‘male,’ and if these characteristics are included within a ‘regulatory frame’ of actions that are acceptable or unacceptable for creating a specifically gendered body, then it follows that what the ‘regulatory frameworks’ involve is the creation of disciplined, gendered, docile bodies.

Understanding how disciplinary practices become enmeshed and employed in society requires attention to the issue of power. In Volume One of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault examines power in relation to discourses of sex. Foucault makes it clear what he means by power when discussing it in terms of discourses:

.... power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied ... in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault 1978: 92-93)

For Foucault, power is a continuous set of relations between actors; it is always in action, always being enacted and acted upon. In explicit relation to sexuality, Foucault (1978) is careful to mention that when examining discourses surrounding sex, the specific question to address is:

in a specific type of discourse on sex, in a specific form of extortion of truth, appearing historically and in specific places ... what were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work? How did they make possible these kinds of discourses, and conversely, how were these discourses used to support power relations? (Foucault 1978: 97)

Chris Brickell (2009) extends Foucault’s analysis further by exploring explicitly the numerous ways in which power is utilized in respect to discourses and ideologies surrounding sexuality. He argues that there are four dimensions in which power and sexuality are tied

together: definitional power; regulatory power; productive power; and unequal power (Brickell 2009: 58). While each of these dimensions is often employed simultaneously, they all serve to emphasize the ways in which power and sexuality are implicated together.

Definitional power involves the ways in which certain sexualities are defined as good and others as bad; essentially, how definitions of appropriate sexual behaviour come to be realized (Brickell 2009). Regulatory power is routinely tied up with definitional power, in that it focuses on the ways in which definitions are regulated and controlled. Productive power pays specific attention to the ways in which discourses aid in the production of various subject positions. Finally, unequal power involves a focus on the more specific ways in which sexuality is used in order to maintain inequality between groups. Brickell (2009) argues that an analysis of productive power is especially apparent in the work of Foucault, but with his discussions on the creation of certain knowledges and their further regulation, his work exemplifies how various power types work together in order to regulate and maintain a specific system of knowledge.

The works of both Foucault and Brickell raise a number of questions in regard to the ways in which discourse and power work within the Doll Forum: What are the regulatory frameworks surrounding sexuality that members of The Doll Forum draw from for their discussions and how do they employ various disciplinary practices in order to create a specifically gendered body? What types of regulatory frameworks are users working to construct through their discussions, and how are these being performatively enacted within The Doll Forum?

1.3 Hegemonic Masculinity/Subordinate Femininity

In order to address the discipline of gender that is enacted within the forum, it is important to understand what representations are prevalent within society already. Arguably, the users of The Doll Forum will be enmeshed in the society at large (in varying degrees), and may therefore draw from various scripts already present relating to representations and performances of gender. What, then, are the current regulatory frames of gender already present in society? The notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as conceptualized by R.W. Connell (1987; 1995) offers a starting point for addressing this issue.

When first conceptualized, hegemonic masculinity was “defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 1995: 77). While the traits associated with the dominant masculinity may differ through points in time, it could be argued that the current Western notion includes “sporting prowess and competitiveness, heterosexuality and the objectification of women, alcohol and mateship, and the ability to prove oneself through physical force” (Coles 2008: 237). It is important to note that hegemonic masculinity is not the same everywhere and all the time. Connell (1995: 76) notes that it is “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.” As such, the constructions of masculinity in The Doll Forum may be different from that typically understood as hegemonic within the broader society.

Connell (1995:79) does note that while hegemonic masculinity is the most ‘normative’ standard, many men do not practice it in its ideal form, yet all benefit from it in the sense that it maintains the subordination of women to men. Connell (1995) discusses how alongside

hegemonic masculinity, there are also subordinate and complicit masculinities. While in a general sense, hegemonic masculinity is the most dominant, there are times when subordinated masculinities may assume more hegemonic positions in different situations. For example, Tony Coles (2008) examined how men who were in positions of ‘subordinate’ masculinities—for example being gay or overweight—drew upon elements of hegemonic masculinity in order to ‘redefine’ what masculinity meant to them.

Therefore, if hegemonic masculinity is understood as a regulatory framework or part of a disciplinary practice, of the proper way to enact the ‘male’ gender, then to what extent is it apparent within The Doll Forum? Do the users of Real Dolls construct a version of masculinity that is distinct to The Doll Forum? In the process, do they rely upon (or respond to) particular traits that could be considered hegemonic in the wider society?

Because gender is typically understood or constructed as ‘relational,’ a key issue is the way in which femininity is constructed in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1987: 186-7) argues that the femininity popularized within the context of hegemonic masculinity is “constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men.” Because of this, there is no image of femininity that bears the same importance to women as hegemonic masculinity does for men. Connell maintains that due to the lack of need for power struggles between women, as well as the fact that women have less social power than men, there is a wider range of femininities available to women. However, the femininity that may be preferred in relation to hegemonic masculinity is that which allows for the continued dominance of men over women, which Connell terms ‘emphasized femininity.’ Emphasized femininity involves compliance to the dominant structure, a display of sociability as opposed to technical competence, acceptance of motherhood roles and marriage, and also fragility (Connell 1987: 187).

The concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity raise issues as to how each is embodied by individuals—how each is performed by men and women at different points in time. Drawing from the work of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) examine how sex, sex category, and gender are three distinct classifications, and how gender is a performed process. Individuals engage in adopting specific gendered processes in order to match, or attempt to give the impression that they are in, a specific sex role. So individuals who are in the ‘male’ sex role by fact of having a penis will act out the ‘male’ gender, and likewise for females.

James Messerschmidt (2009) has employed West and Zimmerman’s conceptualization in his work on youth, and argues that while ‘doing gender’ is an extremely useful tool for understanding the importance of sex and gender performance among individuals, we also need to focus on ‘embodiment’ or the role that the body plays in enacting gender. Messerschmidt found two ways in which the body is important in gender performances: that it does, but also can serve to negate, gender; and that the body is an agent of social practice. Therefore, Messerschmidt (2009: 87) argues that “‘doing gender’ is experienced in and through the body.” What we need to understand, then, is how important the body is to constructions of gender. Not only through individuals acting out specific gender roles, but in how they come to embody those roles, the body becomes an important site through which gender is constructed and reinforced—or contested.

Messerschmidt (2004: 36) explores the issue of embodiment in the book *Flesh and Blood*, arguing that “gender grows out of embodied social practices in specific social structural settings and serves to inform such practices in reciprocal relation.” He explains that “Our recognition of another’s sex is dependent upon the exhibit of such bodily characteristics as

speech, hair, clothing, physical appearance, and other aspects of personal front—an embodied gender presentation becomes a substitute for the concealed genitalia” (2004: 36). However, these characteristics that come to convey whether one is female or male are determined largely by social structures, yet also serve to reinforce those ideas—“structure is realized only through embodied social action and social action requires structure as its condition” (2004: 39).

Messerschmidt (2004: 43) discusses the importance of hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities in determining the “conventions applied in the enactment and reproductions of masculinities and femininities.” It is these conventions that individuals draw upon in embodying and presenting themselves as male or female. How individuals embody and enact gender is important in not only creating themselves as gendered beings, but in reinforcing (or not) the characteristics associated with each gender. In this way, gender is reproduced—or challenged—at a structural or social level as well.

In relation to The Doll Forum, then, how does hegemonic masculinity factor into the exchanges made between members within the forum? What type of masculinity—and, by extension, femininity—is performed, embodied, and discursively presented within the forum? Are the members reinforcing contemporary notions of hegemonic masculinity, or are they redefining what is ‘hegemonic’ to their specific community?

1.4 Normalization and Fluid Sexuality

A key theme which emerges through the discussion of performativity and gender is the idea that there is a ‘normal’ definition of gender, an acceptable way to present being feminine or masculine. Arguably, with various definitions of femininity and masculinity, and expectations regarding gender, certain characteristics are framed and understood to be ‘normal’ while others

are 'deviant.' These binaries are also reinforced through the regulatory frameworks that are developed. However, as the examples of transsexuals and drag queens and kings show, these regulatory frameworks are not decisive, and gender indeed is a fluid designation. However, individuals who work to contest the bounds of gender often encounter criticism and resistance. This normalization occurs not only around definitions of gender, but also in regards to a great deal of other behaviours, including sexuality.

Deborah Brock (2003) provides a helpful description as to the process of normalization and the construction of certain behaviours as deviant. Behaviour is deviant if it is one "that violates social norms, rules, or laws" (2003: IX). It is important to understand how the definitions of norms, rules, and laws become established, in order to understand why certain behaviours become deviant as opposed to others. A key way that designations of deviance are determined that Brock explores is from various positions of power. As discussed earlier in outlining the work of Foucault and Brickell, power has the ability to create and name various positions as deviant over others. Through discourse, certain acts are defined as deviant, while others become 'normal,' the basis on which deviance is defined. Brock notes that power has the ability to define a specific situation. As such, various views are given more precedence than others to define situations, such as psychiatry and medicine to define wellness and illness (2003: XV).

As has been previously discussed, Foucault understands power as not necessarily requiring a top body to be enforced, but it can be reinforced anywhere, by many people, all the time (Foucault 1978). In this sense then, if behaviour has been defined as deviant, it does not necessarily require a ruling body to police it, but many people can work to ensure proper behaviour at any given moment. In examining disciplines, specifically, Foucault (1977: 183)

argues that punishments which are incurred due to non-compliance with disciplines serve a few key purposes, but generally “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*.” The penalties incurred for non-compliance to disciplines serve to normalize behaviour. If one is non-disciplined, they are understood as deviant, as abnormal and in need of punishment.

Of most interest in the present project is the definition of sexuality. How have certain aspects of sexuality come to be understood as ‘normal’ while others have been constructed as ‘deviant?’ An important way in which normalcy and deviance come to be defined is through discourses of morality (Brock 2003). Through moral regulation, practices and behaviours that are understood as normal are good, and those that go against this definition of normal are bad, deviant, and are disciplined as such. Paula Maurutto (2003: 5) argues that moral regulation involves “practices that seek to reshape and mould behaviour and inner beliefs through normalizing discourses and techniques.” Dorothy E. Chunn (2003) examines some of the moral regulation and normalizing discourses that emerged in post-World War I Canada to eradicate the spread of sexually transmitted diseases within British Columbia. She notes that a key ideological aim was in using the ‘nuclear’ family as the standard of appropriate sexuality. The key understanding was that “sex is ‘bad’ unless stringently controlled and the control is heterosexual marriage” (Chunn 2003: 65).

Discourses about sex and sexuality did not emerge, however, until the late-19th and early 20th centuries, including definitions of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and understandings as to what constitutes ‘sexual perversions’ (Foucault 1978; Adams 2003). Mary Louise Adams (2003) outlines the historical process by which heterosexuality came to be understood and

defined as the ‘normal’ sexuality. Throughout the 1920s, 30s and 40s discourses regarding sexuality shifted, such that there came to be a strict divide between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and “By the 1940s, companionate forms of heterosexual marriage had achieved dominance as *the* way of organizing erotic, emotional, and reproductive life” spurred on partly due to the ‘revival of domesticity’ after World War II which “helped to entrench the strict gender dichotomies that held up these forms of marriage, while efforts to control extramarital sex contributed to their sexualisation, a process that was seen as one route to family harmony and domestic stability” (Adams 2003: 94).

The understanding of heterosexuality as the normal realization of sexuality is further exemplified by medical discourses—specifically those found within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) which, up until 1973, listed homosexuality as a mental disorder. Currently, various other sexual behaviours, such as fetishism, are classified as pathologies, further reinforcing certain sexual behaviour as normal. Essentially:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tried gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (Foucault 1978: 105-6)

Employing the framework that Brickell (2009) advanced, as discussed previously, we can see that the creation of a heterosexual framework of ‘normal’ sexuality is a result of many types of power being used together. Through definitional power heterosexuality has come to be regarded as the ‘normal’ given for sexual behaviour and regulatory power has been utilized in order to situate alternative sexual expressions as deviant, with one example being the

aforementioned psychiatric problematization of homosexuality. Unique to this study, however, is the fact that the problematic aspect of sexuality is the tool which is being used in order to experience pleasure. The use of an object as representative of a woman for sexual pleasure is one that, as the reactions discussed to the documentary highlight, is understood as abnormal. It is through this use that productive power becomes important. Through their engagement of an alternative sexuality, members of The Doll Forum and users of Real Dolls are utilizing productive power in order to increase the range of sexual subjectivities, and the discussions within the forum provide a key way through which discourse is being incited to do so.

In looking at the history of definitions regarding sexual behaviour, and the power involved in creating the regulatory frameworks of ‘normal’ sexuality, it becomes more apparent why the initial responses to the use of Real Dolls would be rather negative. Yet how could the behaviour of members of The Doll Forum be further explained? Perhaps the closest explanation can be found in work exploring the term ‘fetishism.’ Tim Dant (1996: 496) explores various theoretical understandings of fetishism, defining it as “human relations with material objects; non-human things in the world with which pseudo-human relations are established.” While fetishism has been explored in various religious and economic situations, of most interest in this study is the sexual aspect. Fetishism in this sense was explored perhaps most notably by Sigmund Freud.

While Freud argued that fetishism is indeed deviant from the normal sexual act, it is not necessarily pathological or representative of mental illness (Dant 1996). Freud argues that “A certain degree of fetishism is thus habitually present in normal love, especially in those stages of it in which the normal sexual aim seems unattainable or its fulfilment prevented” (Freud as cited

in Dant 1996: 502). Fetishism only becomes a problem for Freud if the object completely replaces real human contact.

While Freud argued that fetishism is not necessarily problematic, the DSM as well as the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) contain categories in which the condition is considered a psychological problem. The psychiatric definition, according to the ICD, is generally understood as “Reliance on some non-living object as a stimulus for sexual arousal and sexual gratification” (WHO as cited in Reirsol and Skeid 2006: 245). Odd Reirsol and Svein Skeid (2006) argue that the classification of fetishism within the ICD should be removed, stating that while the behaviour may not be statistically ‘normal,’ classifying it as a pathology is a moral issue. As well, the authors note that there are many sexual behaviours—such as homosexuality, fellatio, and anal sex—that were once considered abnormal which are no longer classified as pathological. While many individuals may feel guilty for engaging in this sexual behaviour, this is due in part to the fact that it is classified as deviant from a clinical perspective, and if “sexual behaviour is safe and consensual, there is nothing wrong with it from a clinical point of view” (Reirsol and Skeid 2006: 247).

It is clear through examining the ways in which sexuality has come to be defined throughout the years that expressions which stray from a heterosexual model are routinely described as ‘deviant’ because the regulatory framework in which we conceptualize sexual behaviour is that of heterosexuality. While the use of Real Dolls may seem like a deviant behaviour within this framework, similar to the fluidity of gender, sexuality should be understood as a fluid behaviour. In these terms, by engaging in sex with Real Dolls, members of The Doll Forum are engaging in a behaviour that—while understood as deviant within the

current frameworks of accepted sexual behaviour—highlights the fluidity of sexuality and challenges the very designations of ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ sexual behaviour.

Therefore, I argue that it is not enough to attempt to understand the use of Real Dolls and the members of The Doll Forum as a deviant group. Instead we need to explore their behaviour as one of many ways in which individuals express their sexuality. Yet how do the members of The Doll Forum acknowledge or understand their behaviour? Are there ways in which members of forum reinforce the present regulatory framework of sexuality, as within a strict, heterosexual binary? Or do they work to redefine what is accepted sexual behaviour and thereby reinforce the fluidity of sexuality? How do they work to normalize their behaviour within the forum? And how do they work to create an alternative definition of sexual behaviour discursively within the forum?

1.5 Community and the Impact of the Internet

In order to understand the discourses at work within The Doll Forum regarding gender and sexuality, it is important to engage in a brief overview as to the wider context in which The Doll Forum is situated. Specifically, by examining how the Internet serves as a site of community building, as well as identity experimentation, I explore how The Doll Forum allows for a community of individuals who engage in an alternative sexual behaviour to come together and create a vibrant, accepting community.

Sherry Turkle (1995: 9-10) describes the Internet as a space where people “can talk, exchange ideas, and assume personae of our own creation. We have the opportunity to build new kinds of communities with virtual communities, in which we participate with people from all over the world, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may

never physically meet.” Felicia Wu Song (2009: 1) argues further that virtual communities are so enticing because “On the internet [sic], people have the potential to experience the benefits of communal life with none of the burdens. They can share their deepest, darkest secrets without risking their personal privacy.” In this sense, the Internet provides a safe arena through which The Doll Forum is able to create a community of individuals who can come together from all over the world and share a behaviour that they may otherwise be inclined to keep secret. As well, Keith F. Durkin and Clifton D. Bryant (1995: 193) discuss the Internet as a space where subcultures especially are able to flourish, in that they “can readily network with individuals across the nation, or even worldwide.”

Along with the ease of community building which is afforded by the Internet, P. David Marshall (2004) argues that it also serves as a space where individuals are able to control more aspects of cultural production. Whereas some media forms are controlled by a few individuals, the Internet is a free, open space that allows for many individuals to create websites based on various topics. Marshall (2004: 51) argues that “the web is simultaneously a place for production, distribution and exhibition in a way that no previous media form has ever permitted.” The gate-keepers which abound in traditional media—such as art, television, and film—do not have the same control over the space of the Internet, allowing for a wider diversity of voices to be presented. What has emerged as a result is a space where various individuals who may engage in behaviour or support a cause that is traditionally unpopular can find others who agree with them, and have the same beliefs and ideas. Various groups previously separated by geographic distances can now participate together in one ‘space.’ The bounds of space and time conveniently fall away from concern within the Internet.

The Internet also provides an arena through which individuals are able to play with aspects of identity (Simpson 2005; Turkle 1995), including such features as gender and sexuality. What has traditionally been seen as somewhat 'static' can be manipulated and experimented with on the Internet. Brian Simpson (2005: 122) argues that while there has been a tendency to view virtual or online life as distinct from 'real' life, research has shown that "virtual communities can change how we live as people in all facets of our lives." Furthermore, he argues that previous studies have shown that "the 'virtual' and the 'real' are not distinct spaces, and that instead of disconnecting people from each other, the Internet can enhance social life and create new forms of connection and social exchange" (Simpson 2005: 126). The difficulty, however, as Simpson (2005) is sure to point out, arises from the ways in which individuals construct alternative identities. In experimenting with gender, for example (as Turkle (1995) explores), while the 'virtual' world does allow for transgressions, many individuals draw on already present conceptions and definitions in order to create their online personas. "[I]t is more correct to say that in the virtual world such persons construct an identity around what they perceive to be how a person of the opposite sex, alternative sexual preference or different age would behave. Is this then experimentation with a different identity or some part-constructed notion of that other identity based on stereotypes or ignorance?" (Simpson 2005: 126). It seems, then, that while the Internet allows for new communities to arise and for individuals to experiment with identities that they may be reluctant to do so within the 'real' world, they may still draw on popular notions regarding what defines these 'new' identities in order to construct them for their experimentation.

The Internet also provides a space through which intimate connections and relationships can be produced and enhanced, as Helen M. Lawson and Kira Leck (2006) explore in their

examination of Internet dating. The authors discuss how changes in technology have “historically shaped courtship, making it freer and expanding possibilities” (Lawson and Leck 2006: 189). The Internet is one of the changes that is affecting the practice of courtship. As other authors have discussed, Lawson and Leck (2006: 190) argue that the Internet “has the ability to connect people who have never met face to face and is thus likely to transform the dating process.” They conducted interviews with individuals who had, or currently are, using the Internet for dating purposes. They found a few key reasons as to why individuals used the Internet for dating: companionship; comfort after a life crisis; control over presentation and environment; freedom from commitment and stereotypical roles; online dating as an adventure; and online dating as romantic fantasy. While there are issues relating to trust within an online environment, Lawson and Leck (2006: 206) argue that “The need to obtain companionship motivates people to seek out romantic relationships in a variety of ways, and the Internet is merely the latest technological development used by people to assist their romantic goals.”

A key area in which community formation and expression of alternative lifestyles can be found on the Internet is in dealing with sex and sexuality. People are now able to access pornography, purchase sex toys, as well as engage in ‘cybersex’ on the Internet (Attwood 2009). As well, some individuals arrange sexual encounters in ‘real’ life after meeting in ‘virtual’ life (further exemplifying the argument Simpson (2005) makes regarding the blurred boundaries between the two arenas). As an unbounded, free space, groups traditionally marginalized are able to communicate, network, and find acceptance on the Internet.

Amir Rosenmann and Marilyn P. Safir (2006) examine ‘Pull Factors’ and ‘Push Factors’ that contribute to the use of the Internet by individuals and groups whose sexual behaviour is traditionally marginalized by wider society. Push Factors include, especially, the feeling of social

isolation felt by individuals whose sexual proclivities are different from those stipulated as 'normal' within the wider society. Individuals are unable to network in offline life, and are thus unable to find a group through which to affirm their behaviour. The Pull Factor of the online group is what draws many individuals to seeking out communities on the Internet. Rosenmann and Safir (2006) explore a few key ways in which individuals can engage in online sexual behaviour, including 'lurking,' 're-learning,' and 'virtual self disclosure,' with the final result being 'sexual empowerment.' Empowerment is a result of "a feeling of belonging to a peer community ... feelings of social and self-acceptance" (Rosenmann and Safir 2006: 78). In regards to sexual behaviour, specifically paraphilic communities (which Rosenmann and Safir use to describe all 'deviant' sexualities):

The online paraphilic community would become the major sexual reference point for the individual, from where paraphilia affirming values can be extracted. The empowerment process, interfaced with this newly found in-group would inescapably erode adherence to sexual standards imposed by mainstream society. (Rosenmann and Safir 2006: 79)

The fluidity of sexuality is exemplified within this passage, in that through the use of the Internet and online community building the regulatory frameworks of the 'sexual standards of mainstream society' are being eroded and challenged.

Further research highlights the use of the Internet for continued challenges to sexual norms. For instance, Nicola M. Doring (2009: 1090-1) outlines six central areas of sexuality as it appears on the Internet which she found through a review of research. These include: pornography; sex shops; sex work; sexual education; sex contacts; and sexual subcultures. Pornography and the availability of pornographic images on the Internet are very vast, with many sites featuring pornography available for free or a small fee online (Doring 2009: 1091-92). In terms of sex shops on the Internet, with such visibility and easy access there may be an

increasing acceptance and normalization in terms of the use of these various products. Doring (2009) found that for sexual subcultures, the Internet provides “emancipation and empowerment” for groups that are typically marginalized or discriminated against. As well, “the Internet can ameliorate social isolation, facilitate social networking, strengthen self-acceptance and self-identity, help to communicate practical information, and encourage political activism” (Doring 2009: 1097)—which may lead to greater ‘sexual liberation’ among the larger population. In this way, the fact that the Internet allows for a broader range of behaviours to be explored and practiced can be understood as occurring—and flourishing—in large part due to the ability of the Internet to connect large groups of people who are separated by time and space.

There are many forms of sexual behaviour that are afforded legitimization through the presence of the Internet. One example is that of the emergence of online forums devoted to ‘bug chasers,’ gay men who seek out partners who are HIV-positive in order to contract the virus (Gauthier and Forsyth 1998; Tewksbury 2006). There has also been a proliferation in sites and forums devoted to the sharing of child pornography (Jenkins 2001). Juline Koken, David Bimbi, Jeffrey Parsons, and Perry Halkitus (2004) discuss the experiences of male escorts who advertise on the Internet. As well, Feona Attwood (2009) explores the issue of cybersex as engaged in by men, and how it informs their constructions of their self and sex.

With the increase in sexual sub-cultures on the Internet, it is interesting to see how these groups may employ the space as a tool to contest and expand definitions of sexuality, yet possibly also reinforce normative ideas. Simpson (2005) argues that the Internet serves as a site of both contestation and reinforcement of contemporary identities and ideas. Therefore, it is important to explore how members of The Doll Forum both create a new sexual identity, yet also examine what ideas are being reinforced within this community. Which ideas surrounding

‘normal’ (hetero)sexuality are drawn upon through members’ use and discussions of Real Dolls?
How has The Doll Forum utilized the Internet in order to create a safe space where members are able to openly discuss their behaviour?

Concluding Remarks

Much academic research has been done on the fluid nature of gender, as well as the construction of ‘normal’ sexual behaviours. The Doll Forum serves as a space where these ideas are both put to work and directly challenged by the exchanges between the members. Through their discussions, ideas of gender, sexuality, and relationships are potentially both reinforced and challenged, as is often occurring within the space of the Internet. How these ideologies are reproduced and challenged, and the ways in which this occurs, are of key interest in this study. The next section will lay out the methodology I will employ to address this task.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A growing community of over 30,000 members, The Doll Forum constitutes a site where doll owners have found a place where their activities are supported and reinforced. A key aim of this study, therefore, is to understand how particular notions of gender, sexuality, and relationships are constructed and maintained within the discussions that are exchanged within the forum.

Drawing on the method of Critical Discourse Analysis, one month of posts from the forum will be examined to uncover the processes that are at work in these active exchanges and constructions, as well as how power, agency, and subjectivity play out in the users' discussions of their dolls and in their interactions with each other. Before outlining the specific features of this analysis, it will be helpful to first provide an overview of The Doll Forum, as well as an explanation as to the unique ethical issue posed through conducting research in an online environment.

2.1 The Doll Forum

The Doll Forum is an Internet site that was established in 2001 and is geared towards “doll owners and admirers” (www.dollforum.com).¹ Prior to accessing the main page, users are warned that the forum is an ‘Adult Oriented’ site, and are asked to confirm that they are over the age of 18 before proceeding. They are also asked that they agree to the disclaimer outlined at the bottom of the page. Once a reader clicks on the disclaimer, he or she is taken to a web page that features a large photograph of a naked Real Doll in a provocative pose. Upon clicking this

¹ In March 2010, The Doll Forum website underwent a makeover. However, because the data were collected in September 2009, prior to this change, the description provided is of the site as it was at that time.

image, the user is taken to the main site, within which the reader is greeted with advertisements for various sex-related items, including toys, videos, and other accessories. These advertisements are found throughout the main site page, even being included among breaks in the forum listings. The main banner at the top of the page also features an image of a naked Real Doll.

Registration on the site is free to any individual with an active email address. Once registered, users are able to set up a profile consisting of a profile picture that is displayed on any post they make, as well as where they are from and what their 'status' is on the forum. A member's 'status' is determined by how many posts he has contributed to the forum, ranging from 'lurker' to 'senior member' and 'moderator' or 'super moderator.' Members are also able to include a 'signature' which appears at the end of every post they make. Signatures may include links to photo albums they have created within the forum, or a line describing who they are, as well as quotes they may enjoy. Each member also has access to chat rooms, as well as galleries in which members post images of their dolls.

The website is set up so that the main page highlights the topics that have most recently been posted on. When you navigate to the main forum page there are sections relating to specific groupings for each forum. The first section is for news, the second for regular forums, the third is for special access, and the last is for other forums. One can see from this main page how many topics and posts have been contributed to each specific forum. Along with the Real Doll forum, there are forums for other brands of realistic love dolls, such as Boy Toy Dolls (which are produced by the same company that makes Real Dolls, Abyss Creations), Lovable Dolls, 4Woods and more. By far the most popular forum is the Real Doll one, with a total of 70,131 posts contributing to 5,157 topics since the site's introduction in 2001 (as of September 9th, 2010). The Real Doll forum has been chosen as the focus of this study, primarily because Real

Dolls are the original doll and have been in production for the longest time, and also because it is the most active forum on the site.

When one navigates to the individual forums, each topic is shown with how many replies there have been and the date when the last post was contributed to the topic. This feature makes searching the forum for specific dates quite a challenge. In the Real Doll forum, there are four topics that have been designated as 'sticky,' meaning that no matter when they are contributed to, these topics will always appear at the top of the first page of the forum because they relate to general information that all members may be interested in. Other topics are ordered according to the date of the last post. While helpful for finding recent topics, this proves challenging when a topic that was first started in May, for example, is revisited and replied to in October, as it moves up to the top of the first page of the forum. The only search function on the entire website allows for key words in specific forums, as well as searching by contributor, but unfortunately there is no way to search by date.

Despite this feature, most topics that are posted are responded to within a few days, which allows for a rather active exchange between forum members. Members are able to attach pictures to their posts, as well as quote previous text while replying, which allows them to put their response in context and reinforces the topic discussions as more active. While there is a chat function on the website, it does not seem to be as popular as the forums.

While The Doll Forum is open to any individual who has a valid email address, there does appear to be a select number of individuals who take full advantage of the forum for posting images and discussions. Within the month under study, 161 members contributed to the 732 posts, resulting in an average of about 4 posts per person. However, there was quite a disparity between members who contributed 3 or 4 posts throughout the month, and those who contributed

rather continuously. The most prominent member was *phillip57*, who wrote 59 posts on the Real Doll forum throughout the month. Other prominent contributor's included *campdaan*, *iwannadoll*, *Mechwizard*, and *RaDiv* (21, 26, 21, and 20 posts, respectively).

There is not a great deal of additional information given by members on the forum. While it seems through responses that members do develop a sense of community among each other, through months, and even years, of contributing to The Doll Forum, for my visit throughout the month it was difficult to discern much about the characteristics of those who contribute. While it was made clear through some members' posts that there are a few who are in relationships or married, and some who have children as well, there was no information provided on careers or other personal characteristics, maintaining a great deal of anonymity among members.

Members are able to list their location as well as their user name, and the majority who take advantage of this feature come from either North America or Western Europe. The only language used within the forum is English. With the main site and all topics being in English, there does not seem to be much room provided for users who may not use English as a first language. Yet it is apparent that some members do not use English as a first language, with spelling and grammatical errors rather commonplace throughout posts.

2.2 The Data Set

During the month of September, 2009, there were 732 posts contributed to 66 topics in the Real Doll forum—a number that is sufficient enough to allow for an analysis of the discourses contained in these postings. In analyzing the discourses presented with these posts, it was important to keep the data in an organized fashion. Due to the fact that there is no way to search for specific dates within the forum posts, I first went through the topics that showed the 'date of

last post' as being within my time frame. Within these topics, I copied all posts that had been contributed during September, and pasted them into a Word document. In each post, members are able to post images as well as emoticons to express an emotion through a small image, as well as a profile picture. Any images were saved into a separate folder with the caption of the topic as the image name, while emoticons were transcribed as their textual meanings in the Word document.

I numbered each topic, beginning with the first one that had been copied, and began each with the name of the topic in bold, followed by each post that had been contributed to it, numbered subsequently. For example, for topic number one, each post within it was numbered from one onward, allowing for easy reference during my analysis. For each post, I copied the date it was contributed, the member's name, the date they joined the forum, how many posts they had contributed, what their 'status' was, and their location (where they are from) if it was included. I then included the text of the post. In total, 66 topics had been contributed to within the month.

In beginning my analysis, I utilized inductive methods by beginning by reading through the posts to see what types of themes initially emerged. Keeping in mind my research questions, I then went back and coded for themes that stood out, specifically keeping an eye on discussions related to gender, sexuality, and relationships, as well as made note of other terms which stood out that may not have directly related to my research questions. Using various coloured highlighters, I created a key and colour-coded where themes were noted.

In doing my analysis, I was able to go through the binder containing the data and reference each topic and post that contained a theme I was interested in. In notes, I was able to reference 21.9, for example, referencing the topic and then the corresponding post that I wanted

to reference. This allowed for a relatively simple way to go back through the posts and find which ones would be pertinent to my analysis.

2.3 Virtual Analysis

Before discussing in detail the primary methodology I utilize in this study, it is beneficial to explore the particular challenges that conducting research in a virtual space poses. Especially in regards to sexuality, the Internet has allowed for a site where researchers are able to access “data collection from samples that may otherwise be unreachable” (Mustanski 2001: 292). Brian Mustanski (2001) outlines some specific features of conducting research in an online environment that are of particular concern when studying sexuality, including: the relatively low cost; the ability to reach a fairly large sample; and, given that many stigmatized groups use the Internet to network, the ability to collect information on the virtual communities these groups create.

Adam Joinson (2005) notes that the merits of Internet-based research have been questioned, with some asserting that there is much lost in conducting Internet research, mostly in terms of the visual cues individual participants offer. However, he argues that despite these limitations there is much to be gained through Internet research, primarily “that it is this lack of cues which leads CMC [computer mediated communication] to be more highly social, regulated by norms and intimate than face-to-face interaction” (Joinson 2005: 22). Much of this increased intimacy is due in large part to the fact that Internet communication allows individuals to find groups with which they identify particularly closely, and are thus able to “develop high levels of affiliation and liking” (Joinson 2005: 22). A particular aspect of behaviour on the Internet that is extremely beneficial to research is that of self-disclosure. Due to the largely anonymous

environment afforded to users, researchers have found that individuals are more likely to disclose more information in Internet interactions than in those conducted face-to-face (Joinson 2005). In fact, some argue that individuals may go onto the Internet for the purpose of sharing potentially damaging information that requires a degree of anonymity, as Rosenmann and Safir (2006) argued in their exploration of the reasons why groups may arise specifically within the Internet.

While Internet-based research provides increased ease of access to various groups of people, there are ethical issues that are unique to the medium. Clive Seale, Jonatha Charteris-Black, Aidan MacFarlane, and Ann McPherson (2010) argue that while there has been great debate as to whether or not informed consent should be gathered, as it would in more traditional research projects such as face-to-face interviews or surveys, information posted on message boards or forums on the Internet are generally public. Many sites are open access, and when individuals post on them they are aware that these posts are visible to anyone. The authors assert that for sites where public access is open, messages within are public access and research on them does not require informed consent (Seale et. al. 2010). Jason Rutter and Gregory W.H. Smith (2005) argue a slightly different perspective, stating that while things may be posted within public spaces, further steps should be taken by the researcher to ensure as much anonymity as possible. In their own research, for instance, they changed the usernames members had adopted. Interestingly, when they informed members of this decision, some expressed concern that they would not be able to be identified in the subsequent research.

While The Doll Forum requires registration for individuals to post within discussions, any individual can access the site and read all of the content therein. As such, I did not seek to get informed consent from members before conducting my research. I also chose to maintain the

usernames of individuals as they appear within the forum. I made this decision because members are able to control how much information to make public when they register with the forum. While some members have information such as their location or a link to a personal website, the vast majority had nothing more than a username. As well, because the site is open access I felt that there was no need to alter the usernames as they are names that the members have chosen and willingly used on the site. Furthermore, I chose to remain an observer within the forum, and did not make my presence known to members. Seale et al. (2010) argue that in forums where researcher presence is not known, it is the participants of the forum that choose what topics to discuss, and I felt that for the purposes of this study that this would elicit the most beneficial and rich information.

While researchers are able to access a wide variety of individuals and groups through the Internet, questions do arise in terms of the external and internal validity of the data that are collected. Mustanski (2001) discusses issues that Internet research poses for external validity, primarily the potential to oversample certain populations, but also notes that general demographics of Internet users do tend to represent those of the population at large. However, in terms of the current study it would be difficult to assume that the data collected would represent that of all users of Real Dolls. As Mustanski (2001: 297) explains, with the increased anonymity provided by the Internet, individuals may also lie and engage in the creation of ‘manufactured identities’: “characters created by users to present themselves to others on the Internet.” Therefore, it would be difficult to say that the data collected are representative of the experiences and views of the entire population of Real Dolls users, but because of the anonymity and acceptance of the online forum, it is possible to explore the discussions as representative of some of the views and experiences of members of The Doll Forum.

2.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

In order to understand how the forum members construct and engage with gender, sexuality, and relationships, I engaged in a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the posts made on the forum.

Norman Fairclough (1992: 64) describes discourse as “a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning.”

Fairclough uses the term ‘discourse’ to refer to language as a “form of social practice, rather than a purely individual activity” (1992: 63). This approach has two implications, “it implies that discourse is a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation...[and] it implies that there is a dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure” (1992: 64-4). Essentially, by focusing on discourse rather than language, one is able to observe the impact that discourse has on individuals and society, and thus understand the effect that discourse has on both representing society and social structures, as well as reinforcing these structures.

Discourse is therefore constitutive in the sense that it “contributes to the constitution of all those dimensions of social structure which directly or indirectly shape and constrain it,” (Fairclough 1992: 64) including not only norms of speech but also relations and dimensions which lie behind it. It is constructive in that it contributes to the creation of social identities, social relationships, and specific knowledges (Fairclough 1992: 64). Employing this understanding and interpretation of discourse, it is important to explore the world that members of The Doll Forum are ‘constituting and constructing’ in their interactions and discussions.

Fairclough (1992) develops a three-dimensional conception of discourse—text, discursive practice, and social practice. Each of these dimensions corresponds to a particular tradition:

...the tradition of close textual and linguistic analysis within linguistics, the macrosociological tradition of analysing social practice in relation to social structures, and the interpretivist or microsociological tradition of seeing social practice as something which people actively produce and make sense of on the basis of shared commonsense procedures. (1992: 72)

With regard to text, Fairclough notes that the important issue to keep in mind involves the meaning of a text and the way in which it is interpreted (1992: 75). He suggests that in analysis that “we can use ‘meaning’ both for the potentials of forms, and for the meanings ascribed in interpretation” (1992: 75). Following Fairclough, I will approach the specific texts used within The Doll Forum as having a meaning on which the community has come to an agreement. Because there are no discussions in the forum as to definitions of certain terms or the context in which they are used, it would appear that the community has a cohesive understanding as to the meanings associated with each text produced.

The discursive practices of discourse “involves processes of text production, distribution, and consumption, and the nature of these processes varies between different types of discourse according to social factors” (Fairclough 1992: 78). Therefore, different texts are produced in differing contexts, such that the context of The Doll Forum may produce different texts than would be found in other online forums, as well as texts that would be found in books, newspapers, or television (Fairclough 1992: 78). Texts are also consumed differently depending on the context in which they are produced, so that what is produced within The Doll Forum is read differently than a newspaper or a television show by consumers. In this sense, the most important idea that Fairclough (1992: 80) stresses is that:

Processes of production and interpretation are socially constrained in a double sense. Firstly, they are constrained by the available members’ resources, which are effectively internalized social structures, norms and conventions ... Secondly, they are constrained by the specific nature of the social practice of which they are parts, which determines what elements of members’ resources are drawn upon, and how...they are drawn upon.

In this regard, it is important to be aware of the resources members of the forum are drawing from in their daily practice in creating the various discourses they utilize. Specifically, in reading The Doll Forum, I must be aware of the various constraints which influence how members are creating discourses in relation to their use of Real Dolls.

The final tradition which Fairclough addresses is that of social practice. He breaks this tradition down into two parts: ideology and hegemony (1992: 86). It is within this tradition that Fairclough seeks to “discuss discourse in relation to ideology and to power, and place discourse within a view of power as hegemony, and a view of the evolution of power relations as hegemonic struggle” (Fairclough 1992: 86). In regards to ideology, the key issue that I think is important for my research is the idea that ideologies are “significations/constructions of reality ... which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination” (Fairclough 1992: 87). In this way, ideology as found within discourse serves to both reinforce and redefine various structures within the world.

While Fairclough notes that ideologies are arguably present in various instances of discourses, he also maintains that ideology is found both in structures of discourse and in events, such that they are conditions of current events as well as transformative of structures (Fairclough 1992: 89). However, many individuals are not aware of the ideological aspect of their practices: “Ideologies built into conventions may be more or less naturalized and automatized, and people may find it difficult to comprehend that their normal practices could have specific ideological investments” (Fairclough 1992: 90). Therefore, ideologies may be so internalized that an individual is often not aware of the investment that is present in certain discourses. In this

respect, members of The Doll Forum may be engaging in both recreation and redefinition while not being entirely aware as to the meanings which their discussions bear.

Fairclough (1992) is sure to point out that it is solely ideology that is represented in the social practice of discourse. As he notes, “Ideologies arise in societies characterized by relations of domination on the basis of class, gender, cultural group, and so forth, and in so far as human beings are capable of transcending such societies, they are capable of transcending ideology” (Fairclough 1992: 91). Therefore, it is important to also examine the role that hegemony has in creating the ideological bases of various discourses that are currently present in society.

Fairclough (1992) addresses the issue of hegemony within discourse by arguing that “An order of discourse can be seen as the discursive facet of the contradictory and unstable equilibrium which constitutes a hegemony, and the articulation and rearticulation of orders of discourse is correspondingly one stake in hegemonic struggle” (1992: 93). It is the power of hegemony which assigns various ideological meanings to specific orders of discourse. Within these discourses, ideology is played out, and reinforces current ideas or has the potential to redefine and challenge them.

The importance of hegemony to Fairclough’s original three-dimensional framework is summed up as follows:

The concept of hegemony ... [provides] for discourse both a matrix—a way of analysing the social practice within which the discourse belongs in terms of power relations, in terms of whether they reproduce, restructure or challenge existing hegemonies—and a model—a way of analysing discourse practice itself as a mode of hegemonic struggle, reproducing, restructuring or challenging existing orders of discourse. (1992: 95)

This conception calls attention to the importance of discourse in social change. In focusing on discursive change and the relation it has with social change, Fairclough (1992) notes that we need to understand two things: “one needs to understand processes of change as they occur in

discursive events. On the other hand, one needs an orientation to how processes of rearticulation affect orders of discourse” (1992: 96). While Fairclough acknowledges the importance of both aspects of discursive change, the one that is most important to my research is how discursive events contribute to social change.

The primary way in which the discursive event can lead to social change is in the potential for both producers and interpreters to bring into question standard conventions (Fairclough 1992: 96). This leads to ‘dilemmas’ arising among people who are exposed to the discursive event, and individuals deal with these in a number of ways: “They often try to resolve these dilemmas by being innovative and creative, by adapting existing conventions in new ways, and so contributing to discursive change” (Fairclough 1992: 96). Discursive change arises in the responses to challenges produced within various discursive events. Therefore, one could read the texts of The Doll Forum as contributing to discursive change by the fact that many of the discussions bring into question standard ideas surrounding gender and relationship behaviour more generally. Therefore, the ways in which other members respond contribute to a potential social change arising from the discursive events within the forum.

While CDA offers a way of understanding in depth how social life is discursively constituted by individuals, it is not without its limitations. One of the key limitations discussed regarding CDA is the fact that it is largely based upon interpretation (Tyrwhitt-Drake 1999). CDA is an interpretation of various texts, and as such other researchers and readers may interpret what was posted in a different way than I have. As well, members themselves may have had a different meaning in constructing their posts than what I have taken from them. While interviews would allow the forum members to discuss and qualify more clearly their individual meanings and understandings of their behaviour, I am working under a framework of interpretation that is

unique to me, and reflective of my experiences. Many of the limitations reflect the issue of positionality, and the effect that the researcher's experience has on the way in which data are interpreted and understood.

4.5 Researcher Positionality

Given the limitations of CDA in relation to its interpretive nature, it is important to briefly explore my own position in researching The Doll Forum. Gillian Rose (1997) argues that researchers should make their positions within systems of meaning and power clear so as to make their specific perspectives clear. As a feminist woman, I have to admit that my first few visits to The Doll Forum were fraught with an extremely judgemental, critical interpretation. Given the discussions and use of images, I was immediately taken aback by the ways in which femininity was being represented. As a post-structuralist sociologist primarily interested in sexuality, however, I was very much interested in the behaviour that users of Real Dolls are engaging in and how it contests patriarchal understandings of sexuality. As such, it was important for me to keep my positionality in mind while conducting my research. Both viewpoints, while seemingly contradictory, served to allow for a rich analysis of the implications regarding gender and sexuality that the use of Real Dolls poses. However, it is important to note that while my focus was on gender and sexuality, other readings may result in a different interpretation as to what the discussions within The Doll Forum can represent.

Concluding Remarks

The Internet provides a space where a rich amount of data can be gathered with relative ease, especially in seeking out groups that may otherwise be difficult to access. The anonymity and

public access also allows for a great amount of data to be collected, providing for a rich analysis of a wide variety of groups. However, with the anonymity afforded by the Internet and online communication, the ability for individuals to lie is rather great, and the potential for data to be skewed or for groups to be misrepresented is important to keep in mind.

Through CDA, the rich variety of textual data produced on the Internet can be analysed critically. The key focus within CDA is in being aware of the specific features of discourses that serve to reinforce traditional ideologies, yet also those that serve to redefine and elicit social change. In what ways are texts and discourses utilized by members of The Doll Forum in order to construct gender, sexuality, and relationships within the community, and what features of each are they drawing upon from the larger society in their constructions?

CDA is an appropriate method with which to study this community, as the entire basis of their relationships and exchanges are facilitated with the use of language. As well, CDA provides a method to interpret images that are posted within the forum as well, reading them as a discursive practice. The forum exists within the textual space of the Internet, providing a unique way of constructing a specific world and understanding. In this regard, I am able to gain an understanding as to how the members of the forum constitute and construct definitions and understandings around gender and sexuality, specifically, in the ways that they discursively represent the dolls, themselves, and their relationships with the dolls.

CHAPTER THREE

REPEAT AFTER ME: CONSTRUCTING GENDER AND SEXUALITY ON THE DOLL FORUM

I begin my analysis with a focus on the specific ways in which members of The Doll Forum discursively reiterate and reinforce constructions of gender and sexuality. As performativity is based upon various acts, my interest in this chapter is on the acts that are central to the constructions of gender and sexuality as experienced by the forum members. What constructions of gender and sexuality are most important to users of Real Dolls, and how do these constructions differ—if they differ at all—from those understood within society? Before addressing these questions, however, an overview of The Doll Forum is required.

3.1 Overview of The Doll Forum

Within the month of September 2009, forum members contributed 732 individual posts to 66 topics. These topics cover a variety of issues, including reviews of newly released products, as well as various maintenance issues that users may encounter.² An interesting observation is that Abyss Creations, the company that produces Real Dolls, is rather active on the forum, posting updates on new products as well as even engaging forum members with trivia games, providing prizes of credit to members who may win. Within the month under study, Abyss contributed 15 posts to 9 topics. Another interesting feature of the forum, which users take great advantage of, is the ability to post images within an individual post. In fact, the most popular use of the forum is

² One such maintenance issue involved a ‘recore,’ which is a process in which a doll owner is able to fix the vagina of a Real Doll. If it has become loose or disrupted in any way, members are able to order a kit from Abyss and do this procedure. One forum member explained how he did this procedure, including links to pictures of the procedure.

in posting pictures users have taken of their dolls, whether to highlight the doll and the member's photographic skills or to introduce a new doll to the forum community. Within the month, there were roughly 150 images posted by members.

During the period under study, the five most popular topics (based on the number of responses) covered a range of issues. 'Her name is Tamasha (Real Doll 2)' and 'Weena has arrived' (51 and 48 posts, respectively) were the two most popular topics, and each were started to introduce a member's new doll to the forum. The third topic, 'Class Action Lawsuit' (41 posts) was started by a member complaining about a feature of the dolls that many members seem to have had problems with.³ 'How real do they feel' (28 posts) involved an individual who was interested in purchasing a Real Doll seeking advice on how real they actually feel, with many members responding with their experiences. The final most popular topic, 'Inspired by Oohlalas pics of Lilith,' (23 posts) featured a member posting pictures of his doll.

Many of the responses which members post to topics within the forum are rather short, containing perhaps two or three sentences of text. Especially within the more popular topics, many members would respond with a few sentences congratulating a member on a new doll, or commenting on the doll's appearance in the case of a picture. There were some instances, however, where members would write longer, very detailed posts, and these occurred most often in response to topics asking for advice. Most notable among these are the topics 'New and hesitating about a purchase' and 'Learning curve.' In each of these instances, members were very willing to give a great deal of advice to individuals about Real Dolls and their individual

³ This feature involves the issue of what forum members call 'finger pokes' in which the finger frame of the Real Doll has a tendency to break through the skin of the hands. The issue is caused by wear of the skin, and also through users bumping the hands into things. While a few responses to this topic agreed with the original poster in perhaps taking an action against a design flaw in Real Dolls, most of the responses were very supportive of Abyss and the way in which the dolls are designed, including the fact that the 'pokes' are avoidable.

experiences with them. In general, members are very open about helping out fellow forum members, as well as potential Real Doll owners.

The majority of responses to a topic occur within a few days of the initial post, leading to a very active conversation between forum members. An interesting method used by forum members involves the use of various shorthand terms in their posts. There are occasions where members use acronyms instead of an entire word in their post (for example, ‘LOL’ for ‘laughing out loud’). If users refer to the body or face type that they have chosen for their dolls, they use B- or F- and then the number for the corresponding body or face that they have chosen. Another shorthand which was especially prevalent is the use of ‘RG’ for ‘Real Girl’ and ‘RD’ for ‘Real Doll.’ In this way forum members are easily able to distinguish between discussions on Real Dolls or Real Girls. The use of Real Girls when discussing real women is noteworthy, and will be explored in more detail further in this chapter.

While there are both female and male dolls available, users of Real Dolls, as well as The Doll Forum, are mostly male. While female dolls are available in about ten body options, there are only two male doll options available for purchase. As well, the Real Doll forum on the site is utilized for female Real Dolls, as there is a separate Male Doll forum. The Male Doll Forum is not as popular as the Real Doll Forum, with a total of about 3629 posts contributed to 257 topics (as of November 9th, 2010)—compared to the 68,846 posts contributed to 5,110 topics on the Real Doll forum. Abyss also carries accessories such as clothing, shoes, and jewellery which are available to owners of Real Dolls, yet these accessories are exclusively designed for female Real Dolls. Nevertheless, there is indication that some of the users of female Real Dolls are female. In the posts under study, four users—*GigiAvril*, *Renate*, *dollyforme*, and *anonymousrealdollowner*—stand out as female based upon things they have posted, or because

of content included within their signatures. For example, *anonymousrealdollowner's* signature includes "A married female doll owner." Despite the presence of some female users of female Real Dolls, then, the Real Doll forum is dominated by male users.

Due to the relational nature of gender, it is important to understand that the behaviour of users while discursively constructing their dolls as female by extension serves to construct definitions of masculinity. In this way, not only is femininity performatively engaged with within the forum, but masculinity is as well. Often, the two are done simultaneously within the same topic or post, but there are times when they are performed separately.

3.2 Appearance

The most prevalent theme that emerged through users' discussions, particularly in terms of femininity, was in relation to the customization and appearance of Real Dolls. While the users of Real Dolls are offered many choices in regards to facial features, skin tone, eye colour, eye liner, eye shadow, lip colour, nail colour, hair styles, and pubic hair for their dolls, the parameters of those choices are determined by the manufacturer. In this way, Abyss has defined what is attractive in terms of feminine appearance, for example: thin waist; defined hips; large breasts; smooth bodies; minimal hair; and full lips (see: Image 1). However, users still engage in many discussions regarding the ways in which they customize their Real Dolls to the exact specifications they prefer.

Image 1: ‘Real Doll Spec Sheet’

Female Doll Specifications

Specs	Body 1	Body 2	Body 3	Body 4	Body 5	Body 6	Body 7	Body 8	Body 10
Height (approx)	5' 6" (1.68 m)	5' 1" (1.55 m)	5' 5" (1.65 m)	4' 10" (1.47 m)	4' 10" (1.47 m)	5' 3" (1.60 m)	5' 3" (1.60 m)	5' 7" (1.70 m)	5' 5" (1.65 m)
Bust	32C	32C	34D	32AA	32E	32A	32B	34B	34DD
Waist	24" (61.0 cm)	23" (58.4 cm)	26" (66.0 cm)	23" (58.4 cm)	23" (58.4 cm)	24" (59.7 cm)	24" (61.0 cm)	26" (66.0 cm)	25" (63.5 cm)
Hips	34" (86.4 cm)	32" (81.3 cm)	36" (91.4 cm)	33" (83.8 cm)	33" (83.8 cm)	33" (83.8 cm)	33" (83.8 cm)	37" (94.0 cm)	39" (99.1 cm)
Dress Size	S-M/4-6	XS-S/2-4	M-L/6-8	XXS-XS/0-2	XS-M/2-6	XS-S/0-2	XS-S/2-4	S-M/6-8	M-L/10-12
Shoe Size	7,8	5,6	7,8	5,6	5,6	7,8	7,8	8,9	8,9

To learn more about how our clothes fit on our dolls please view our Sizing Guide

Source: www.realdoll.com Used with permission

While members are very aware of the pre-designed options that are available to them, and focus many of their discussions on the merits of specific body or face types as well as various combinations of each, they also work to challenge these options through engaging in their own customizations of their Real Dolls. The personal touches which users engage in take on a large focus within discussions on the forum, with a few specific characteristics given focus: Body/Face type; aesthetic appearance, especially make-up, hair, and clothing; and physical customization and upgrading.

3.2a: Body and Face

Throughout their discussions, users of Real Dolls quite often reduce their dolls to their specific body or face type. For instance, in response to images of a doll posted by *phillip57*, forum member *playtime* remarked:

So what am I seeing here, ...? A nice B4 body with that tight cute butt, ... long hair that go's [sic]⁴ down to just on her butt, you just love to fondle,...HOT DAMN! ... Does it get any better than that?

When member *Moki* told the forum that his doll had been put into production, *stacy718* asked “Can you tell us what specs you’ve chose? I am always curious about that.” *keithallen* echoed the inquiry, with *Moki* replying that “I ordered a B-1 doll with a F-14 and another F-11. This is just in case one of them gets mad at me.” *stacy718* replied that “Body 1 has the BEST ass EVER!!!!!!” Similarly, *iwannadoll* inquired as to whether anyone owned a B10:

I’m kinda interested because of it’s hourglass shape 39-25-39 measurment, meaning it’s got a nice sixed child bearing hips and a nice set of racks. I’m kinda thinking Nordic / Viking type woman here ... a good Hilga.

Mechwizard echoed the favourable sentiments towards the B10 body by describing it “as the voluptuous, pin-up body.”

As well, when members begin topics introducing their newly delivered dolls, they are always sure to point out the body and face combinations that they ordered, and are requested by other forum members to do so if they do not. In introducing his newly delivered Real Doll, *phantom_texan* wrote: “... Amber and Jade had a new sister and Jessica had a new home. She is of course a Realdoll, body 2, face 11. This means that she has the same face as two of my favourite ladies here, Vanessa and Zara.” In response to pictures posted by *movieman*, *Richbeachgoer* asked: “Is Licie a Face 12 body 2? She certainly is a knock out.” In response to

⁴ All posts are cited verbatim, including spelling and grammar.

pictures posted by member *Prof Sakai*: “Vavvavoom! What Mfg., body type, face/head, is the doll? And what size/cup breast are those? Mikey like it! (old cereal commercial).” (*iwannadoll*). When he finally was able to post images of his new doll, *phillip57* introduced his doll in the following way: “For any one that doesn’t know, meet Gabrielle, My lovely B4 F16 Realdoll.” (see: Image 2⁵)

In placing emphasis upon the specific body and face types that members chose for their Real Dolls, posters are working under the assumption that they are all aware of the characteristics of each body and face type. Abyss has a ‘spec sheet’ on their website, providing customers with the exact measurements of each body, and the exact appearance of each face. It is interesting that even when accompanied by images of the Real Doll, members are still curious to know the exact body and face type that is being shown. This trend reflects what Heiko Motschenbacher (2009) discusses in her examination of gendered language when referring to bodies. While members are aware of the measurements and specification each body and face type represent, by engaging in discussions where Real Dolls are only referred to in those terms, they are reinforcing the importance of those characteristics to the feminine representation that Real Dolls embody. By focussing on comments related to the breast size and hip size, among other features of Real Dolls, members are reiterating that these characteristics are what make Real Dolls appropriately feminine and extremely attractive. As discussed previously, Motschenbacher (2009: 18) found that body parts that are specifically feminine were largely aesthetic, and found on the surface of the body. The features which members of The Doll Forum are highlighting are those very same ones, based on size and shape, as opposed to strength and function.

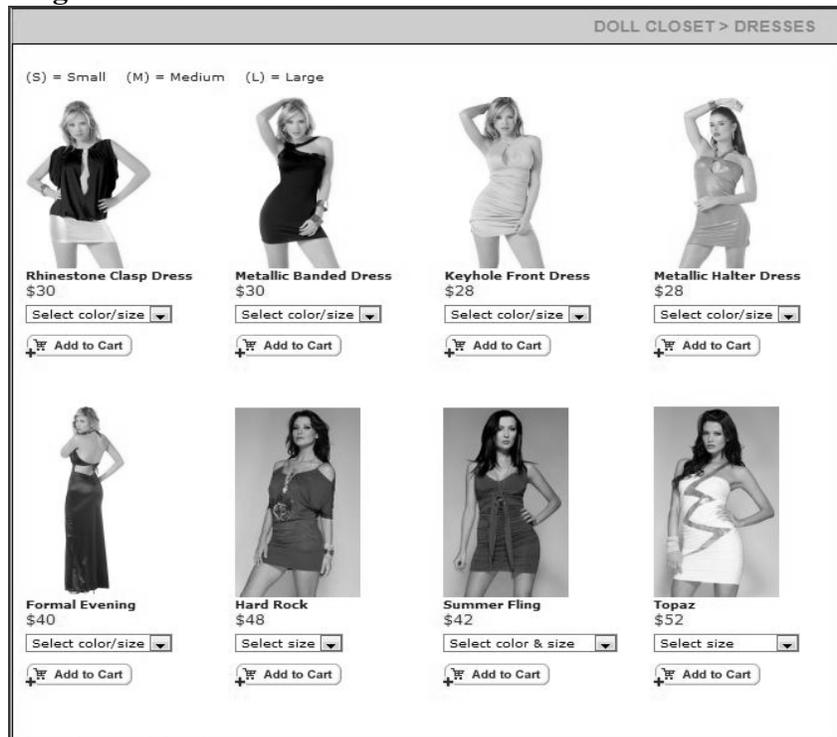
⁵ <http://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=25764&hilit=it%27s+official+I+can+finally>

3.2b: Aesthetic Customization

While members were keen to focus on the specific merits of each proscribed face and body type which they had chosen with their dolls, they were also sure to focus a large part of their discussions on the ways in which they further personalized their Real Dolls through the use of various make-up, hair, and clothing options. The ways in which users change their dolls through the use of make-up and clothing serves to highlight how members of The Doll Forum are able to represent and further reinforce a certain construction of femininity.

In addition to offering choices as to body types and appearance, Abyss has also started to provide clothing options specifically designed for Real Dolls. The Doll Closet page of the company's web site is advertised as "your one stop shop for clothing and accessories for your RealDolls!" (www.realdoll.com). The options provided by Abyss with The Doll Closet are extremely gendered, and provide a further framework as to the femininity that is acceptable in regards to Real Dolls. The shoes, for example, have very high heels that would be difficult for many women to walk in. The clothing is extremely revealing. Being very short in length and showing a large amount of cleavage, the outfits seem more similar to lingerie than typical clothing that women would wear. The clothing options provided by Abyss would be extremely difficult for many women to move in without falling or revealing their bodies (see: Image 3).

Image 3: ‘The Doll Closet – Dresses’



Source: www.realdoll.com Used with permission

While members generally approve of the options made available by Abyss, agreeing that “Our dolls will look very sexy with these outfits!!!” (*Virgo*), there are many other options that more experienced owners are aware of:

I believe that the here shown collection will be a good beginning for less experienced RD owners. Experienced RD owners usually have the suitable shops for the different categories of the doll clothing in their proximity or in the internet. (*Ekkehard*)

Along with clothing and shoes, members discuss changing the appearance of their dolls with various wigs and make-up options. Inquiring about various wig options, *far_from_sane* says that: “dark blue hair interests me,” and when *Mechwizard* posts a picture of his doll, Zara, with a blue wig, one user is sure to point out that: “Zara is beautiful with blue hair, blond hair, black hair or brown hair” (*Gigi_Avril*). In response to a picture that *movieman* posted in which his doll

has been given new hair (see: Image 4⁶), *Virgo* remarked: “Please tell Lucy that she’s very sexy with her new light blonde bob cut.” When *campdaan* posted pictures of his doll, Melissa, with new hair, members commented with such remarks as:

“She looks stunning in this wig!” (*mbishop99*)

“Very nice. Blonde suits her.” (*AMALIA*)

“Melissa looks very sexy in her new wig.” (*fixitman*)

“Totally hot! She looks like a brand new girl!” (*Musician*)

Interestingly, one member, *movieman*, summed up changing appearances by drawing on an essentialist idea regarding femininity: “you know what women are like for changing their minds and things.”

Within these posts the emphasis is on the ways in which various aspects of appearance can—and should—be utilized in order to cultivate a Real Doll’s “true self.” The performative aspect of femininity is at work in the ways in which members are sure to discuss various aspects of appearance that take work in order to make a doll beautiful. Using clothing, wigs, and makeup, one is able to bring out and draw upon the ‘true beauty’ within each doll. However, the importance of the original specifications is not lost, with the body and face playing an important role in the interpretation as to whether or not a doll is beautiful. Interesting within these discussions, however, is the fact that not once would a member be met with a comment stating that their doll is unattractive. No matter what specifications or aesthetic customization one may do to their Real Doll, the overwhelming consensus will still remain that the doll is beautiful and sexy.

⁶ <http://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=26126&hilit=lucie%27s+done+a+few+more>

The quest for constant change and improvement that is represented through discussions of the body and face dimensions, as well as makeup, clothing and hair, relates very well to what Susan Bordo (1993) and Sandra Lee Bartky (2003) discuss regarding feminine appearance. Women are constantly told to improve their appearance and bodies, whether it is through clothing, makeup, and, at the extreme, cosmetic surgery. It seems that members of The Doll Forum are drawing from this cultural construction as well in constantly working to improve and change the appearance of their dolls, and in focussing on doing so through the use of make-up, wigs, and various outfits. In specific regards to the appearance that they create for their dolls, however, members are relying largely on predefined characteristics of ‘attractive’ femininity, as determined by the models offered by Abyss or from social images of desirable feminine bodies. In this way members of The Doll Forum draw from and reinforce contemporary definitions of femininity. *merkin* embraces this idea when he remarks, while introducing his doll to the forum: “Eventually I intend to change her look considerably through makeup and eye color. Now though she’s still the B7F11 natural beauty I was originally attracted to.” Despite asserting that he thinks his doll is very beautiful, changes made to her appearance are still in order, reinforcing that no matter how naturally beautiful a woman may be improvements can, and should, always be made.

The idea of experience is also important, and emerges throughout a few of the members’ discussions. Owning a Real Doll requires an amount of experience that is not lost on forum members—not only in terms of the best ways to dress and make-up a doll, but also in the care required to maintain it. Gender, as well, is a learned trait that requires experience and training to master. Karin A. Martin (2003) examines how gender is learned from a young age, and regularly requires negotiation and work to perform adequately. This idea is embraced as well by members

of The Doll Forum. The fact that members are aware of the experience required in dressing one's doll reinforces the performative act of gender in a very real way.

3.2c: Physical Customization

Perhaps the most prevalent way in which feminine appearance was discussed through members' experiences with their Real Dolls is in posts relating directly to physical customization and upgrades. Within these posts members discuss various options available in order to 'improve' their dolls, whether through basic procedures such as tightening joints or specific body parts, or by getting an entirely new face or body for their doll.

In 'A happy accident,' for instance, forum member *sanpedro* discusses in detail how he was able to make the vagina on his doll, Kelly, to his preferred specifications: "The result is a cameltoe with a cute little peekaboo clit, I'm really pleased with how it came out" (see: Image 5⁷). In this post *sanpedro* goes into quite a bit of detail as to how he came to notice that he could change the vagina on his doll in order to make it more aesthetically pleasing, as well as the actual procedure that he used to do it. As well, *mytime* discusses the way he was able to tighten up his doll after some time and use: "If she becomes bit loose after some years in vaginal or anal area, consider this operation ... The end result? Sex as with a new doll!"

Along with customization through home procedures, members are able to 'upgrade' their dolls through new bodies or faces. Responding to *RaDiv*'s introduction of his doll, which is a Real Doll 2, *mahtek* remarks: "I'm very much interested to hear your reviews and comparisons to the RD1. It will make my choice for a replacement body for Phoebe that much easier." *mahtek* also posed the question about a body upgrade in response to a post by Abyss about the differences between the Real Doll 2 and original Real Doll, asking: "Will it be possible to unbolt

⁷ <http://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=26029&hilit=a+happy+accident>

the head from my RD1, and attach it to the RD2 body so my Phoebe can get a new body upgrade?" *Matt* replied that "it is entirely possible to put an RD skull on an RD2 body and vice versa. BT dolls also have the same basic connections; so in a nutshell, yes, you can interchange heads on ALL of the dolls that I have made to date." This announcement drew many responses, all favourable about the news: "That flexibility in being able to adapt one head on another body type is great news!" (*CJD*); "That is about the best news EVER!!!!..." (*stacy718*). The possibility of re-designing the dolls is in fact a huge part of the appeal for some members: "Sorry to say that, but for an unknown reason, having sex with a dolls without 'correct specifications' break my desire to buy one." (*youshouldtrylinux*).

These posts replicate many of the discourses commonly presented to women in regards to improving their bodies in order to enhance their self-image and confidence, as well as their desirability to men (Bordo 1993). The key theme within these discourses, as Bordo notes, is an image of femininity wherein women are told that they are always in need of improvement. The biggest project of femininity, then, becomes constantly working at improving oneself. This is reflected in the rise in the use of cosmetic surgery. Balsamo (1998) argues that given the technology of cosmetic surgery, it becomes a deviant act for a woman to *not* take advantage, to not improve herself to become the ideal feminine body that is now within reach.

While discourses around the appearance of Real Dolls serve to largely reproduce general notions of femininity in terms of appearance, customization, and improvement, these discourses are subversive in one key respect: it is not the job of the female to constantly improve herself and to take on the 'face work' of femininity. Rather, in the case of Real Dolls, it becomes the task of the *male owners* to dress, make-up, customize, and fix their dolls. The men are the ones tasked with the project of femininity, at least as far as the appearance of their Real Doll goes. In this

respect, the doll owner's experience is akin to that of young girls playing with Barbie Dolls. Barbie Dolls are dressed up, and their appearance constantly changed, by the girls who play with them. In a study conducted by Tara L Kuther and Erin McDonald (2004), Barbie Dolls were found to occupy a key place in the play lives of young girls, wherein they would dress up and engage in imaginative role playing with the doll. In contrast, the authors found that when young boys interacted with Barbie Dolls, it was mostly torture play that involved harming the doll—a stark contrast to the discourse of the men who play with Real Dolls.

In this context, Real Dolls are life-size Barbie Dolls, with the men who use them dressing them up and positioning them in ways of their own choosing. This choice does not happen in a social vacuum, however, and this is evident in the images posted (see: Images 6 and 7⁸). Real Dolls are (re)presented by users in very stereotypical ways, so that the dolls become a reinforcement of standardized ideas regarding feminine appearance. Moreover, Real Dolls are the ultimate docile body, a feature that becomes extremely apparent when examining these images and discussions. In this context, the feminine body as represented by Real Dolls is completely malleable. The fact that users are able to simply remove one face and add another—as *Moki* joked he would do if “one of them gets mad at me”—presents an image wherein women can be changed, and should be changed, if one grows tired of the way they look.

⁸ <http://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=26142>

Image 7: 'Real Doll 2: The Review'



Posted Sept.29th by *RaDiv*
Used with permission

3.3 Taking Care

A further extension of the physical customization users stress within their discussions is the focus on care and responsibility that users found was needed in order to maintain their Real Dolls. For example, there were a few topics that were started by members inquiring as to the techniques for properly taking care of their dolls, whether seeking advice for maintenance tips for a current doll or in inquiring about a potential purchase. Throughout all of these posts, it is apparent that members are very aware that Real Dolls require quite a bit of work. As one example, when a member inquired as to how best to store one's Real Doll, *Bill* replied: "Silicone dolls are a responsibility and have to be moved often but the hook is good for long time storage." In a similar fashion, *Musician* commented on his difficulties in handling his doll: "I haven't gotten the hang of how to pick her [up] best and how to dress the easiest way yet. It's still a bit of

a struggle even though she is a lot lighter than a lot of the dolls out there.” In response to a posting that questioned why Real Doll owners do not sue Abyss for the problem of ‘finger pokes’ with the dolls, *GordonGriggs* commented: “Yes, I’ve had to make a few minor repairs. But owning a Real Doll is much like owning a car. If you drive her long enough you will eventually brake something.”

Within many of the discussions it is apparent that members are prepared for the fact that handling Real Dolls takes some effort, and as such develop techniques in order to deal with what may happen. *sanpedro*, for instance, commented; “Bit by bit I’ve learned how to work with her. I even navigated her through a very narrow right angle into the bathroom for a proper bath and extensive douching.” Furthermore, they are more than willing to provide assistance to other forum members who question how best to handle and care for their dolls. As *phillip 57* noted: “I had read the extensive backlog of posts on the subject before receiving my RD, and was prepared when she arrived to take the necessary precautions as to avoid the dreaded pokes.” Experience plays a large part in discussions around care and responsibility as well, further reinforcing that there is a level of knowledge and learning one must acquire when owning a Real Doll.

The idea of ‘care’ came through clearly in some of the posts as an important part of owning a doll. In one post forum member *muzza* warned an inquiring *Pat69* about the work required in owning a doll: “how much care and repair and maintenance are you prepared to manage?” As well, when another member mentioned that it was the birthday of his doll, *AMALIA* offered congratulations to the doll: “Congratulations to dreamweavers for taking such good care of you.”

It is interesting to see within the forum that while care and responsibility are extolled as virtues of a ‘good’ Real Doll owner within the forum, these are characteristics traditionally

aligned more with femininity than masculinity (Connell 1995). In this way, users are setting up a masculinity that shares characteristics of femininity, thereby redefining what is valued as masculine within the forum. Yet, in doing so, they are still relying largely on an idea of femininity as a constant project, as something learned, that one must master and constantly attend to in order to maintain.

While femininity is reinforced in the appearance of Real Dolls, a shifting definition of masculinity emerges, primarily in the way that the owners of Real Dolls are the ones who are responsible for the appearance and maintenance of their dolls. However, as discussed above, *movieman* was sure to draw on stereotypes of femininity in explaining changing appearance. His comment that women are “known for changing their minds and things” reinforces the idea of femininity as constantly changing. Femininity still remains as a continual project of shifting appearance.

It is interesting to see through the discussions surrounding the beauty of Real Dolls the fact that, while extolling the virtues of the body and face types as proscribed by Abyss, members are still keen on putting their own personal touches onto their Real Dolls. This trend relates to the idea of “appropriation.” Discussed briefly in exploring various theories of femininity, appropriation is at work in a key way in the discussions member of The Doll Forum engage in regarding the customization they do with their Real Dolls. While the members of The Doll Forum generally enjoy the image of femininity as embodied by the Real Dolls as it is produced by Abyss, the fact that they engage in modifications speaks to a desire to personalize their Real Dolls according to their own desires and images of feminine attractiveness.

Kathleen Ashley and Véronique Plesch (2002) define appropriation as a way for various groups to define their separate identity—separate from that of a dominant group. Individuals

appropriate a variety of cultural images, such as certain music styles or brands in a way that reinterprets the message and meaning to one that the consumer identifies with on a more personal level (Rodriguez 2006; Orend and Gagné 2009). In this way, members of The Doll Forum, while generally supporting the vision of femininity created by Abyss, also seek to carve out their own image and interpretation of feminine beauty through experimenting with other characteristics for their own pleasure.

Through their discussions and in urging one another to show images and provide descriptions as to the appearance of one another's dolls, the members are in fact situating appropriation as a necessary aspect of doll ownership. Through posts which describe in detail various physical customizations, and in posting ideas for various hair and clothing options, members are reinforcing not only the changing aspect of femininity, and a femininity based on appearance, but also that they, as consumers, have the power and ability to construct what they desire their Real Dolls to be. Therefore, while Abyss Creations may have a specific image of femininity in mind while constructing Real Dolls—for example, large breasts, small waist, defined hips, smooth, hairless body—users still want to interpret the image in their own way, putting their own personalization on their Real Dolls.

3.4 Sexual Desire

While more traditional constructions of femininity were largely reinforced by members of the Doll Forum in terms of appearance and the quest for constant improvement, they also utilized various discourses which reinforced ideas surrounding constructions of sexuality. Specifically, users note that a key attraction in having a Real Doll is the fact that the doll is always sexually available—in a way many note that from their experience real women have not been. Posters

construct their dolls within parameters of being sexually desiring and sexually empowered, putting emphasis on femininity predicated upon a coy and available sexuality, as opposed to one based upon chastity.

One example can be found in response to images posted by member *Prof_Sakai*. *emjay* commented: “Just love the way the panties ... are falling down, kind of a very suggestive invitation.” In responding to various comments made about images he posted, *movieman* ended by saying: “Must dash as Lucie is getting frisky again.” While exchanging with members about the wait he must endure before his new doll, Jessica, arrives, *phantom_texan* made a point of noting that: “Amber and Jade are finding ways to keep me occupied.” Similarly, before posting images of his doll, *fixitman* wrote: “Of course she couldn’t resist showing off a bit more.” (see: Image 8⁹)

Interestingly, posters drew upon the notion of the ‘perfect wife,’ and the way in which Real Dolls conformed to this construction. Most notable in this regard is an exchange between forum members *Gigi_Avril* and *movieman*. *Movieman* had posted pictures of his doll, Lucie, in a wedding gown (see: Image 9¹⁰), to which *Gigi_Avril* commented:

What a beautiful Bride Lucie makes...Why not get married, she’s the perfect wife, beautiful, open for anything sexual you want, won’t leave you, want fool around on you and won’t talk you to death.

movieman responded to *Gigi_Avril* with the remark:

You may have a good point there, the last one ran off, took all the money, lied and cheated and then it cost me another \$75,000/£48,000 to pay her off. As for Lucie she never wants to know where I am going, when I am coming back, how much anything costs, or what do you want one of those for don’t even have to feed her. HmMMM could be onto something here.

⁹ <http://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=25840&hilit=enjoying+a+day+off>

¹⁰ <http://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=26186&hilit=three+more+from+Lucie>

In company with the sexual availability of Real Dolls—and in keeping with the relational nature of constructions of femininity and masculinity—is the ability of users to fulfill the sexual desires of their Real Dolls. On posting images of his doll, Gabe, *phillip57* commented: “She’s always horny after a gig.....and I know just what she wants...” (see: Image 10¹¹). Commenting on user *RaDiv*’s new doll, Tamasha, *Musician* remarked: “Your going to be a busy boy trying to keep all those beauties of yours happy” to which *RaDiv* replied: “I don’t think I’ll have trouble being bored now. satisfying 4 dolls keeps me occupied.”

Throughout these posts it becomes clear that within The Doll Forum users are bringing forward many discourses of sexuality throughout their discussions, all of which highlight the competing conceptions of sexuality as found within society. While in these posts femininity, as it relates to Real Dolls, is being constructed in such a way as to suggest sexual availability and complicity, the discussions about real women focus on negative characteristics, with forum members arguing that from their experience real women are demanding, liars, and cheats. The ‘perfect wife,’ as represented by Real Dolls, is always ready and willing for sex, and makes few demands upon their owners.

Discourses about the sexual availability of Real Dolls, then, seem to contradict notions of femininity in which women are constructed as sexually passive. In these posts, femininity is constructed as sexually available and always in need of being satisfied, while masculinity is defined as sexually able to satisfy. Masculinity is reinforced as able to please, as sexually adept and competent. In this regard, the focus is not so much on masculine pleasure, but on female pleasure. Patriarchal or male-centred discourses and conceptions of sexuality and gender roles focus largely on masculine satisfaction, with females being the passive tools through which the male achieves pleasure. The discourse in the Real Doll posts, however, contests this idea by

¹¹ <http://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=26095&hilit=gabe+got+a+gig>

positioning female sexuality as more active. Feminine sexuality is given agency, and it becomes the masculine role to provide that pleasure and fulfill that constructed desire of the dolls.

In these posts, femininity becomes active, desiring, and seeking out sex. The feminine is open to very much sexually, while the masculine is more than able to fulfill these desires. Moreover, it is interesting that the pleasure of the users is not given as much focus within these discussions; the pleasure of the dolls is ostensibly primary.

Not only is this agency represented by posts about the sexual desires of Real Dolls, but also in posts dealing with individual inquiries, technical assistance, and more. For example, in response to the query “My question to the owners of a RD, how real does sex with it actually feel?” *Mechwizard* was sure to point out that it is “Sex with her, not it. Maybe that’s all the answer you need.” Furthermore, forum member *merkin* emphasized the importance of names in imparting agency and identity upon Real Dolls in his purchase of a used doll. He states: “I’ve also renamed her Alexandra, or Alex. Svetlana is her past now, she’ll learn to adjust.”

Nevertheless, a contradiction becomes apparent within these discussions in terms of the agency ascribed to Real Dolls versus the element of possession or ownership by their users. While dolls are given identities and personalities, the fact that they are objects is not entirely ignored by forum members. In this way, the passive nature and constant availability of Real Dolls is reinforced, as well as an active, ownership role of the men. For example, one topic used to introduce a member’s new doll is entitled ‘Took possession of Svetlana.’ As well, another topic introducing a new doll to the forum features a post with a member congratulating the other on his new “acquisition.” In this way the idea of the dolls as feminine bodies and passive objects that are owned by their masculine users is reinforced.

In respect to the use of Real Dolls, while members of The Doll Forum describe their dolls as being sexually desiring and available, the fact that the dolls are designed specifically for that purpose serves to reinforce a certain conceptualization of female sexuality. Nicola Gavey (1989: 467) asserts that many patriarchal constructions of sexual behaviour conceptualize heterosexual sex as “socially constructed as involving an active, initiating male and a passive, responsive female.” Catharine MacKinnon (1997) argues that in a patriarchal society, sexuality is a key way in which aspects of social life, specifically gender, are experienced. Gender occurs and is constituted by sexuality, such that “Dominance eroticized defines the imperatives of its masculinity, submission eroticized defines its femininity” (MacKinnon 1997: 160). MacKinnon could be discussing the use of Real Dolls specifically when she states:

Sexual meaning is not made only, or even primarily, by words and in texts. It is made in social relations of power in the world, through which process gender is also produced. In feminist terms, the fact that male power has power means the standard way it is allowed and recognized to be felt and expressed and experienced, in a way that determines women’s biographies, including sexual ones.

Through the discussions members engage in, they are constructing the sexual biographies of their Real Dolls, reinforcing that they are the ones in charge of the sexual experience.

Yet it is interesting to see that members do work to describe the explicit desire of Real Dolls. While there is an obvious aspect of ownership and control embedded in the fact that Real Dolls are not able to speak back or construct their own sexual biographies, members work to make it seem as if that is exactly what is occurring. In this way they are drawing from many recent conceptions of female sexuality as empowered and agentic. This trend of female sexual behaviour was most notably explored by Ariel Levy in the book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005).

In the book, Levy highlights the rise in ‘raunch culture’ that has emerged in the past decade wherein women are encouraged to be overtly sexual as a form of personal empowerment.

With the rise of television specials such as ‘Girls Gone Wild,’ Levy (2005) argues that we have entered into a period wherein women are expected to be sexualized, and they are encouraged to do so out of the empowerment they will feel as a result. Television series such as ‘The Girls Next Door,’ which follows the women who live in the Playboy Mansion, also assert this ideology (Cato and Carpentier 2010). This new sexual ideology is quite different from more traditional images of sexuality wherein women are inherently disempowered through the sex act. Instead, sexuality is empowering for women, a key way in which women are able to assert their agency as strong, powerful, and independent beings.

The use of Real Dolls and the ensuing discussions within The Doll Forum highlight both of these ideas. It is clear that users are aware of living in a society where they are surrounded by images of an empowered female sexuality. Through constructing their Real Dolls as desiring and wanting of sex, as well as of their own wanting to ‘show off’ for other forum members, the users are drawing on a femininity that is in many ways compatible with images that proliferate in contemporary media. In these terms, while the use of Real Dolls aligns with MacKinnon’s argument that sex is a source of women’s oppression, members are challenging this discourse by describing their dolls as desiring, and by imparting sexual desire and agency upon them (albeit within parameters of desire that they have defined).

Concluding Remarks

The discussions within The Doll Forum serve to reinforce and create very distinct ideas regarding gender and sexuality within the forum. While the focus on the appearance of Real

Dolls is very much representative of hegemonic understandings and definitions of femininity, the sexual availability ascribed to the dolls by members of The Doll Forum breaches certain patriarchal notions of male and female 'agency' with regard to sexuality.

The Doll Forum, and the discussions within, brings to the forefront the competing discourses surrounding gender and sexuality, especially sexual behaviour. Not only are users engaging in an act considered 'deviant' by certain definitions, they are framing it in a way that brings out specific features of gender found within society at large, while contesting others. In these terms, the use of Real Dolls is an opportune means by which discourses around gender and sexuality can be showcased and questioned, with the fluid nature of each reflected through the ways members discuss each issue.

CHAPTER FOUR

RELATIONSHIPS ON THE DOLL FORUM

While the previous chapter highlighted the key ways in which members of The Doll Forum reiterate and challenge discourses of gender and sexuality within their discussions, the focus of this chapter is on the larger impact these discourses have. Essentially, the focus is on the performativity of Real Dolls and how they contribute to the creation of plastic subjectivities and bear upon the social relationships for members of The Doll Forum. The analysis highlights the implications that these discussions have upon not only understandings of gender and sexuality as witnessed within the forum, but also on implications that the use of Real Dolls pose for the relationships that the users have with one another.

4.1 Real Doll Agency and Masculine Identity

Real Dolls, as has been noted, are inanimate dolls. While it may seem as if they do not possess agency apart from what is assigned to them by their users, there is no doubt that Real Dolls have an influence upon the members of The Doll Forum and the relationships they have with one another. Discussions on both the appearance and sexual availability of Real Dolls highlight a very interesting theme that is found in forum discussions: the specific ways in which users impart agency to their dolls, and how this agency reflects the subjectivity of the users.

Members of the forum often refer to their Real Dolls as ‘she’ and ‘her,’ and Real Dolls are given names by the posters who use them. In addition, the previously discussed theme of imparting sexual agency upon Real Dolls was a key way in which members worked to discursively construct their dolls as real, sexual beings.

An interesting and somewhat tenuous relationship emerges throughout the forum discussions. While Real Dolls are understood and described as beings with agency, there is at the same time a constant awareness that they are indeed objects. While posters' discussions of sexual desire and availability construct femininity as more sexually active, this is still done within a masculine framework: the doll as object is always available for sex. So while it may seem as if femininity is being afforded a new definition—of being more than a sexual object—the discussions of 'possession' and 'acquisitions' have the effect of negating that idea. In terms of femininity, then, what emerges is a view of femininity that reinforces hegemonic constructions that prevail within the wider society. Not only are the Real Dolls as feminine bodies treated as, and understood in large part as, objects, but their appearance is extremely idealized and is manufactured in such a way as to be flawless representations of feminine bodies.

Furthermore, the use of the term 'RG' when referring to real women is one that reinforces a specific image of women. As discussed previously, forum members utilize the shorthand term 'RG' when referring to real women, which puts forward an image of real women as 'girls' as opposed to 'women.' This choice of language stresses a lack of agency and a focus on adolescence in real women, as opposed to the agency and independence associated with 'women.' In this sense, members of The Doll Forum are further reinforcing the accepted image of femininity within The Doll Forum as one that is passive and eternally youthful; one that will not involve any resistance to the power they hold.

Masculinity becomes reinforced as well through posters' discussions, specifically those centring on the sexual availability and desires of Real Dolls. While Real Dolls are constructed as sexually desiring, it is important to understand that this agency is aligned to masculine wants and desires: the dolls are 'in the mood' for sex because the male user is in the mood. Without the

ascription of desire by the user, the doll is a passive object. So while femininity is understood as sexually desiring and active, this construction only holds in relation to the dolls' male users. In other words, the construction of femininity as sexually desiring and active serves to reinforce the sexual dominance of masculinity—sexual desires only occur on masculine terms. Here again, however, an interesting issue emerges. Real Dolls are designed for sex. They are, by nature of the way that they have been manufactured, always ready, willing, and wanting sex. Why is it, then, that male users are moved to describe their dolls as being sexually aggressive?

Descriptions of Real Dolls as sexually aggressive and of users as able to please—despite the fact that Real Dolls are objects that do not need to be pleased—can be seen in large part as legitimizing the masculinity of forum members. A key aspect of hegemonic masculinity is that men are sexually proficient and desirable to women. By constructing their dolls as insatiably sexual—and by extension themselves as able and willing to please—members of The Doll Forum are reinforcing their own masculinity and their status as 'successful' males within a hegemonic masculine framework. As has been discussed previously, Coles (2008) examined the ways in which men who did not fit in with hegemonic constructions of masculinity drew from very stereotypical definitions when describing their behaviour in an effort to normalize their identity within a hegemonic masculine framework. This is a key way in which individuals who are considered 'deviant' within hegemonic masculine definitions are able to reinforce their identity as 'normal' and appropriately masculine. Through constructing their behaviour within such an important feature of hegemonic masculinity—being heterosexually proficient and desiring—members are situating their use of Real Dolls within hegemonic definitions of masculinity, reaffirming their complicity within this framework.

4.2 Dynamic Relationships

Further to the agency members ascribe to Real Dolls throughout their discussions is the specific ways in which they discuss the relationships that they share with their dolls. Most notable is the use of hegemonic ideas surrounding relationships that members engage with through their discussions. While some members may be in relationships—user *phillip57*, for instance, made note that his “spouse” was trying to show him how to post images in a thread—many members discuss either not having luck with ‘real’ women or having had issues with past relationships.

When responding to an update regarding the vaginal insert feature on the new RealDoll 2, *youshouldtrylinux* commented that part of the reason as to why Real Dolls work for him was because of his difficulty in engaging sexually with RG or “real girls”:

With RG, I can try to forget about it [discomfort] because they are RG (as long as they don’t ask for cunnilingus each time). I can “force” myself and I have to hide that I feel discomfort in all my body (easy to do because you are not face to face).

In the topic thread where user *phantom_texan* introduces his new doll, Jessica, an exchange takes place between him and *CW3* regarding dating:

CW3: “I too have been thinking about buying another doll so Tiffany will have someone to be with her when I am away but, I am going to give dating one last run before I decide on it.”

phantom_texan: “good for you. I will cross that bridge when I come to it. I’ve been through two. One ended because we weren’t both working on the relationship, the second due to substance abuse (not mine). I’m a little burnt out. And I work too much. The AI, J, and J should give me a few hobbies to work on when I do have free time. And then, if the right one comes along, she may have to accept some of my warts since I will be having to accept some of hers.”

While users may have had negative experiences with women in the past, or currently choose not to be in a relationship with a real woman (as opposed to a Real Doll), there is an emphasis on not only the importance of relationships, but on the fact that Real Dolls provide

some fulfillment to users. This is done primarily through the use of texts related directly to ideas of intimacy. In this way, members of The Doll Forum situate their relationships within the realm of traditional romantic relationships.

In discussing issues of intimacy and relationships, members of the forum again draw on patriarchal definitions of heterosexual relationships. Drawing especially on the idea of ‘intimacy,’ users are providing legitimacy to their use of Real Dolls by aligning the relationships that they share with their dolls with those considered ‘normal’ and acceptable within society. For instance, in the topic thread, ‘It’s official! I can finally post pics in a thread,’ *phillip57* is finally able to showcase his doll, Gabrielle. *playtime* responds with a congratulations, as well as advice for their future relationship:

I hope you are both very happy together and enjoy the exploration you will share. If you love her now ... just wait till later on down the road when you get to just sit together and enjoy each others company while watching your favorite shows etc...

In another topic thread begun by *siliconeluvvv* to inquire about how real Real Dolls actually feel, *Bill* stated that a Real Doll:

... will never replace a RG so what is so wrong with the next best thing to cuddle with?... It is all in the mind when you simply use your hand so a doll is above that because she looks great, feels great, and is great to cuddle.

As well as discussions on the intimacy that users have with their dolls, members also use words such as ‘adopted,’ ‘family member,’ and ‘honeymoon’ when discussing relationships between the users and their dolls. But these terms have a gendered dimension to them. When *Renate* received her ‘pre-loved’ doll, *AMALIA* responded with “I’m happy for you, Renate ... and for the newly adopted Mikayla,” while *dreamweavers* remarked: “Congratulations on the safe arrival of your newest family member.” While *Renate*, who is a female forum member, was

congratulated on the “adoption” of her doll, her relationship is not constructed in the same way as male members of the forum. When *merkin* announced the arrival of his doll, *zazakell* responded with: “Congratulations merkin. Happy honeymoon!” Similarly, in response to *phantom_texan*’s post introducing his new doll, Jessica, *mahtek* commented: “Congratulations, Phantom_texan! She is sweet! I’ve always been partial to the F11 B2 combinations. Have a Happy Honeymoon!” By using the term ‘honeymoon,’ these male members are legitimating the unions they have with their dolls as akin to marriages. Marriage is a central structure within society, and one that reinforces the primacy of heterosexual relationships (Wolkomir 2009). By aligning the relationships of male members to their dolls with marriage, while consigning Renate’s relationship to an “adoption,” members are reinforcing the heteronormativity of the romantic relationship.

The relationship between the dolls and their users are also evident in users’ discussions of maintenance and care issues. When *sanpedro* recounts his first sexual encounter with his doll and the disappointment that he was met with when he found it rather difficult, *muzza* responds by noting:

The makeovers and repairs, including more tear repairs than I could count, have enhanced our relationship way beyond just man and doll. Furthermore they (the tear repairs and, to me, her looks) have improved our intimacy – OK sex then – to a level that equates to and in some ways surpasses that with a RG...I guess what I am saying is don’t be too afraid of the tears and other repair because they help build the relationship and they just may, as in our case, make the yummy even more yummy.

In this regard, the maintenance and care required of Real Dolls serves to enhance the relationship—and intimacy—that a user shares with it; as opposed to being a burden this work becomes part and parcel of the relationship. In this way, by drawing upon standardized ideas regarding intimacy, users are again legitimizing their relationship with their dolls. Rather than

constructing their Real Dolls as purely sex objects, members of The Doll Forum understand them as providing a fulfilling relationship—even more so than a “real girl” can.

4.3 Object Relations and Plastic Subjectivity

The discussions members engage in about the relationships they have with their Real Dolls bring us back to the idea of “fetishism.” The term, as it was introduced previously, is used to describe relationships that individuals have with objects. While fetishism was introduced with regard to sexual behaviour, it is worth revisiting the various theoretical interpretations of the term, notably those in relation to commodities and consumer relationships. Karl Marx provided one of the most discussed arguments around fetishism as it relates to consumers and commodities; yet, of most interest in this study is the way that the relationships consumers have with a specific commodity serve to animate that commodity. In this regard, the work of Jean Baudrillard (1981) will be worth exploring.

Baudrillard understood fetishism as not necessarily based upon sexual desires, but rather as a placement of signs and values (Dant 1996). A fetish is born through “the extent to which an object demonstrates ostentation, a sign of value that accrues to the possessor of the object” (Dant 1996: 505). Essentially for Baudrillard (1981: 92) fetishism is:

*fetishism of the signifier ... the subject is trapped in the factitious, differential, encoded, systematized aspect of the object. It is not the passion ... for substances that speaks in fetishism, it is the *passion for the code*, which, by governing both objects and subjects, and by subordinating them to itself, delivers them up to abstract manipulation.*

Through the process of fetishism, both object and subject become implicated in a relationship of signs, and this relationship influences the further creation and interpretation of said signs. Much

of this happens on the surface of the body—and it is this point that speaks most closely to the larger impact that Real Dolls carry.

Tim Dant (1996: 506) argues that “In Baudrillard’s analysis of modern cultures the merging of subject and object happens on the surface of the body as it is inscribed with visible marks that transform its meaning, inserting the consequent subject/object in the circulation of signs.” Through various processes such as make-up, clothing, and other aesthetic pieces, the body becomes “fetishised”; it is implicated in the creation of “a seductive sexuality that is not grounded in real sexuality. It is no more than a sign ... a circulation of meaning through which the subject is transformed by sign objects into a fetishised object” (Dant 1996: 507). Real Dolls become fetishised in this way through the various aesthetic adornments which signify them as ‘female.’ The sexuality they represent places Real Dolls within a system of meaning and as a sign object to become a fetish.

For Baudrillard, the most explicit example of this process of fetishization through adornment was seen in relation to art. A piece of art “becomes detached from its production to become foreign, itself beyond determination but nonetheless still determining human subjects” (Dant 1996: 508). This idea becomes extremely relevant in relation to the way in which members sometimes compare their Real Dolls to works or pieces of art. An example of this comparison is found when *Virgo*, in response to an update on the Real Doll 2 from *Abyss*, wrote: “Many thanks for sculpting such exceptional pieces of art.” *celtic* reinforced the congratulations to *Matt* from *Abyss*, writing: “Matt McMullen is an amazing artist and truly willing to go the extra mile to pull an idea out of his head and make it work in the 3D world.” As well, in response to the discussion started calling for a potential lawsuit due to the finger pokes experienced by many doll owners, *sid52* argued that “the dolls are a work of art! Quite frankly, handling them should be kept at a

minimum. Their capacity for sex is merely a fringe benefit.” In these discussions, the notion of Real Dolls as a work of art extends their status as objects. Not only are they beautiful, but they are so beautiful that they are possessions that need to be owned and admired, not necessarily used for sex or afforded agency.

Through the process of being fetishised, Real Dolls are then implicated within the process of reinforcing and representing the meaning and symbolic representations of gender and embodiment. As was previously discussed, James Messerschmidt (2004) maintains that the ways individuals embody gender serve to not only create individuals as gendered beings, but also reinforce various norms of gender; gender becomes further structured through the ways in which it is embodied at an individual level. In this way, the body becomes a key site of not only reinforcing gender (as discussed in Chapter Three), it also becomes a site of structuring gender.

Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo (2004) explore the ways in which the body is implicated as a symbol in Western society. They argue that while the body is a very powerful symbolic medium—as discussed in the previous chapter through the ways in which the Real Doll body is discursively constructed to represent a particular femininity—“the body is also endowed with the capacity to participate in the creation of social meaning” (Reischer and Koo 2004: 307). Through the assignment of agency to their Real Dolls, users are able to legitimize their own masculine identities in relation to the femininities created for their Real Dolls. This assignment also becomes a key way in which they can further reinforce these identities within the world: “bodies, because they are constitutive of subjectivity and also mediate the relationship between person and world, necessarily participate in the agency of the person” (Reischer and Koo 2004: 307).

It is important to note that although Reischer and Koo discuss the influence of the agential body in terms of the subjectivity expressed by an individual's own body, their ideas are nonetheless relevant in regards to Real Dolls because of the relationship that is created between the doll and its user wherein the Real Doll, as a body, becomes a dynamic extension of the individual owner. Arguably, Real Dolls serve as an extension of users' own subjectivity through the assignment of agency and identity upon their respective Real Dolls. This is where the importance of fetishism becomes clear: the Real Doll as object becomes representative of the consumer, of the user of the Real Doll.

4.4 Normalization and Fluid Sexuality

Members of The Doll Forum draw on rather traditional notions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in their discussions. It is clear, however, that members are aware of the deviant status of their behaviour.

For example, some members discuss hiding their involvement with a Real Doll from family and friends, and how they could go about possibly telling them. *enjay*, for instance, noted that he had already told a female and male friend about his getting a Real Doll and had also wanted to tell his daughter. He commented: "communicating should be important with any friendship and if one can't just open up and talk maybe One should move on." Yet it seems that most members do keep their doll use a secret, with *fixitman* saying that he and his doll, Michelle, "haven't had much time together" since his oldest child moved back home with him.

The awareness that members have as to the deviant status of their behaviour was also noted in more implicit ways. For example, member *merkin* remarked that "this [using Real Dolls] is all about fantasy." The fantasy aspect—as well as the minority group status of doll

users—was echoed by *andrewlee1012* when he was seeking advice on how to reduce the size of the breasts on his Real Doll:

The doll hobby is in large part a fantasy hobby and it is beyond a doubt that the majority of hobbyists fantasize about large breasts. I'm in the minority in that I fantasize about smaller college girl breasts and the big sizes seem fake to me. That said, within society at large doll owners are a minority themselves so I guess I'm a minority within a minority.

phantom_texan also implied an acknowledgement as to the deviant nature of owning Real Dolls when he stated that if he were to form a relationship with a real woman “she may have to accept some of my warts [referring to his owning a Real Doll] since I will be having to accept some of hers.”

While there are both men and women engaging in discussions within the forum, the fact that the Real Doll forum focuses on female Real Dolls, and the fact that the overwhelming majority of posters are male, serves to create a homosocial group, especially regarding the constructions of femininity and masculinity within a patriarchal framework. While some women are contributing to the forum discussions, they participate in the same discussions as the men do, and therefore do not set up contradictory positions from the forum consensus. In these terms, the discussions present within The Doll Forum reflect what Michael Flood (2008) explores regarding homosociality. While the concept of the ‘homosocial group’ refers to same-sex friendships, it is helpful in regards to The Doll Forum as the members of the group, despite its hetero-sociality, all participate in reproducing particular constructions and definitions regarding gender, sexuality, and relationships.

Flood (2008: 339) argues that homosocial groups are very important in relation to men’s heterosexual involvement in that “homosociality shapes the sexual relations in which these men engage, the meanings given to their sexual involvements, and the development of narratives

about them.” Through the group within The Doll Forum, users of Real Dolls are given meaning and context that shape the relationships they have with their dolls. Flood (2008: 342) explores four ways in which male-female sexual relationships are organized by the homosocial group:

First, male-male friendships take priority over male-female relations ... Second, sexual activity is a key path to masculine status, and other men are the audience, always imagined and sometimes real, for one’s sexual activities. Third, heterosexual sex itself can be the medium through which male bonding is enacted. Last, men’s sexual storytelling is shaped by homosocial masculine cultures.

These characteristics are all present within discussions on The Doll Forum, creating a group wherein members are able to reinforce and normalize their behaviour through the support of other forum members. In relation to the first characteristic, the fact that Real Dolls are inanimate makes the male-male group—The Doll Forum—extremely important in terms of the relationship members engage in. As the dolls do not have any say in the relationships they share with users, the forum allows for the group, and the friendships within, to be the priority. Secondly, within The Doll Forum, the fact that users discuss and share their images and stories related to their relationships with their Real Dolls reinforce the fact that it is “other men”—other forum members—who are the main audience. In posting discussions about the relationships they have with their Real Dolls, members are giving others a glimpse into the activities they share with their dolls. As noted previously, when images of their dolls are posted, the response received is overwhelmingly positive, producing social support within the group.

As to the third characteristic, the use of Real Dolls provides an avenue through which members of The Doll Forum are able to come together and create friendship. Not only do members joke with each other in posts, but they share personal details as well, and some even make mention of meeting up in real life. For example, when member *Renate* finally received her

Real Doll, *dreamweavers* commented “Can’t wait to see her in pictures, and possibly, in person.” To which *Renate* replied: “DW, we have to get together for a little B2 on B2 love.” Lastly, the ways in which members of the forum discuss their use of Real Dolls is situated within the patriarchal society in which they all are, to varying extents, a part. Not only do forum discussions reflect these structures, but the forum itself has created new structures that have become a part of their “sexual storytelling” (most notably in terms of the various shorthand terms that members use within posts).

Through the group within The Doll Forum, the standards of appearance, sexual desire, care, relationships, and agency are defined and reinforced. While forum members are drawing from those constructions present within society at large, the ways in which they are interpreted are unique to the forum, and through images and discussions become normalized. By sharing images and stories with other members, the group becomes a primary relationship for members of the forum.

The notion of the homosocial group serves to highlight the importance of group values in normalizing deviant behaviour. This idea is explored in great detail in the work of Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957). The authors examine various techniques of neutralization that individuals who engage in deviant behaviour utilize in order to rationalize that behaviour. These techniques include: the denial of responsibility; the denial of injury; the denial of the victim; the condemnation of the condemned; and the appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes and Matza 1957). The homosocial group within The Doll Forum most represents the appeal to higher loyalties. As Sykes and Matza (1957: 669) note: “internal and external social controls may be neutralized by sacrificing the demands of the larger society for the demands of the smaller social groups.”

Through the use of Real Dolls, and their acceptance within the forum, members are creating new demands and norms within this smaller social group.

However, as has been discussed throughout this chapter, forum members have not completely rejected norms of behaviour found in society at large, and in fact draw quite heavily from these norms in situating their behaviour. Sykes and Matza (1957: 669) address this aspect, stressing that the point within one's appeal to higher loyalties is that "deviation from certain norms may occur not because other norms, held to be more pressing or involving a higher loyalty, are accorded precedence. Indeed, it is the fact that both sets of norms are believed in that gives meaning to our concepts of dilemma and role conflict." By drawing on such norms as those related to gender, sexuality, and relationships, members of The Doll Forum, while adhering to behaviour unique to the forum, work to ease conflict they may feel through their engagement with a deviant behaviour. The fact that forum members recognize their status as deviant speaks more to the conflict they may be feeling, and why they work to reinforce such standard constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships.

Through their interactions within The Doll Forum, users of Real Dolls are able to simultaneously create a group where new loyalties in regards to sexual behaviour are formed, while at the same time those loyalties related to gender, sexuality, and relationships are reinforced in order for members to normalize and rationalize their behaviour.

Given the members' recognition of their 'deviant' status in society at large, it is important to briefly explore the more specific ways in which members normalize their use of Real Dolls—the specific understandings they draw from society at large in order to interpret their behaviour. Two key ways in which members work to normalize their behaviour stand out in the forum discussions: situating sexual prowess in relation to masculinity and maintaining the emphasis on

feminine appearance in regards to femininity. While each theme has been discussed in detail previously, the focus in this section is to briefly explore the more specific features each has upon the way members normalize their behaviour.

Hegemonic masculinity is deeply rooted in the ability of men to be sexually proficient and to have a great deal of skill in attracting women. Michael Flood (2008) examines this aspect in his discussion of homosociality, and David Grazian (2007) also explores this feature of hegemonic masculinity in his examination of the 'girl hunt.' 'The girl hunt' is understood as the practice young men engage in to seek out potential female partners in various settings, such as nightclubs and bars. In recounting the narratives of men as they engaged in the girl hunt, Grazian (2007: 238) argues that the girl hunt represents the collective feature of masculinity; it is a "*ritualistic, performative, and homosocial ... strategy of impression management and mobilizing masculinity.*" What is present in these texts are the ways in which sexual ability and prowess are essential to one's successful performance of masculinity.

It has already been discussed that Real Dolls are designed for sex; that users describe their dolls as desiring, and themselves as pleasing of the sexual desires of their (inanimate) dolls, are primary ways in which they align their behaviour with a very traditional understanding of hegemonic masculinity. Real Dolls, and discussions within The Doll Forum, present a world wherein the users are always able to 'pick up' a sexy, willing, woman. So while the behaviour itself presents a challenge to traditional ideas regarding sexual behaviour, through the forum group traditional constructions of masculinity and sexual prowess are reinforced. The similarity that The Doll Forum has to the homosocial groups that Flood (2008) and Grazian (2007) explore reinforces the similarities of The Doll Forum to other homosocial groups, and represents how

much the discourses serve to align users with very normal, acceptable, hegemonic, masculine behaviour.

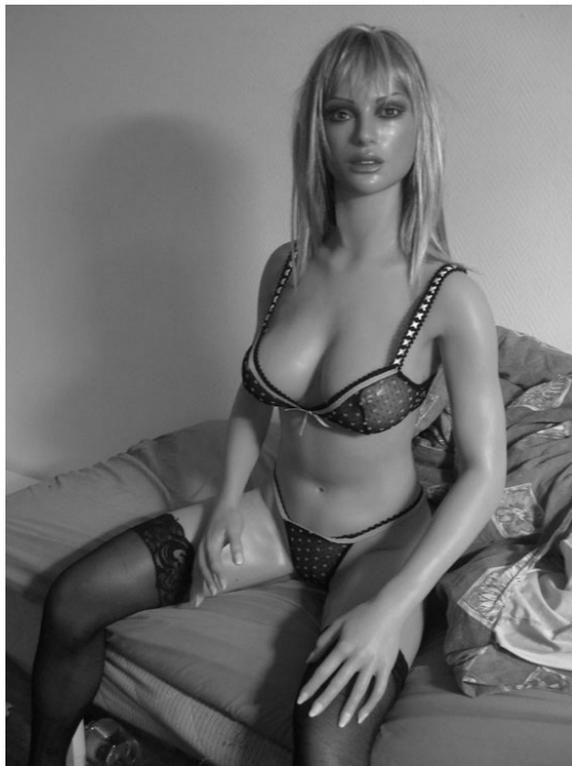
In regards to appearance, the work of Bordo (1993) has already been discussed, highlighting the ways in which a specific, slender, ideal of the feminine body has come to be expected, and demanded, of women. As the discussions already explored in Chapter Three have shown, the ways in which users discuss the customization of their Real Dolls explicitly reinforce an expectation to continuously work to upgrade one's doll, whether through aesthetic or more technical means. Kathryn Pauly Morgan (2003: 175) addresses this issue as well in discussing the ways in which women deal with the increased expectations of cosmetic surgery, arguing that with the increase of cosmetic procedures and surgeries available to women, those who do not undergo these procedures, or those who disagree with them, become "stigmatized as 'unliberated,' 'not caring about their appearance,' ... as 'refusing to be all that they could be.'" Forum members further reinforce this idea through discussions on customization and 'upgrades,' notably with regard to topics started solely for the purpose of showing how one can 'tighten up' their doll if she becomes loose in the vaginal or anal areas.

The key issue is that while members are aware of the fact that engaging in sexual relationships with Real Dolls is considered to be not 'normal' and viewed as a deviant sexual act, they draw from very standardized, patriarchal constructions of gender within their discussions, which have the effect of normalizing their behaviour within a hegemonic framework.

While members of the forum primarily utilized text in order to normalize their behaviour, they also posted images of their dolls. These images served as a means by which the norms of The Doll Forum were presented and reinforced by members. A primary way in which images were utilized within the forum occurred when a member began a topic about finally receiving

their doll from Abyss. When introducing their doll, members were almost always sure to post pictures of their newly received doll. For example, the images from the topics ‘Weena has arrived’ and ‘Her Name is Tamasha (RealDoll 2)’ were the most popular topics from the month (see: Images 11 and 12). Along with introducing new dolls, many topics were started just for users to share images of their dolls, whether to feature a hair change or to showcase new poses. Within the month under study, 22 out of the 66 topics were started with images, introducing or highlighting the member’s Real Doll. These images consist primarily of featuring members’ Real Dolls in various positions.

Image 11: ‘Her name is Tamasha (RealDoll 2)



Posted Sept. 18th By *RaDiv*

Used with permission

Image 12: 'Weena has arrived'



Posted Sept. 6th By *Bill*
Used with permission

The posting of images not only serves as a way for members to highlight and show off their dolls, but it also as a way for users to construct and maintain the discourses surrounding femininity and masculinity that predominate within the forum. Members are not required to post images of their dolls, yet they appear to do so quite willingly. There are instances where they are encouraged by other members to post more pictures, or to register with the photo albums within the forum. Through images members are able to highlight the attractive form of femininity within The Doll Forum, as well as their ability to performatively engage with it.

Images elicited many comments from members—all of which were favourable. In this way, the standard of appearance for Real Dolls within the forum is policed and reinforced by the favourable comments that the images generate. This feature of the forum is akin to a point made

by feminist writers: women are constantly judged on their appearance and their ability to conform to ideals of feminine beauty (Bartky 2003; Bordo 1990; Pauly Morgan 2003). While women are generally understood and described as being policed as to the specific ways in which they embody gender—through what makeup to apply, clothing to wear, their body size and shape, among other things—men have, generally, not been as exposed to this social pressure. However, within The Doll Forum, what has emerged is that the men who own Real Dolls put their dolls up for critique by posting images, and fellow members provide positive feedback. In this way the onus is on the users to ensure that they are abiding by the standards set within the group.

These standards are not created in a social vacuum and, as has been discussed previously, they are still very much aligned with those commonly found within the wider society. As well, it is important to note that the users themselves are not held up to any standards of appearance. In fact, members only appear in images with their dolls on two occasions, with only one image showing the face of the forum member (see: Image 13¹²). It is the Real Dolls—as representations of femininity—that are being held up for critique and acceptance of their appearance. While the users are responsible for creating the femininity of their dolls, it is still femininity that is being reinforced and critiqued, not masculinity. Yet, at the same time as feminine appearance is being put up for critique it is, at root, masculinity that is being primarily judged. Through their posting of pictures, users are being judged on how well they can perform femininity. Users are being judged also on how well they are able to care for their Real Dolls. This opens up an interesting shift: masculinity within the forum is being critiqued in terms of how well members are able to perform femininity through their dolls, and how well they are able to care for and maintain their Real Dolls.

¹² <http://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=25802&hilit=a+bud+girl+in+a+bar>

What results from the discussions and images posted within The Doll Forum is that while members have created an environment where they discuss their engagement in, and support of, a sexual behaviour that would most likely be understood as deviant, they are very aware of their deviant status, and work to normalize their behaviour by drawing on stereotypical, accepted, constructions of gender, sexuality and relationships in situating their behaviour in relation to the larger society. Yet it is not lost that they are indeed working to expand understandings of accepted sexual behaviour, employing the space of the Internet to do so. The fact that they draw from already present notions of gender and sexual relationships while discussing their behaviour speaks to the tenuous nature of sexuality. Heterosexuality and certain norms of sexual behaviour are so enmeshed within our collective understandings that while individuals may work to challenge it, they do so within specific frameworks to maintain legitimacy. It is in this sense that The Doll Forum reflects most what Sykes and Matza (1957: 669) outline in their discussion of the appeal to higher loyalties as a technique of neutralization, stating that the deviant behaviour individuals engage in “represent tangential or glancing blows at the dominant normative system rather than the creation of an opposing ideology; and they are extensions of patterns of thought prevalent in society rather than something created *de novo*.” While the behaviour of users of Real Dolls may initially seem like a complete dismissal of traditional notions of sexual and relationship behaviour, once the discussions are examined in closer detail, it becomes clear how the group works within the dominant system, and is not outright rejecting the normative system but creating an alternative space within it.

By drawing on patriarchal constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in their discussions of their dolls, members of The Doll Forum serve to normalize their use of Real Dolls by situating their behaviour within the framework of traditionally gendered, heteronormative

relationships. At the same time, however, the group is, indeed, carving out a space of increased acceptance for their behaviour—providing a ‘blow’ to the dominant ideology. Within The Doll Forum members have constructed a space wherein behaviour that is viewed as deviant is constructed as an acceptable—and ‘normal’—choice. In this way we can see how members of The Doll Forum are utilizing the ‘productive power’ as discussed by Brickell (2009) within their discussions. By discussing so openly a sexual behaviour that is traditionally understood as deviant, they are working to expand the framework of sexuality and sexual behaviour as it is currently presented within society.

Concluding Remarks

Members of The Doll Forum draw largely from traditional constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in their discussions of their use of Real Dolls. By drawing on constructions that prevail in the wider society, members are able to align their behaviour within a framework of acceptable sexual behaviours. Patriarchal constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships become largely reinforced within The Doll Forum. Much of this is done in order for users to normalize their behaviour and align it within a patriarchal framework. However, there are instances where members engage in a redefinition of some characteristics of gender, sexuality, and relationships, primarily in terms of masculinity. As the dolls are objects, masculinity becomes based upon how well forum members are able to perform femininity, as well as how well they are able to take care of their Real Doll, creating an alternative definition of masculinity from that of hegemonic constructions.

Through their discussions, however, members are also working to expand definitions of sexual behaviour, thus highlighting the fluidity of sexuality and the definitions surrounding it. As

well, through their application of various constructions of gender members are reinforcing just how performative these characteristics and identities are.

CONCLUSION

The Internet has become a powerful tool for individuals to use to connect with others who may share in similar desires and behaviours. As a relatively affordable, unbounded space, individuals from all over the world are able to connect with each other, thus allowing for the creation and increased acceptance of many alternative identities. The Doll Forum has emerged as one such instance, wherein individuals who use Real Dolls are able to come together and discuss their behaviour.

Throughout this thesis I have explored the ways in which members of The Doll Forum use their discussions, as well as images, to create a community in which the use of Real Dolls is embraced. Through these discussions, members of the forum work to both reinforce and redefine various ideas surrounding gender, sexuality, and relationships. While the use of Real Dolls is a form of sexual behaviour that is quite distinct from those constructed as 'normal' and acceptable within society, this community represents an effort to expand the definitions of accepted sexual behaviour, reflecting the fluid nature of sexuality. Members are quite aware of the fact that their behaviour is not readily accepted as 'normal.' Throughout their discussions, however, they draw from hegemonic, patriarchal constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships. In doing so, members of The Doll Forum reinforce specific features which serve to align their behaviour within those understood as normal while they also work to expand the definitions of normal behaviour. In these terms, the discussions and posts on The Doll Forum represent an effort by members to work together to simultaneously create a space where a new form of sexual behaviour is accepted, but also one where certain norms already entrenched within society are reinforced and utilized in order for users to make their behaviour appear as normal as possible.

In the descriptions and images of their Real Dolls, members of The Doll Forum represent and reinforce hegemonic constructions of femininity, especially focusing on appearance, customization, and improvement, as well as the work, experience, and responsibility involved in owning and maintaining a Real Doll. Real Dolls represent youthful, flawless, images of femininity that require a great deal of work to maintain. Despite the fact that women are tasked with the maintenance of feminine appearance, within The Doll Forum it is the users who are responsible for this performance of femininity. Through their use of pictures, the image of femininity that is accepted as beautiful within The Doll Forum, as well as the wider society, is represented and reinforced by members of the forum. Eternally tight, toned, smooth, ageless, and docile, Real Dolls represent the ultimate goal of the project of femininity.

While the patriarchal image of femininity was largely reinforced within discussions on the forum, those discussions reflected a more malleable understanding of sexuality and femininity. While Real Dolls themselves reflect many radical feminist understandings of feminine sexuality in terms of the fact that, as inanimate dolls, their sexuality is bound up and representative of their owners' desires, users also drew upon more contemporary notions of sexuality as empowered, and their Real Dolls as desiring of sex. In this way members brought to the forefront many competing discourses of sexuality, reflecting even more the fluid nature of sexual behaviour.

It is in discussing the deeper relationships which members of The Doll Forum share with their Real Dolls that the transformative and subjective effect that Real Dolls have is brought forward. In their discussions of the relationships they share with their Real Dolls, the members drew from heteronormative constructions. By using ideas surrounding intimacy and marriage,

the relationships users share with their Real Dolls is legitimized by being aligned with traditional, heteronormative, and patriarchal conceptualizations of relationships.

The use of Real Dolls by members of The Doll Forum can be said to represent a quintessential expression of performativity. Through the expression of gender, sexuality, and relationships in relation to an inanimate object, the performative nature of these characteristics becomes explicit, and of utmost importance, to their interpretation. The fact that members of The Doll Forum can represent Real Dolls as feminine expresses the performativity of gender, as gender is made known based upon the various clothing and appearance signifiers, as well as discourses with the forum, that users apply to their Real Dolls. As users draw primarily from hegemonic, patriarchal, constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships, the regulatory frameworks already in place which situate masculinity and femininity in the ways that are currently understood within society are constantly reinforced by members of The Doll Forum.

The Internet provides a key forum for individuals who engage in behaviours that are traditionally understood as deviant to connect with others who engage in the same behaviour. It is transformative in the sense that it allows for an increasingly diverse expression of behaviours and views to be seen. However, as this study shows, we must keep in mind that the Internet is not created in a social vacuum. Individuals are still socialized in very specific ways, and despite movements to redefine and create new ideas of 'normal' behaviour, certain ideologies are reinforced as well. However, this does not mean that the transformative ability of communities on the Internet is lost, as the Internet is serving to increase the expression and awareness of many alternative identities.

While members of The Doll Forum reinforce hegemonic constructions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in their discussions, they are redefining acceptable relationships in

the very fact that they are engaging in relationships with Real Dolls. They have created a community wherein individuals who use Real Dolls are working to broaden the definition of ‘acceptable’ sexual behaviours, and highlight the fluid nature of sexuality. In the process, their behaviours are normalized. While it seems difficult to imagine that the parameters of ‘normal’ sexual behaviour will be opened up immediately, the fact that The Doll Forum is so active and has so many members suggests that these parameters are slowly expanding. It may not happen tomorrow or even within the next decade, but members of The Doll Forum are contributing to a redefinition and challenge of what is considered ‘normal’ sexual behaviour.

The discursive aspect of The Doll Forum and the discussions which members engage in exemplifies the power of discourse in terms of its ability to both represent the world and create meaning for it (Fairclough 1992). Within The Doll Forum we can see that the three processes highlighted by Fairclough within discourse—text, discursive practice, and social practice—are all at work. Members produce specific texts, such as the focus on various terms in relation to describing gender and behaviour within their discussions. Through discursive practice, members of The Doll Forum come to create and understand the specific texts in ways that are unique to The Doll Forum. Most notably, the discourse surrounding sexuality and sexual desire as it pertains to individuals Real Dolls represents the particular ways in which members understand the sexuality of their Real Dolls, and the relationships they share with them. The broader social practices relating to gender and sexuality are both reinforced and challenged in discussions on The Doll Forum.

Throughout my analysis I was paid attention to the fact that members of The Doll Forum were working within specific frameworks of knowledge regarding gender, sexuality, and relationships, and these were reinforced in many ways within their discussions. Yet I was also

interested in the ways in which discourse was utilized within the forum to produce meaning, and this was shown in the ways that members discuss their relationships with their dolls as very active. Essentially, the very fact that members of The Doll Forum use the forum to create an active dialogue supporting the use of Real Dolls suggests that they are utilizing discourse to expand current understandings and constructions of sexuality.

While much can be gained by critically examining the discussions presented within The Doll Forum, they only represent one aspect of the experiences of users of Real Dolls. Future research that seeks to interview members of The Doll Forum would expand our awareness of this unique community. While discussions represent one way in which members understand and construct their community, these posts are only brief points of discussions. Interviewing members would provide a broader context and deeper understanding of the motivations driving members to use Real Dolls. As well, as discussed in Chapter Two regarding the methodological issues related to interactions on the Internet, I was taking what was written by members to be representative of their experiences. Thus, a further limitation to this study is that the analysis is reflective of my interpretation of the discussions which members engaged in, and other readers may have alternative interpretations. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the Internet is serving as a vehicle for accommodating the expression and awareness of many alternative identities. In this regard, it offers an important tool for research on groups and behaviours that may otherwise not be easily accessed or readily accepted within society at large.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abyss Creations. n.d. "Realdoll, The World's finest Love Doll." Retrieved January 15th, 2009 (www.realdoll.com)
- Abyss Creations. n.d. 'Wicked Real Doll' Retrieved September 10th, 2010 (www.wickedrealdoll.com)
- Adams, M-L., 2003. Excerpts from 'the trouble with normal': Postwar youth and the construction of heterosexuality. In D. Brock (Ed.) *Making Normal: Social Regulation in Canada*, Canada: Thomson Nelson, Pp. 90-103.
- Ashley, K. And Plesch, V. 2002. "The cultural processes of 'appropriation'." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, v.32(1), 1-15.
- Attwood, F., 2006. "Sexed up: Theorizing the sexualisation of culture." *Sexualities*, v.9(1), 77-94
- , 2009. "'deepthroatfucker' and 'discerning adonis': Men and cybersex." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, v.12(3), 279-294.
- Balsamo, A., 1998. On the cutting edge: Cosmetic surgery and the technological production of the gendered body, Pp. 223-233 In N. Mirzoeff (Ed.) *The Visual Culture Reader*, New York: Routledge, Pp. 223-233
- Bartky, S.L. 2003. Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power. In R. Weitz (Ed.) *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Baudrillard, J. 1981. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis, Mo: Telos Press Ltd.
- Bernstein, E. 2001. "The meaning of the purchase: Desire, demand and the commerce of sex." *Ethnography*, v.2(3), 389-420.
- Bordo, S. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brickell, C. 2005. "Masculinities, performativity, and subversion: A sociological reappraisal." *Men and Masculinities*, v.8(24), 24-43.
- , 2009. "Sexuality and the dimensions of power." *Sexuality & Culture*, v.13, 57-74.
- Brock, D. 2003. Moving beyond deviance: Power, regulation, and governmentality. In D. Brock (Ed.) *Making Normal: Social Regulation in Canada*, Canada: Thomson Nelson Pp. Ix-xxxii

- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- 1993. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Cato, M. and Dillman Carpentier, R. 2010. "Conceptualizations of female empowerment and enjoyment of sexualized characters in reality television." *Mass Communication and Society*, v.13, 270-288.
- Chunn, D. E. 2003. Regulating (ab)normal sex: anti-VD strategies in British Columbia 1918-1945. In D. Brock (Ed.) *Making Normal: Social Regulation in Canada*, Canada: Thomson Nelson, Pp. 63-86
- Coles, T. 2008. "Finding space in the field of masculinity: Lived experiences of men's masculinities." *Journal of Sociology*, v.44(3), 233-248.
- Connell, R.W. 1987. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- 1995. *Masculinities*. Polity Press: Cambridge
- Dant, T. 1996. "Fetishism and the social value of objects." *The Sociological Review*, v.44(3), 495-516.
- Doring, N.M., 2009. "The internet's impact on sexuality: A critical review of 15 years of research." *Computers in Human Behavior*, v.25, 1089-1101.
- Durkin, K. E., and Bryant, C.D., 1995. "'Log on to sex': Some notes on the carnal computer and erotic cyberspace as an emerging research frontier." *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, v.16, 179-200.
- Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Flood, M. 2008. "Men, sex, and homosociality: How bonds between men shape their sexual relations with women." *Men and Masculinities*, v.10(3), 339-359.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- 1978. *The history of sexuality volume 1: An introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gauthier, D.K. and Forsyth, C.J., 1998. "bareback sex, bug chasers, and the gift of death." *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, v.20, 85-100.
- Gavey, N. 1989. "Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis: Contributions to feminist psychology." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, v.13, 459-475.
- Gillespie, C. (Director). (2007). Lars and the Real Girl [Film]. Sidney Kimmel Entertainment.

- Grazian, D. 2007. "The girl hunt: Urban nightlife and the performance of masculinity as collective activity." *Symbolic Interaction*, v.30(2), 221-243.
- Jenkins, P. 2001. *Beyond Tolerance: Child Pornography on the Internet*. New York: New York University Press.
- Joinson, A.N. 2005. Internet Behaviour and the Design of Virtual Methods. In C. Hine (Ed.), *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, Pp. 21-34.
- Koken, J. A., Bimbi, D.S., Parson, J.T., and Halkitis, P.N. 2004. "The Experience of Stigma in the Lives of Male Internet Escorts." *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, v.16(1), 13-32.
- Kuther, T. L. and McDonald, E. 2004. "Early adolescents' experiences with, and views of, Barbie." *Adolescence*, v.39(153), 39-51.
- Laslocky, M. 2005. "Just Like a Woman." Retrieved November 29th, 2009 (http://dir.salon.com/story/mwt/feature/2005/10/11/real_dolls/index.html)
- Lawson, H.M., and Leck, K., 2006. "Dynamics of internet dating." *Social Sciences Computer Review*, v.24(2), 189-208.
- Levy, A. 2005. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press.
- MacKinnon, C.A., 1997. Sexuality. In L. Nicholson (Ed.), *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. London: Routledge, Pp.158-180.
- Marshall, P. David. 2004. *New Media Cultures*. London: Arnold.
- Martin, K. A., 2003. Becoming a gendered body: Practices of preschools. In R. Weitz (Ed.), *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior 2nd Edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, Pp. 219-239.
- Maurutto, P. 2003. Moral reform, discipline, and normalization: Juvenile delinquency and rehabilitation in Ontario. In D. Brock (Ed.) *Making Normal: Social Regulation in Canada*, Canada: Thomson Nelson, Pp. 4-17
- Messerschmidt, J. W. 2004. *Flesh and Blood: Adolescent Gender Diversity and Violence*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- , 2009. "Doing gender": The impact and future of a salient sociological concept." *Gender & Society*, v.23(1), 85-88.

- Motschenbacher, H. 2009. "Speaking the gendered body: The performative construction of commercial femininities and masculinities via body-part vocabulary." *Language in Society*, v.38, 1-22.
- Mustanski, B.S. 2001. "Getting wired: Exploiting the internet for the collection of valid sexuality data." *The Journal of Sex Research*, v.38(4), 292-301.
- Orend, A. and Gagné, P. 2009. "Corporate logo tattoos and the commodification of the body." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, v.38(4), 493-517.
- Pauly-Morgan, K., 2003. Women and the knife: Cosmetic surgery and the colonization of women's bodies. In R. Weitz (Ed.), *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior 2nd Edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, Pp.164-183.
- Quinn, J.F. and Forsyth, C.J. 2005. "Describing sexual behaviour in the era of the internet: A typology for empirical research." *Deviant Behavior*, v.26(3), 191-207.
- Reirsol, O. and Skeid, S. 2006. "The ICD diagnoses of fetishism and sadomasochism." *Journal of Homosexuality*, v.50(2/3), 243-262.
- Reischer, E. and Koo, K.S. 2004. "The body beautiful: Symbolism and agency in the social world." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, v.33, 297-317.
- Rodriguez, J. 2006. "Color-blind ideology and the cultural appropriation of hip-hop." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, v.35(6), 645- 668.
- Rose, G. 1997. "Situating knowledges: Positionality, reflexivities and other tactics." *Progress in Human Geography*, v.21(3), 305-320.
- Rosenmann, A. and Safir, M.P. 2006. "Forced online: Push factors of internet sexuality: A preliminary study of online sexual empowerment." *Journal of Homosexuality*, v.51(3), 71-92.
- Rutter, J., and Smith, G.W.H. 2005. Ethnographic Presence in a Nebulous Setting. In C. Hine (Ed.), *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, Pp. 81-92.
- Sanger, T. 2008. "Trans governmentality: The production and regulation of gendered subjectivities." *Journal of Gender Studies*, v.17(1), 41-53.
- Schrock, D., Reid, L. and Boyd, E.M. 2005. "Transsexuals' embodiment of womanhood." *Gender & Society*, v.19(3), 317-335.
- Seale, C., Charteris-Black, J., MacFarlane, A., and McPherson, A. 2010. "Interviews and internet forums: A comparison of two sources of qualitative data." *Qualitative Health Research*, v.20(5), 595-606.

- Shapiro, E. 2007. "Drag kinging and the transformation of gender identities." *Gender & Society*, v.21(2), 250-271.
- Simpson, B., 2005. "Identity manipulation in cyberspace as a leisure option: Play and the exploration of self." *Information and Communications Technology Law*, v.14(2), 115-131.
- Stoddard, G., 2004. 'I did it for science.' Retrieved September 10th, 2010 www.nerve.com
- Sykes, Gresham M. and David Matza. 1957. "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency." *American Sociological Review*, 22(6):664-670.
- Tewksbury, R., 2006. "'click here for HIV': an analysis of internet-based bug chasers and bug givers." *Deviant Behavior*, v.27, 379-395.
- The Doll Forum. 2001-2010. (www.dollforum.com)
- Turkle, Sherry. 1995. *Life On The Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson
- Tyrwhitt-Drake, H. 1999. "Resisting the discourse of critical discourse analysis: Reopening a Hong Kong case study." *Journal of Pragmatics*, v.31, 1081-1088.
- Valenti, J., 2007. 'Real Dolls, real creepy.' Retrieved September 10th, 2010 (www.feministing.com)
- Van Doorn, N., Wyatt, S. and van Zoonen, L., (2008). "A body of text: Revisiting textual performances of gender and sexuality on the internet." *Feminist Media Studies*, v.8(4), 357-374.
- West, C. and Zimmerman, D. 1987. "Doing gender." *Gender & Society*, v.1(2), 125-151.
- Wolkomir, M. 2009. "Making heteronormative reconciliations: The story of romantic love, sexuality, and gender in mixed-orientation marriages." *Gender & Society*, v.23(4), 494-519.
- Wu Song, F., 2009. *Virtual Communities: Bowling Alone, Online Together*. Peter Lang: New York.