

Do child-like sex dolls increase or decrease the risk of harm?

The use of child-like sex dolls (CLSDs) is highly controversial, being subject to both moral and legal debate. Despite this ongoing discussion, there has been little research examining the psychological profiles of those who own CLSDs, or whether ownership might influence a person's risk of abusing children, either by increasing or decreasing it. A recent study conducted by researchers at NTU[†] offers what appear to be the first empirical insights into this issue, exploring how CLSD ownership relates to personality traits among people with attractions to children and their potential risk of perpetrating abuse. The paper, which challenges some common assumptions, provides an evidence-based look at a difficult subject, aiming to inform future research and discussion on preventing abuse and supporting this group in safely managing their sexual interests.

Background

Research examining issues related to sexual attraction to children can face significant hurdles due to the stigma and legal issues involved. While there have been some studies considering those who own adult-like sex dolls, the ownership of CLSDs, along with its potential harms and benefits, remains a largely unexplored area. Public and professional opinions on this topic are divided, with some believing that CLSDs could encourage offending and others proposing that they might offer a safe alternative to the abuse of real children.

“It is plausible that child-like doll ownership is ... associated with proclivities for child sexual abuse. It is equally plausible that [it] is associated with child abuse prevention.”

Understanding these complex dynamics requires careful, evidence-based investigation, especially given the potential implications for abuse-prevention strategies and mental-health support for people with attractions to children. While previous discussions around CLSDs have focused largely on moral and legal objections, the lack of concrete data about their practical impact remains a significant barrier to informed

debate. The difficulties faced by people with attractions to children in achieving sexual satisfaction without causing harm have also been noted, underlining the importance of exploring all potentially safe outlets. This study is an important first step in empirically assessing these issues, focusing on the psychological and risk-related factors linked to CLSD ownership.

The study

The researchers conducted an anonymous online survey, with participants recruited through online forums related to doll ownership or those focused on peer support for people attracted to children. The final sample included 85 people who owned at least one CLSD and 120 non-owners.

The survey explored participants' use of dolls (sexual, non-sexual, and other), their general sexual attitudes, emotional wellbeing, and personality traits, and thoughts about their potential engagement with sexual offending. Non-owners were also asked whether they would consider owning a CLSD. The goal was to compare the two groups to see whether doll ownership was linked to any particular psychological traits or patterns of risk.

While the authors did not begin with specific expectations about the psychological traits associated with owning CLSDs, they presented

three possible models in relation to risk: that ownership may increase it, reduce it, or have no effect. The risk-neutral model includes the possibility that CLSDs may be used as “functional life tools” to increase life satisfaction and overall wellbeing without affecting risk.

Results

Interestingly, CLSD owners appeared to be using their dolls for a mix of sexual and non-sexual reasons, with no single purpose dominating. One important finding is that there were similar levels of self-reported sexual offending of different kinds among owners and non-owners. Perhaps surprisingly, those who reported exclusive attraction to adults were slightly over-represented among CLSD owners, suggesting that motivations for ownership may be more varied than is commonly assumed.

“Doll owners were significantly less likely ... to express a proclivity for sexual abuse.”

The psychological profiles of doll owners showed some interesting contrasts. Compared to non-owners, they tended to be older, and they were slightly more likely to exhibit “schizotypal” personality traits (unusual thinking and beliefs). They also showed lower levels of sexual preoccupation, fewer antisocial traits, and less anxious attachment. Notably, while they reported higher anticipated enjoyment in hypothetical abuse scenarios, they also reported lower arousal to those scenarios. This suggests a more complex and nuanced psychological profile than might be expected.

Which risk model fits the data?

Overall, the findings do not support the idea that child-like sex dolls either reduce or increase the risk of sexual offending, offering no clear evidence for either model. The results were, however, more consistent with the “functional” model, suggesting that doll ownership may reflect specific psychological traits, such as a reduced need for attachment to others or a desire for predictability and control, rather than having any direct link to offending behaviour.

Implications

This study challenges common assumptions by suggesting that CLSD ownership is motivated by a mix of sexual, emotional, and companionship reasons rather than being linked in any clear way to the risk of someone committing abuse.

“There is an implicit (and sometime explicit) assumption that the ownership of [CLSDs] is inherently risky ... We found no such evidence of this.”

Although the psychological traits of CLSD owners are measurably distinctive, they do not seem to show a higher risk of offending when compared to non-owners. This, along with the finding that CLSD ownership may serve as a coping tool for some individuals, indicates a need for balanced, evidence-based policies related to the management of sexual interests in children. Such policies should consider the potential role of CLSDs in harm reduction, particularly given that 79.2% of non-owners expressed an interest in ownership.

It should be noted that the authors stress the preliminary nature of the results: the sample was relatively small, and they list a number of other potential limitations. Research with larger, more diverse samples is needed to clarify the observed patterns and guide the development of harm-reduction strategies. A better understanding could also help people to seek support in managing their attractions safely.

Summary

- People own CLSDs to fulfil a mix of sexual, emotional, and companionship needs.
- CLSD ownership may reflect psychological desires for attachment and predictability.
- No evidence was found that CLSD ownership increases the risk of sexual offending.
- Further research is needed to help inform the development of evidence-based policies.

[†]Harper, C. A., & Lievesley, R. (2022). Exploring the ownership of child-like sex dolls. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 51(10), 4141–4156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-022-02422-4>

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