

Master Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology

Master Thesis

The collecting experience

The collector-collected relation and collector interaction of Barbie, Blythe, and Ball-jointed doll collectors

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Master Thesis

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1. Introduction

When I wake up in the morning the first thing I do is pick up my glasses from my nightstand, put them on, and get up from my bed. After getting a cup of tea in my favorite mug I go to my desk, sit down in my desk-chair and turn on my laptop. While I wait for my laptop to be ready I glance at the shelves above it. On my shelves you will find a number of objects ranging from study books to a variety of designer toys and dolls to random objects such as tiny Hello Kitty toys. In these first minutes of my day I have already interacted with a large number of different objects and I will continue to do so during the day.

In our daily lives we all encounter, use, and interact with a stream of objects. Different objects will hold different values and different meanings to different people. Moreover, dependent on the meaning ascribed to the object it will play a different role in one's life and a different relationship with the object is formed. For instance, I could drink tea from any mug, but I prefer to drink it from one of my favorite mugs that has some character from a Disney movie on it. The mug is not more suitable for drinking tea than other mugs I have, but by being my favorite mug it says something about me, in this case that I like Disney movies and that I prefer to drink my tea from a mug that reminds me of those characters and movies. There were also the objects of my shelves. I did not use these objects in my morning routine, but I looked at them and while most of the objects on my shelves do not hold a practical use, like my tea mug, my most valued objects are on those shelves. A lot of those objects are part of collections. I already explained that objects can hold different meanings and functions, making an object part of a collection, making it a collected object, is a specific kind of way to regard and relate to objects. Collecting and the relation formed with collected objects is the focus of this thesis.

With the rise of consumer society collecting became a widespread and common phenomenon and by estimate one in three people in affluent nations collects something (Belk 1995a, 83). There is a vast number of popular literature available about collecting and collectors such as autobiographies and novels as well as magazines and guidebooks for collectors of a specific object (Danet and Katriel 1994, 220-221). The academic literature on collecting was considerably less than the popular literature until a spur of interest arose in the late 1980s which came from a new interest in modern material culture among many social scientists (Danet and Katriel 1994, 221).

The widespreadness and importance of the collecting phenomenon can be seen not only in the attention given to collecting by popular and academic literature, but also in the range of objects that are collected. Think about stamps, cars, dolls, rocks, lunch boxes, fine art, and beer cans, to name just a few examples, as objects that are collected. Virtually anything can become an object of collecting as long as there is someone who collects it. Furthermore, collecting is something with many sides to it. Collecting does not begin and end with acquiring objects to then form a collection. The whole collecting experience

can also involve looking for objects, research, caring for and displaying the objects, and interacting with other collectors. Not all aspects might hold the same importance to all collectors, but collecting certainly involves a variety of activities and ways to be involved with objects.

This thesis is not meant to form any conclusive statements about collecting in general, but its aim is to explore the ways of collecting and the ways in which people form a relationship with their collected objects and the collection as a whole. I will now discuss my own research, which is on doll collectors, as well as my main research questions in more detail.

1.1. Own research on doll collectors

My own research on collecting took place January through March 2012 and its focus is on different collectors of three different kinds of dolls: Barbie dolls, Blythe dolls, and Ball Jointed Dolls. I think focusing on several different groups of doll collectors instead on doll collectors in general will provide a more in-depth view on the complexity of collecting and the relation between the object that is collected and the person collecting it. If I were to focus on doll collectors in general I could miss any diversity that the different types of dolls might bring to different ways of collecting or relating to an object as well as the ways in which collectors interact with each other.

The three types of dolls mentioned above were chosen for several reasons. First of all, these dolls differ in the way they look and are made, their history, and how well they are known in general. These differences may also play a role in how collectors interact and relate to the dolls. Second of all, practicality played a role in the choice of these dolls. There are many different kinds of dolls out there and I thought that with these dolls I could find collectors and would have some opportunities to go to doll related events such as conventions. Finally, my personal interest played a part. Because I chose dolls I had a personal interest in it was easier and more natural to me to talk about these dolls with collectors than if I had chosen an object that I had no interest in. Furthermore, I think being a collector of dolls myself created a different bond with my respondents than if I was not. By knowing I was a collector too, or by showing that I had an interest in these dolls beyond my research, I immediately had a common ground with my respondents.

The object of this thesis is the formation of the relationship between doll collectors and their dolls. The relationships doll collectors might have with other doll collectors and how they interact is also an important part of my thesis and follows from the relationship people have with their dolls since the relationships between collectors generally originate from the doll-collecting. Furthermore, interacting with other collectors can be a part of the collecting experience. The main research question for this thesis is the following:

What kind of relationships do people form with their doll collections, how are these relationships formed, and what kind of interaction is there between collectors?

It must be noted that when, in this thesis, I use the term *doll collector* I mean a collector of either Barbie dolls, Blythe dolls, or Ball Jointed Dolls, unless otherwise stated. Because I want to pay notice to the difference between both the material objects and the way they are talked about, used, and shared by their collectors I have formulated the following sub-question for my research:

What differences and similarities are there between the ways the different dolls are interacted with by their collectors?

After presenting the theoretical framework on collecting I will formulate additional sub-questions drawn from the literature which will be used to analyze the data in order to answer the main question. I think the social and academic relevance of this research lies in the fact that people-object relations are an essential part of who we are and what we do in life. By exploring these relations as well as how these people-object relations can be a part of people-people interaction in the context of collecting my research will add to the knowledge on the ways people form relationships with objects, with collections in particular, how these relationships with the objects are part of the relationships between collectors, as well as on the whole phenomenon of collecting including the way people shape their collections and how they connect to it.

1.2. Thesis overview

The next chapter, chapter two, will discuss literature about collecting and collectors.

The third chapter will be a return to my research questions. Here I will formulate additional questions based on the literature discussed in the theoretical framework. I will discuss for each question the relevance and operationalization of that question. Furthermore, I will give an overview of my methodology and end with a practical and ethical reflection on my research.

Chapter four will focus on the relation between doll collectors and their dolls. It will be discussed how people decide what to include or exclude from their collections, the concept of the extended self in relation to dolls, and how people see themselves as collectors. Furthermore, the differences between Barbie, Blythe, and Ball Jointed Doll collectors will also be paid attention to throughout the chapter.

The fifth chapter will discuss the interaction between doll collectors. Online and offline as well as the connection between the two will be discussed. Furthermore, the interaction as part of the collecting experience and the ways the collector-doll relationship is reflected in collector-collector interaction will be discussed. Again, attention will be paid to the differences between the different doll collectors.

The final chapter will be the conclusion in which I return to each research question individually as well as make an all-inclusive conclusion about my research.

2. Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework I will discuss several aspects of collecting beginning with how collecting is defined or not-defined by several authors. After that I will take a look at who collects. As mentioned in the introduction the variety of what is collected is basically endless, from that the question arises if there is also such a variety in who collects and if general patterns in who collects what can be seen. Then I will continue on to discuss how objects become part of a collection. From my own experience with collecting I know that an object that is part of a collection is different to me than a “stand-alone” object or an object I only have for its functional purpose. So how is it that objects go from being a certain object to being a collected object? Thereafter I will discuss motivations that the literature identifies for collecting. It being such a widespread thing, it is not unusual to think that there are also multiple motivations to collecting. Then I will discuss the concept of the extended self where the sense of self is extended into objects. This concept is useful to look at for the ways in which a relationship people person and object can be formed. Finally, I will discuss the interaction between collectors to see what kind of interaction is identified by the literature and how interaction between collectors is a part of the collecting in general.

2.1. Defining collecting

All authors I discuss here who write about collecting talk about a certain aspect or aspects of collecting, but an actual definition is hardly ever given. It might be assumed that everybody knows what it entails or that it is too complex and broad to construct a definition. However, one way in which several authors have sought to find a definition is to define what kind of activity collecting is not.

Belk et al. make a clear distinction between collecting, acquiring, possessing, and hoarding. Belk et al. find that a collector is selective about the objects he acquires and is therefore different from the indiscriminate accumulator (1988, 548). Belk further finds that regarding possessions as a set further distinguished the collector from the accumulator (Belk 1995a, 67). Belk et al. find that the difference between a collector and someone who simply possesses a collection put together by someone else, lies in, what the authors call the curatorial aspects of collecting: caring for, cataloging, or displaying a collection (1988, 548). The difference between a hoarder and a collector is seen in the idea that while hoarders view the items they possess foremost as utilitarian commodities, collectors give the items in their collection a non-utilitarian special status (ibid.).

Danet and Katriel also differentiate collecting from other terms, which according to them are sometimes used interchangeably in everyday converse, namely saving and hoarding (1994, 224). In their view, often when someone says they have collected a lot of something, for example clothes, what they actually mean is that they have been saving them, keeping what they already have, instead of collecting

which the authors view as an activity that sets up a future action for the collector (Danet and Katriel 1994, 224). Furthermore, while hoarding is also future orientated, the hoarder is interested in quantity and the collector in quality. Moreover, like Belk et al. made the distinction between an accumulator and a collector based on selectivity, so do Danet and Katriel for the collector and the hoarder (1994, 225). While Danet and Katriel also discuss that a collector gives an item a special status removed from its utilitarian usefulness, they do not necessarily address this as a difference between collectors and hoarders.

While making distinctions between collecting and other forms of going about getting objects is useful to get a better sense of what collecting is, it is not a definition. Belk in his book 'collecting in a consumer society' does provide a definition: "*collecting is the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences.*" (1995a, 67). In this definition the distinctions made earlier can also be seen. While it is thus possible to form a definition of collecting, any definition of something as complex as collecting is open to objections (Pearce 1994, 157). With regard to a definition by Belk et al. (a different Belk et al. than the one I discuss), which is very similar to the one given above, Pearce notes it is easy to find objection with the term 'active' since there are people who only realize they have a collection after they have already collected it (ibid.). This is actually also a point made by Belk et al. in the sense that they think that collections almost never start purposely (1988, 548). What is important to notice in Belk's definition as given above is that the things that are collected do not have to be material objects, but can also be experiences.

Furthermore, Belk states that the things collected are non-identical and part of a set. Danet and Katriel discuss what they call the 'principle of no two-alike' (1994, 227). They state that "*no matter what their ages or what they collect, collectors, at least of material objects, are usually not interested in having two of anything.*" (Danet and Katriel 1994, 227). The authors argue that collectors seek items that are the same in the sense that the collector sees them as belonging to the same category of things, but that are not identical to each other. They also note that there are exceptions to be found. However, they give the example of a person who always collects two of the same salt and pepper shakers where the two identical pairs together form the collectible. In this case there is no collecting of two of the same thing, because the same things are seen as one thing. However, 'real' exceptions can also be found, but not often (Danet and Katriel 1994, 228).

Another point that, while not part of any clear definition of collecting, most authors regarding collecting discuss is that of addiction and obsession. Olmsted finds that the concepts of addiction and obsession are sometimes used by collectors as a way to deny responsibility, but participant observation studies have found little evidence for actual addictive or obsessed behavior (1991, 297). Belk, in his article on the positive and negative aspects of collecting, also finds that many collectors, in a casual and

humorous manner, call themselves addicted as a way to escape responsibility for their behavior (1995b, 480). However, while most collectors are not at a point where they could really be called addicted or obsessed, some are (Belk 1995b, 140). Furthermore, Belk sees the guilt expressed by many collectors as an indication that the collectors might potentially see themselves going down a wrong road in the future (Belk 1995b, 141.).

As has become clear from all that is written above, it is perhaps not possible to give an all-inclusive clear definition of what collecting is, but there are a few characteristics that most authors see as related to collecting. Collecting is different from other types of consumption such as hoarding, the collectables that are collected are seen as belonging to a certain category and unique in the collection of items of that category, objects are removed from their utilitarian purposes, and the notions of addiction and obsession often play a role. Pearce finds that “*perhaps the real point is that a collection is not a collection until someone thinks of it in those terms*’ (1994, 158). Furthermore, she concludes that collecting is too complex to be able to be summarized in a definition (Pearce 1994, 159).

2.2. Who Collects?

Besides questions of what collecting is, there are questions of what a collector is and who collects. Several authors have pointed out a general pattern of collecting in terms of age and gender. Collecting is a very common activity for children, especially between the ages of seven to twelve. In childhood girls are equally likely to collect something as boys. In puberty collecting activities seem to subside, especially in women, and it is middle-aged men who are most likely to start collecting something again (Baudrillard 1994, 9; Belk 1995a, 97; Olmsted 1991, 298).

The above pattern already indicates a difference in terms of gender. Belk states that while men dominate collecting in general, in some areas of collecting, such as stamps and coin collecting, approximately half of the collectors are women, while there are also areas of collecting, such as instant collectibles, that are dominated by women (Belk 1995a, 97). However, Belk indicates that there is less a difference in whether or not men or women collect, but more of a difference in what is collected by whom. For instance, Belk found that men are more likely than women to collect guns, books, and beer cans, while women are more likely than men to collect animal replicas, jewelry, and housewares (Belk 1995a, 99; Belk and Wallenberg 1994, 243). Differences in what is collected when looking at gender is also seen amongst children collectors where boys and girls are more likely to collect different things.

Next to the notion that there is a gender difference in what is collected, Belk and Wallenberg also discuss that the act of collecting has several characteristics that can be seen as either stereotypically masculine or feminine (1994, 240-242). They find that masculine traits such as aggressiveness and competitiveness are especially present in the acquiring of objects for the collection whereas feminine

traits such as nurturance and creativity seem especially important in taking care of the collection after it has been collected. Therefore, collecting is a mix of masculine and feminine traits and cannot be regarded as just the one or the other (Belk and Wallenberg 1994, 242).

Besides differences in who collects what in terms of gender, Belk also identifies differences in terms of class. While the development of consumer society has made collecting more widespread there is still a majority of upscale and male collectors (Belk 1995a, 97-98). While a poor person can collect *something*, that person will not be able to collect *anything*. However, while those with more money will be able to afford the more expensive and higher status objects in a collection area, those with less monetary means might be able to compensate that with, for instance, knowledge of the objects, luck, or narrowing one's collecting specialty within an area of collecting (Belk 1995a, 100). In this way almost everybody is able to collect something as well as find a way to be successful in forming their collection.

While Belk discusses differences in who collects what in terms of gender and class, Bal indicates that some people have a "collector's mind-set" or a "collecting spirit" while other people seem to lack it (1994, 99-100). Bal does not discuss what differences between people with or without this mind-set could be, nor does she state why some people have it and some do not. She only states that certain people have it and others simply lack it. To illustrate her view on the "collecting spirit" she tells the story of how a friend of hers became a collector of vases. She writes about how her friend bought a vase and then another one that matched the first. Bal continues to say that even someone who buys six vases can still argue that they need six different vases for different kinds of flowers and would not necessarily be a collector. She then states: "*As someone who lack the collecting spirit, that is how far I would go myself. But my friend who has the spirit in him pushed on after vase number six*" (Bal 1994, 100). Here she suggests that some people just do not have it in them to become a collector and that some people are more likely to start collecting than are others. Finally, Formanek notes that passion for the things collected seems to be the collector's defining characteristic as it is common to all motivations to collect (1991, 285).

In short, all kinds of people of different ages, gender, and class, collect. There are, however, differences in who collects what. In addition, it would seem that certain people have a tendency to collect or have the potential to become a collector, and that certain people lack something that would turn them into a collector. For my own research it will be interesting to see how doll collectors view themselves as collectors and if there is a difference between people who view themselves as a collector for certain reasons and other people who also think they are collectors, but have different rationalities behind it. It will also be interesting to see if the idea of Bal's collecting spirit can be found in certain people while appearing to lack in others. Furthermore, it might be interesting to see if these differences and differences in how they interact with their dolls are reflected in the gender, age, and occupation.

2.3. *Becoming part of the collection*

What was already briefly mentioned in the first section of this theoretical framework is that collections almost never start purposely. Bal states that a collection can only be after a certain number of objects have already been collected. The beginning of the collection happened when there was not yet a collection for the object to be a part of (Bal 1994, 101). Several other authors have also stated that collections generally start incidentally and unconsciously (Belk et al. 1988, 548-545; Pearce 1994, 158). This indicates that people do not set out to become collectors of a certain kind of object, but that the realization of being a collector only comes when someone has already become one.

Even though it might not be clear from the start that a collection is being formed, it is clear to many authors that an object and its meaning need to somehow be changed by their collectors in order to become part of a collection. Baudrillard states that when an object is stripped from its function and from any practical context it may have had, its destiny then becomes to be collected. Furthermore, when an object is stripped of its original function its meaning can be totally formed by the person owning it (Baudrillard, 1994, 7-8). Danet and Katriel refer to this concept as “reframing” the object (1994, 225). They argue that an object needs to be reframed as a collectable in order to be able to become part of a collection and that to do so it means to take the object out of its original context and to create a new context for it (Danet and Katriel 1994, 226). However, Danet and Katriel state that “*to relate to an object or experience as a collectable is to experience it aesthetically*” (1994, 225). One point they make about this seems somewhat contradictory with many of the other literature and my own ideas about collecting. They state that the experience of an object aesthetically is disinterested (Danet and Katriel 1994, 225). If an object has to be experienced aesthetically for it to be a collectable, and to experience it aesthetically is to look at it disinterestedly, how then can people invest their collection with other meanings than aesthetical ones such as emotional attachments or as a symbol of a memory? Belk et al. state that in making an object special, reframing it, the aesthetics of the object are often not of great importance (1998, 550). However, their concept of reframing an object can still be applied except that I do not think the object needs to necessarily be reframed aesthetically because other, non-aesthetical meanings, can be used to reframe the objects meaning.

Belk et al. look at the transformation of an object into a collectable as a conversion from the profane to the sacred. They take profane to mean ordinary, mundane, common, while they take sacred to mean special, extraordinary, and capable of generating reverence (Belk et al. 1988, 550). They see bringing items together under the name of a collection as the most basic way in which objects are converted to the status of being sacred (ibid). Another way in which an object may become sacred is through “contamination”, in a positive sense, by a famous person. When an object has been touched by or belonged to a certain person it gains a sacred significance for a collector (ibid). Moreover, Belk mentions

the auction as a ritual that can turn commodities into sacred collectibles (1995a, 69). Furthermore, Belk et al. state that the strongest evidence of the sacred status of collected objects lies in the fact that most collectors cannot imagine selling an item once it has become part of their collection (1988, 550). However, in times of financial crisis the collection might become a source of wealth (Olmsted 1991, 288). Olmsted seems to think of the sacred conversion of the objects as negative, in contrast to other authors, as she notes about the Belk et al. article: “*A review of collectors and collecting suggests that negative aspects pervade collecting; a collection makes the object sacred, legitimizes acquisitiveness as art or science, creates jealousy in families and causes post-mortem distribution problems (Belk, et al., 1988)*” (Olmsted 1991, 296). While the latter two things mentioned are obviously negative, the first two notions are not seen as negative by Belk et al. at all.

While he is not talking about collecting per se, Kopytoff’s chapter on the cultural biography of things is also useful to think about the way collectors (and people in general) transform objects from one thing or context to another (special) thing or context. Kopytoff discusses a process of commoditization, decommoditization, and possible recommoditization (1988, 65). In relation to collecting the process from commodity to decommoditized object seems to be most interesting as it transforms a commodity to an object that is perceived to be singular and unique. However, as Kopytoff makes clear, there is always a paradox present in collectibles. As an object gets made special and worthy of collecting, it becomes more valuable, which in turn gives it a price which makes it a commodity (Kopytoff 1988, 81). However, such objects that might have a monetary value (thus are commodities) can also have a value that goes beyond the monetary one (Kopytoff 1988, 83). Because most collectibles still have an exchange value they can, in theory, be, what Kopytoff calls, recommodified. However, as was noted above most collectors will not want to look at their collecting as something that could possibly be again a commodity instead of a special, sacred, object whose value does not relate to the monetary world. Exceptions to this can of course be found, for instance in times of financial crisis when collections might become a source of money for the collector (Olmsted 1991, 300). In short this means that objects and what they are, is never fixed, but always in the process of being and becoming (Woodward 2007, 103). The biography of things discussed by Kopytoff could also relate to the idea of contamination that is discussed above. The biography of a thing, its history, could determine its life and value as a collectible object.

From the above discussion it is clear that in some way or another the meaning of an object needs to become a different one than it already carries if it is to become part of a collection. For my own research it will be relevant to see how people shape their collection by adding things to it and how they make it a part of their collection. It will also be interesting to see if this happens in the same way for all the dolls.

2.4. Motivations for collecting

In this section I will first discuss diverse motivations that are often thought to be behind collecting, then I will further discuss two of these motivations which I think to be the most interesting for my own research: the extension of self and motivations that relate to interaction with other collectors.

In her research on collectors and their motivations to collect Formanek identifies motivations for collecting that she has divided in five categories: motivations that stand in relation to the self; motivations that stand in relation to others; as preservation, restoration, history, and a sense of continuity; financial investment; and addiction. In addition there are also people who had multiple motivations and a category of miscellaneous motivations (Formanek 1991, 281-284). She further notes that the data she collected indicated that people's collecting interests and behavior changes over time and that the way people collect and what they collect might change with different personality needs at different times (1991, 285).

Of these five motivations the motivation related to financial investment is a questionable motivation for collecting. As mentioned briefly above most collectors come to regard their collected objects as something removed from monetary value. People who only collect for financial investment are often not seen as 'good' collectors by collectors who do not view their collection activities in monetary terms. Belk argues that the reason for this is that collecting only for monetary gain does not compute with other collector's own, ideal, idea about collecting (Belk 1998, 12). If I look back at what has already been discussed in this theoretical framework I cannot say that I would count people who only acquire things to later sell them with no emotional attachment to the objects as collectors. However, one point that came forward at the end of section 2.1. is that perhaps a collection becomes a collection when someone regards it as such. In that way, if a person who's main motive for collecting is money, he might just be a collector. For my own research it might be relevant to see how people see these collectors and how such collectors view themselves as collectors.

2.5. The Extended Self

Our sense of who we are, our sense of self, is more than our bodies and our minds, it can be extended into objects (Woodward 2007, 144-145). When an object is seen as part of the self, as "me", it has become an extension of the self and thus part of the sense of self. Belk states that "*A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves.*" (1988, 139). Belk's essay on the extended self and possessions is the key work about the way people incorporate objects into their concept of self (Woodward 2007, 144).

Belk explains that some objects are more central to the self than are others and visualizes this as a core self wrapped in layers of possessions that are part of the extended self (Belk 1988, 152). Based on

own research Ahuvia agrees with Belk that possessions are a part of the self and play a great role in shaping the self (2005, 179). However, Ahuvia sees Belk's use of the term core-self as problematic because it might be confused to mean that there is such a thing as a true, authentic, core-self that comes before the extended self (2005, 179-180). Ahuvia suggest that we do away with the notion of core-self, but keep Belk's idea that objects can have varying degrees of selfness for a person (2005, 182).

In order for an object to be able to become part of the self it needs to be a possession, it needs to be possessed. As Belk puts it: "*When an object becomes possession, what were once self and not-self are synthesized and having and being merge.*" (1988, 146). The more we feel we possess an object, the more we see it as part of our self (Woodward 2007, 145). Belk identifies four ways in which the self can be extended into possessed objects.

First of all, a way in which objects can become part of our extended self is by creating or altering them, by way a part of the self gets extended into the object (Belk 1988, 144). Here money can also be seen as a way of extending the self as it creates opportunities for the imagination of what we could do and buy and, therefore, what we could be. Furthermore, money creates possibilities to be more selective of what one buys and in what the self is extended (Belk 1988, 150). Creating or altering an object is an investment of time as well as craftsmanship and creativity which are parts of who a person is. By using one's creativity, one's own hands, and one's energy to create or alter an object that creativity and time put into creating it becomes part of the object. With the creativity and energy being a part of the self and that creativity and energy becoming a part of the object, the object becomes part of the self as well.

Second of all, control or mastery of an object can be a way for that object to become part of the extended self (Belk 1988, 150). In this way, gifts can be a way to extend the self and give part of the self to someone. As it is the gift giver who controls what object the other person receives. Furthermore, mastery or control can also turn nondurable products, events or public property into possession and therefore in objects of the extended self (ibid.).

Third of all, intimately knowing an object can make it part of the self. Belk states that this knowing cannot be without passion if it is to become part of the self (1988, 151). As mentioned in section 2.2 a collector who has less monetary means or a less impressive collection than others might compensate this by knowing a lot about the objects collected. For instance, a stamp collector with a vast knowledge about collecting stamps and individual stamps might see this knowledge and the objects that the knowledge applies to more as part of himself than if he knew nothing about the object.

Finally, Belk states that, while the previous three ways to incorporate the self into objects are for the most part active and intentional, there is a fourth way to extend the self which is contamination. An object possessed by someone, an object that is an extension of the possessor is contaminated with that person and this contamination might prevail after the object is no longer the possession of that person

(Belk 1988, 151). An example of the importance of contamination with regard to collecting are objects that used to be owned by celebrities and because of that, because they used to be part of that celebrity and are still contaminated by it, they mean something and get their value from that contamination.

These four ways in which objects can become seen as part of the self are not rules, but possibilities. Not everybody who creates, masters, knows, or has a contaminated object will automatically see this as a part of their selves, but it are ways in which the self can be extended. Cohen fears that the concept of the extended self lacks boundaries and is therefore too vague a concept to be used (1989, 125-126). Belk, however, in his reply to Cohen's critique states that since the extended self is about how people see themselves and how they regard objects as a part of themselves the extended self is a individual concept. Meaning that it is about the self perception of someone and placing boundaries on what a person can and cannot regard as the self will only limit the possibilities for research on the ways people interact and regard objects (Belk 1989, 129).

As a part of our extended self's objects and whole collections can represent a part of us, but it can also add to a fantasy of the self. For instance, a person collecting baseball cards can collect them because of his interest in baseball, but also have a sense of being part of that baseball world (Belk et al. 1988, 550-551). Furthermore, objects can not only play an important role in who we are, but also in our sense of past. Objects can relate to our past by being the embodiment of our memories and feelings related to our pasts (Belk 1988, 148). For instance, a souvenir bought on vacation might come to represent the memories and feelings, related to that vacation, of the person who bought the souvenir. It is not just a cheap souvenir; it is a part of that person's past experiences and therefore part of who he is.

When an object is seen as part of the self the involuntary loss of them can feel as a loss or lessening of self (Belk 1988, 142; Belk et al. 1988, 550). An example of this is the feeling victims of theft have with regard to the theft of their objects. People who have been robbed experience feelings of anger, violation, and grief for the objects lost. When an object that was considered to be part of the self is taken away, a part of the self is taken away and thus the grief for the object is actually a grief for the self (Belk 1988, 142).

With regard to collecting Belk states that because of the time and commitment that a collector puts into the collection a collection may be seen as more a part of the self than single consumption objects (Belk 1988, 155). Furthermore, the more an object is seen as part of the self, the more attention and care it will receive (Belk 1988, 158). Because the individual objects as well as the collection as a whole are part of the extended self it is, in a way, oneself that one collects (Baudrillard 1994, 12).

Since my main interest in this thesis is the relationship between doll collectors and their dolls the ways those dolls and the collection as a whole is part of their sense of self and how they extend the self into the dolls is of great interest. Furthermore, how they feel about the possible loss of doll will be an

indication of how they see the dolls as part of them. Moreover, since objects closer to the self will receive more time and attention it is interesting to see if collectors have favorite objects in their collections, if those objects receive more or a different kind of attention as well as why those objects are favorites.

2.6. Interaction between collectors

One final thing I will address in the theoretical framework before taking another look at the research questions is the interaction between collectors. Some collectors have said that they like to be in contact with likeminded people to share their hobby with (Formanek 1991, 282; Belk 1995b, 486; Belk et al. 1988, 551). Belk et al. even state that it is only with knowledgeable others that the collector will be able to feel fully appreciated as a collector of a certain object (1988, 551). Collectors might be involved in conventions, shows and auctions together with other collectors (Olmsted 1991, 295; Belk 1995a, 83, 93-94). Furthermore, a sense of competition is often present between collectors and a chance to gain prestige through the collection (Danet and Katriel 1994, 222; Belk 1995b, 486).

While none of the literature goes into much detail about collector interaction, one thing completely missing from the literature is the ways collectors interact with each other on the Internet. This is perhaps mainly because the Internet was not so widespread and so much in use at the time that most of this literature was written. However, I think that more focus on the interaction between collectors, both online as offline, will provide interesting insights into the worlds of collecting. Furthermore, not only the interaction between collectors has possibly been affected by the Internet, but also ways in which people can collect and find objects and information has been affected by the Internet.

3. Research questions, methodology, and ethics.

3.1. A return to the research questions

In the introduction I presented the following main research question: *What kind of relationships do people form with their doll collections, how are these relationships formed, and what kind of interaction is there between collectors?* I also presented the following sub-question: *What differences and similarities are there between the ways the different dolls are interacted with by their collectors?*

Now that I have presented the theoretical framework I would like to add some sub-questions, which are formed by the above discussed framework, to answer my main-research question. I will discuss each question briefly in relation to the theoretical framework as well as the significance and operationalization. After this I will give an overview of the methodology I used for my research. In the final part of this chapter I will reflect on the practical and ethical issues of my research.

- *When do people consider themselves and others to be a collector?*

As became clear from the discussions in section 2.1. and 2.2. about defining collecting and who collects, there are many aspects that are considered to be a part of collecting. However because collecting is such a diverse and complex phenomenon it is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to define it so that it will entail every aspect of it while not being too broad. It is certainly not my goal to attempt a clear-cut definition based on my own research findings. However, the literature does not pay much attention to how collectors view themselves as collectors and, therefore, asking the above question might provide some interesting insights into the world of collecting. Furthermore, people's ideas on what collecting and collectors are might also have some interesting connections to the ways they interact with their dolls and with other collectors.

In my interviews I have asked people if they saw themselves as a collector and why that was. I then also asked them what they thought was a difference between a person who had certain dolls and was a collector of those dolls, and a person who also had these dolls, but was not a collector. By asking these questions I gained an insight not only in how they saw themselves, but also what they believed collecting to be more generally.

- *How do objects enter and possibly leave a collection?*

As discussed in the theoretical framework, in section 2.3., in order to become part of a collection the meaning of the object needs to somehow be changed by the collector. This transformation of meaning is the first step in forming a relationship with the object and possibly in making the object a part of the self. As stated on page 13 in section 2.5. in the quote by Belk, when an object is transformed into a possession it becomes part of the self. Furthermore, as became clear from the literature, many collectors cannot imagine selling objects from their collections because they consider them to be part of themselves. Therefore, when an object is sold the reasons and feelings of the owner regarding selling will shed light on the way the person considers the object to be part of the self.

In order to get an answer to this question I have asked my respondents about how they add objects to their collections and how they decide what to add. Furthermore, I asked if they had ever sold anything from their collection and why they had or why they had not. Of those who had never sold anything I asked what a possible reason for selling could be. Of all respondents I asked if they had any dolls they could not imagine ever selling. Furthermore, I paid attention to the sale sections on online forums to see what reasons people gave for selling, if they gave a reason.

- *How is the self extended into the dolls and the collection as a whole and how does this self investment show in the collector-doll relation?*

In the theoretical framework in section 2.5. I discuss that Belk identified four ways in which the self is extended into objects: creating/altering an object, control/mastery over the object, knowing the objects, and contamination. The answer to this question will provide data on the ways doll collectors use those four ways to extend the self into their dolls and therefore in what ways they form a relation with their dolls. It will become clear if perhaps some ways of self extension prevail while others are hardly applied or if there is a difference in how much of the self is invested and how this shows in the relationship collectors have with their dolls. Furthermore, the time and attention given to the collection can be an indication of the collector-doll relationship.

I have asked people about how they spend time on their collections and if there were specific dolls that got more attention than others. I also asked people if they had ever lost a doll to theft or if a doll had ever broken beyond repair and how that made them feel. If they had no such experience I asked them how they think they would feel if something bad were to happen to their dolls. Furthermore, I asked people when they felt a doll was really theirs. The answers to these questions can show how the dolls are seen as part of the self. Furthermore, to learn about the ways dolls are created and altered by their collectors I asked if they changed things about the dolls, either non-permanent changing such as clothing as well as more permanent changes. In relation to this I asked if they gave a name or personality to their dolls. The issues of control/mastery and knowing the object is also present in these questions because customization involves skills and knowledge about how the doll works. Furthermore, the knowing of the dolls is a subject that appeared throughout conversations and interviews, especially when talking about how people decide which dolls to buy. Finally, for the issue of contamination I asked people if they preferred to buy new or second-hand and why and if the history of the doll mattered to them.

- *How do collectors portray their collecting/collections to non-collectors?*

Next to how people see themselves as collectors is also the question of how they portray their collecting activities and collections to non-collectors. Here I mean with non-collectors people who do not collect Barbie, Blythe, or Ball-jointed dolls. If collectors have invested a part of their selves into the doll collection that might be reflected in the way they talk about their collections to people who do not share the interest as well as how they react to other people's reactions and comments about their dolls. Furthermore, the ways in which they might not share or even hide their collections is equally interesting. In short, the answering of this question will provide insight into how dolls are used to portray a part of the self to others as well how it is portrayed to others.

In relation to other questions it will also show if there is a difference in portraying to other collectors and to non-collectors and if the ways in which the self has been invested into the dolls play a significant role in the ways the objects are portrayed.

In order to get the information needed to answer this question I asked people about experiences they had maybe had with non-collectors and how they feel about telling people about their collection. Furthermore, I asked what they tell people about their collection, for instance, if they tell others how much it costs or why they have them. I also asked how the dolls were displayed.

- *What are connections between the collector-doll interaction and collector-collector interaction?*
By going beyond what the actual interactions are and looking at possible connections between the different kinds of interaction the answer to this question will provide insights in the interconnection between how the doll-collector relationship is formed and ways collectors interact with each other. In order to answer this question I will first need to lay out what kind of interactions take place both between collectors and their collections as well as between collectors and collectors. As discussed in section 2.6. collectors might like to be in contact with like-minded people, go to special events, and competition and prestige can play a role. However, beyond this the interaction between collectors is not discussed in much detail in the literature that I discussed. Furthermore, the role of the Internet is not discussed at all. Therefore, this question will add to the knowledge on collector interaction.

To get a sense of the online interaction between collectors I chose several online forums. The forums were selected on being the largest and most active international forums or being the main Dutch language forum. I decided to both look at an international and more local forum in order to see if there were perhaps significant differences between the two. I also asked my respondents about online interaction with others. I asked about why they decided to join forums and if they felt the online interaction was much different from offline interaction. For offline interaction I went to a Blythe convention in London, a Barbie convention in the Netherlands, and a Ball-jointed doll related workshop in a specialized store in the Netherlands. I also gained information on offline interaction that I was not able to attend by asking questions during my interviews about what they did on such occasions and what they enjoyed about it. Furthermore, I asked if being able to have contact with other collectors was important to them and why or why not.

3.2. Methodology

Most of the things people do with their dolls, taking photos, customizing them, dressing them up, are things they generally do in the privacy of their home. It is very difficult to go and observe these private activities, first of all because if you enter a private environment without knowing that person really well you might have a significant effect on the way they behave and second of all, private homes are not the most easily accessible areas for observation. Moreover, over half of my respondents do not live in the Netherlands. Because of these reasons these activities are not easily observable and therefore I used semi-structured interviews to gain insight in the things people do with their dolls, how they feel and think about their dolls and how they value them. I conducted my interviews both offline and online. I decided to do the interviews offline when it was possible, but my respondents did not all live in the Netherlands and different kinds of online interviews were conducted. My respondents came from the Netherlands, the UK, Canada, the US, Australia, Spain, and Estonia. For some of my online interviews I used a microphone and/or webcam to conduct the interview, making it semi face-to-face. For other interviews I used the text chat functions of Skype or Gmailchat. In this way the interviews were still in real time, as opposed to interviews done through e-mail which I did on one occasion, but there was no visual or audio involved. The choice to use chat to conduct interviews instead of (semi) face-to-face was made by the respondents. I always presented possible respondents with the choice to do it in person, if they lived in the Netherlands, or to conduct the interview online either semi face-to-face or chat only. Some respondents simply did not have a microphone or were unfamiliar with any chat programs and others preferred to type the interview. I conducted a total of 26 interviews. Women were the majority of my interviewees, with only two being men. Ages ranged from 19 to 64.

Besides interviews participant observation, both online and offline, was my key method to gain insight in the collector's world. Since many collectors connect with other collectors online I used online participant observation on forums to gain insight not only in to the ways collectors interact, but also the parts of the collector-doll relationship that is shared with others. The aforementioned is true for the Blythe and Ball-jointed doll forums. However, for Barbie I did not find an active online forum and respondents also did not know of one. I will discuss this issue in more depth in chapter four about collector's interaction. I also used participant observation offline on several occasions. I went to Blythecon UK in October 2011, a Dutch Barbie convention, and a Ball-jointed doll related workshop. While the Blythe convention falls outside my research period I will include it here because I did not get a chance to attend a Blythe convention during that time.

The combination of interviews and participant observation in online forums and during above mentioned events enabled me to see differences between the groups of Barbie, Blythe, and Ball jointed

doll collectors. Furthermore, I could see connections between how people interact with their dolls and form a relationship with them, and the ways in which they interact with other collectors.

3.3. Practical and Ethical Reflection

Fortunately I did not face many practical problems during my research. The most important difficulties that I faced was getting access to the largest international ball-jointed doll forum as well as finding Barbie collectors to be my respondents. The ball-jointed doll forum requires an invite in order to join, and while I had no difficulty in getting an invite from someone I knew, registration is only open for short periods at a time. At first I was faced with a closing period that would last until July, but fortunately I was able to register in the last month of my field work. Because of this I had less time to experience the community. For Blythe and ball-jointed dolls I found most of my respondents through the forums, but as I could not find a similar online community for Barbie I had trouble getting in contact with Barbie collectors. I found respondents through other collectors I interviewed and I met some on the Barbie convention I went to.

Finally, I will take note of a few ethical considerations related to conducting research on the Internet. Since a big part of my research took place on the Internet it would have been easy to conceal my research, more so than when you psychically walk amongst the people you are researching. People did not even have to know I was present. However, I decided not to conceal who I was or what my research was about for several reasons.

First of all, I simply saw no added value to my research if I would hide it and I feel that people might be upset to find out they were researched without any information given to them. However, I must add that I did not ask for consent from every person individually. On the forums I observed and participated in I posted a topic about my research, informing the people who read it what my research was about. Second of all, I used the forums to find respondents whom I could interview which I could not have done if I did not tell people about my research.

While I was certainly not secretive about my research, I did not constantly remind people that I was conducting research and I doubt that many people were actively aware of it. Because of this I will not use people's names, including Internet nicknames, nor will I use any direct quotes from the forums without the consent of the person who posted it. In this way I protect people's privacy and I ensure that I have at least clear informed consent from the people who are directly quoted. An exception to this is the owner of the Dutch Barbie specialty store. Since there is only one such store it would be no trouble to find out who the owner is and me changing the name in this thesis will not add to his privacy. Furthermore, while I do not think my research will contain any content that might harm anybody, I cannot be certain of how people might react and protecting their privacy as best I can is a measure to protect them.

4. Collectors and the Collected

In this chapter I will discuss various aspects about the collector-doll relationship and how it is formed. Because I think it is necessary to first understand the history and characteristics of each kind of doll before I can discuss this I will begin this chapter with an outline of the history and characteristics for each of the dolls.

I will start the remainder of the chapter with the ways I found in which a collection begins and is shaped by adding and removing objects from it. This section will already touch upon the subject of the extended self in several ways. Adding objects to the collection is where the collector-object relationship begins and the ways in which dolls are selected, bought, and received can give an idea of the beginning of that relationship. Furthermore, the topic of selling can also shed light on the ways in which a doll is or is not seen as part of self by looking at emotions and reasons involved with the decision to sell or not to sell something from the collection.

After the section on shaping the collection I will move on to discuss the extended self in relation to doll-collecting more specifically. Since the more an object is seen as part of the self the more attention and care it will likely receive, the ways in which time is spent on the collecting activity as a whole and on individual dolls will shed some light on how it is seen as part of the self.

Then I will discuss the investment of creativity by the doll collectors. In the theoretical framework in section 2.5 it was mentioned that creating or altering an object, knowing an object, and mastery of an object are ways in which it can come to be seen as a part of the self. While I think these three ways do not stand alone and are connected to each other, at least in the case of my research findings, I think that creating and altering an object plays the most important role when it comes to dolls becoming part of the extended self.

In the final section of this chapter I will discuss how my respondents view themselves as collectors and how they portray their collections to other, non-collector, people.

4.1. *Doll history and characteristics*

4.1.1. *Barbie*

The idea for the Barbie doll first came to Ruth Handler when she saw her daughter, Barbara, play with paper dolls. The little girl gave the paper dolls grown-up roles as she played with them and it gave Handler the idea of a three-dimensional teenage doll for little girls. Research of the doll market confirmed to Handler that there was no such doll on the market in the US as most of the dolls were displayed as infants. After designing the doll and suggesting the idea to her husband and co-founder of Mattel, Elliot Handler, Barbie was first presented at the New York annual Toy Fair in 1959. While toy critics were

skeptical of such an adult shaped doll for children, Barbie proved to be very popular. In 1961 the first, but certainly not the last, addition to the Barbie line was added: her boyfriend Ken, named after Ruth and Elliot Handler's son. Ken has been a steady addition to Barbie's world and many other friends and family members have come and gone throughout the fifty plus years that Barbie has been around. Another noticeable thing about Barbie is that the Barbie doll has portrayed over sixty professions ranging from fashion designer, to astronaut, from pet stylist, to president. Not only did her circle of friends and career keep changing, so did her looks. The original Barbie doll is a 1/6 scale doll with an adult look. She has distinctive breasts, a small waist, and small feet which is why the doll cannot stand on her own. The face and body of the Barbie doll has seen many changes with one of the most distinctive changes from 1971 when her eyes were adjusted to face forward instead of glancing to the side like the original. Some of the changes made to Barbie's body have also been made to respond to criticism on Barbie's unrealistic proportions. In general Barbie's face is changed slightly every seven years. In this way Barbie can adapt to changing ideas about beauty as well as keep the long time Barbie fan interested.

With Barbie's growing popularity the variety of Barbie products available also grew. Besides dolls the Barbie product line includes clothes and accessories, and series of Barbie branded goods such as movies, books, apparel, and cosmetics. In the 1980s Mattel started to notice that the first generation of girls that had played with Barbies was grown up and started to collect Barbie dolls. Mattel started to expand their market by producing Barbie dolls that were not made for play, but for collecting. The first collectors Barbie is considered to be the 1986 Blue Rhapsody Barbie doll, which was made from porcelain. Throughout the years Mattel has produced numerous dolls specifically made for collectors including vintage reproductions, Barbie representing a certain country, Barbies based on characters from popular culture and celebrities. They have a special catalog and online store and website for adult Barbie collectors. In 2004 Mattel introduced a color tier system for their collector Barbie dolls, based on the number of dolls that are produced and availability. For instance, gold, platinum, and silver label Barbie dolls are produced in certain quantities, while there are also dolls, such as the direct exclusive and the Barbie fan club exclusive, that are only available in the Barbie collector's online shop or through Mattel's Barbie collector's catalog order. In addition to Mattel's own website for adult Barbie collectors, there are numerous websites containing information about production history, how to identify your Barbie, and how to restore and care for vintage Barbie's. Barbie and other dolls part of the Barbie family are considered vintage if they were produced before 1972. Prices for Barbie can range from about \$15,- for a play-line Barbie to over \$1000,- for a good condition early vintage Barbie.

4.1.2. Blythe

The history of the Blythe doll starts in 1972 when the doll was first released by toy company Kenner. Blythe dolls are 1/6 scale like Barbie, but have an oversized head and eyes that change color and gaze-direction by pulling on a string that turns the eye mechanism which contains a total of four sets of eyes. The original Blythe line consisted of Blythe dolls available in four different hair colors, twelve different fashion packs, four wigs and sunglasses, and a wardrobe. Blythe's big head and color-changing eyes did not appeal to children and Blythe was only in production for a year. She then had to wait until the late 1990s to be discovered by Gina Garan, a photographer who fell in love with the Blythe doll after she got one as a gift and started to use Blythe as a subject for her photography. In 2000 she released a photo book entitled "This is Blythe". Together with friend and toy producer Junko Wong she developed a commercial for the Japanese department store Parco featuring Blythe. Interest in the doll was awoken in Japan and the first Neo Blythe "Parco" was released in 2001 by the company Takara. This time the Blythe doll was not produced as a children's toy, but a doll for adult collectors. In 2002 production of the petite Blythe, a roughly 11 cm little version of Blythe, without color-changing eyes but with the iconic large head, started. In 2010 the Middie Blythe, 20 centimeters with large head that can tilt, was introduced.



Figure 1 The original Kenner Blythe dolls

The Neo Blythe has seen several changes in her face and body. The first Neo Blythes, BLs, had a body with bendable arms and legs, but with the introduction of the EBL (Excellent Blythe) came a new body without bendable arms to be more like the original Kenner Blythe. The face mold of the EBL had slightly different eyes than the BL mold. Throughout the ten years that the Neo Blythe has been introduced Takara produced several face molds after the BL and EBL. Each time the change in the face was the most important while there are also certain changes that can influence the way collectors handle

the doll in terms of customization. Customizing, changing things about the doll, is a very active part of the Blythe world. It can range from changing their eyes to changing everything from hair to shape of the face-features. This will be discussed in more detail in section 4.3.

There have been 178 Neo Blythe releases starting from Parco until the end of 2011. Some releases are regular and some are store exclusive or limited editions. Each year Takara releases a special Blythe to celebrate the Neo Blythe. These so-called anniversary girls are released in the amount of that year. So, for instance, in 2010 there was an amount of 2010 anniversary dolls produced. The popularity of Blythe has been growing not only in Asia and there are many collectors active on conventions and online forums. Prices for Blythe varies from around \$100,- for a regular release Neo Blythe to up to \$2000,- for a good condition Kenner Blythe or a custom doll. However, on average a Neo Blythe costs around \$200,- and customs, depending on their maker and skill with which it was made, \$400-500.



Figure 2 A collection of Blythe dolls by Runawaykite

4.1.3. *Ball-jointed dolls*

While a ball-jointed doll is actually any doll that is articulated with ball and socket joints, nowadays it is usually a term used to refer to modern ball-jointed dolls. This is also the case in this thesis. Often the abbreviation BJDs is used by collectors and will be used here on occasion as well. The history of the modern ball-jointed doll began in 1999. The Japanese company Volks created a line of dolls named Super Dollfie. Dollfie is a compilation of doll and figure. Their previous dolls named Dollfie were 27 centimeters and had painted-eyes, while their new Super Dollfie was around 57 cm and had glass eyes. According to their own website this was very unique at the time since the doll world was dominated by dolls like the 27cm Dollfie. Super Dollfie became more popular over the years and throughout the years more BJD companies in Japan, South-Korea and China, have started to create their own lines of dolls. Throughout the years the range of sizes in which BJDs are made has gotten bigger. Dolls 60 centimeters and larger are generally referred to as SD size (SD being from Super Dollfie even though the BJDs from Volks are the only true Super Dollfies, SD has become a term used to refer to all BJDs of a certain size). Dolls around the 45cm range are referred to as MSD (mini) and 35 cm and smaller are labeled as Tiny.

The fact that there are multiple companies who create Ball-jointed dolls, each with their own style and body and face sculpts, is a big difference with Barbie and Blythe which are all produced by one company. Ball-jointed dolls have several more distinctive characteristics. First of all, is of course the fact that they have ball-joints. They are casted in resin and their different parts are held together with elastic string that enables them to hold a wide range of poses. Second of all, ball-jointed dolls are highly customizable. They have eyes and wigs which are easily replaced and the face-up, which is the make-up of the doll as well as eyebrows and other facial features such as tattoos or scars, is often offered as an option so the buyer can get a blank doll to do the face-up on him/herself. Most companies offer various options when you buy a doll. For instance, you can choose to have the doll made with standard company face-up, no face-up at all, and some companies also offer the possibility for a special face-up by the customer's instructions. Many companies also offer different skin-tones and optional parts such as horns or elven-ears. Finally, while neither Barbie nor Blythe has realistic body proportions and cannot stand on their own, Ball-jointed dolls are generally realistically proportioned and can stand on their own two feet. This offers various options for photography and displaying the dolls. Prizes for ball-jointed dolls are dependent on company and also on the size of the doll. Generally though, the bigger the doll the higher the price. Prized vary from around \$100 to \$2000 depending on size, company, and extra's such as clothing the doll comes with or a special face-up.



Figure 3 Examples of ball-jointed dolls, photo credit Kristy de Klerk

4.2. *Shaping the Collection: beginning, buying, and selling*

The way people start their collection and the ways in which they shape it by adding things and selling things is the first step towards gaining an insight in the relation and interaction between the collector and the collected. I will begin this section by discussing the different ways my respondents indicated their collections started. Then I will continue on by discussing how they decide what to buy, how they buy it and what they do immediately after purchase or arrival of the doll. Finally I will discuss possible reasons for selling or not selling a doll out of the collection.

4.2.1. *The start of a collection*

While Barbie is widespread and has been a well-known doll for well over fifty years, Blythe and Ball-jointed dolls are not. Therefore, the question “how did you learn about the existence of the doll” seems a little irrelevant when it comes to the well-known Barbie doll, but it is interesting to ask in case of the other two dolls. From what I have learned from the people I have interviewed as well as introduction posts on the forums the most common ways, that I encountered in my research, through which people learn about the existence of Blythe and Ball-jointed dolls seems to be through knowing someone who owns them or through coming across a photo of one while browsing the Internet. Out of the 22 people I

interviewed that had either Blythe and/or BJDs twelve first learned of the doll's existence by coming across a photo of one of them and six knew someone who had them. Of the remaining four, two respondents fall between coming across it on the Internet and learning about it through someone they know since they learned about Blythe and BJD through people they knew only online. Then the last two, both BJD collectors, learned about the dolls by coming across them outside. One of them was at a Fantasy Fair and came across the stand of Think Pink!, a Dutch store that specializes in Ball-Jointed dolls. The other person saw someone carrying a BJD at a train station. The ways in which people first learn about the dolls is an indication of the role that the Internet plays in both Blythe and Ball-jointed doll collecting since the Internet has not only made new ways of searching and buying and selling objects available it has also made the knowledge of the existence of these dolls more readily available. Since both these kinds of dolls are mainly sold in Asia the rise in collectors outside of Asia would probably have been very limited if not for the Internet.

While the knowledge that it even exists can be considered a point where the possibility of the collection first arises, the tangible start is still the first object acquired. I purposely do not use the word collected here since collections are generally not formed with a single object, therefore the first object is not yet a part of a collection the first time it is acquired even though it might have been the start of the collection in retrospect. From my data I have been able to identify four ways in which the first doll is acquired.

First of all, some of my respondents told me that they started collecting after they had gotten a doll or dolls as a gift. From the people I have interviewed this was most common with the Barbie collectors of which over half had received Barbie dolls during their childhood for, for instance, birthdays and Christmas. Only one person who did not collect Barbie got her first doll as a gift. She had learned about the existence of Blythe through a friend and as she was just learning how to crochet she thought it would be fun to have one to make hats for. Initially she only wanted a clone Blythe (a cheap knock-off of the official Blythe doll), but she did not like it at all and she accidentally broke it. She then got her first real Blythe as an anniversary present from her husband. Now she has fourteen Blythes. What is interesting about gifts as the start of a collection is that it is the least conscious start of a collection. While an object bought by the collector-to-be might not be consciously chosen to be the start of a collection, a gift is even less so because it is the gift giver and not the receiver who provides the potential start of a collection.

Second of all, the example above of the Blythe collector brings me to the next way in which a collection might start: through other people. While the previously mentioned Blythe collector first learned of Blythe through a friend, she did not actually start collecting after receiving one as a gift. However, there are also collectors who did not only learn these dolls exist through other people, but also got emerged into the world of collecting and enjoyed the collection through others before starting their own

collecting activities. For example, a Canadian Blythe collector told me about how she got started with Blythe through a friend:

“When I first saw it, it didn’t grab me at all. I didn’t even know what they were or anything, but she has a huge collection and we’d just sit and say like “oh let’s put a dress on her” or whatever, we sort of sit and natter and then she got me into Blythe” (Interview #5)

While I talked to several people who started collecting in this way, a unique example is that of Paul who has been Holland’s Barbie expert for over 25 years. Paul owned a toy store and two of his friends who collected Barbie found out about the collector’s Barbies being released in the United States and asked him if he could import them to his store. This was in the time that collector Barbies just started to catch on in the US in the 1980s. The demand of these Barbies kept growing and Paul soon had a large Barbie department in his toy store. At one point he decided to do away with the rest of the toy store and start a specialized Barbie store. It was not until after this, not until after he was emerged in the world of Barbie, that he actually started collecting Barbie himself. Of course people end up actually buying the dolls because they like them, but these examples show that there can be a certain influence from people who already collect. Sometimes seeing the fun and potential of collecting through other people is what starts a collection.

Third of all, there is the start of a collection through an impulse buy. Here there can still be some time between knowing that the doll exists and buying the first one, but then the first doll is bought on an impulse without much thought and research about all the options out there. An example of this is a Dutch Blythe collector who had seen a photograph of a Blythe doll standing in a field and was mesmerized with the whole image. She found out it was called Blythe and took a look on a Dutch website where people can sell their secondhand items. There were not many Blythe dolls for sale on that website at that time, but the one she had seen on the photo happened to be on sale there. She told me:

“That’s why I felt that, that one had to be mine, it was just meant to be” (interview #18, translation from Dutch by author).

Finally, there is the well thought through first purchase. Many of my respondents had decided they wanted to buy a doll long before they actually bought one. This is because they first wanted do research on what was out there, what the options were, and what they liked. I also saw this on the online forums where occasionally someone would sign up without having a doll. They signed up to learn about the dolls before actually buying one. I talked to more Blythe and ball-jointed doll collectors who had though their

first doll through for a while before purchasing it than I talked to Barbie collectors who had done so. In fact, none of the Barbie collectors I spoke to had started their collection in this way. The cost of these dolls can be one of the reasons for looking for that perfect doll because they are too expensive for most people to be bought on a whim. However, for some people it was all about finding the perfect fit for a character or finding a doll that is just right. For instance, the BJD collector who had seen someone on a train station carrying a doll consciously took a year time to decide which one to get (after he had found out what they were, since he was too shy to ask the girl at the station). I think a combination of price and availability makes that Barbies are less an object that people spend a lot of time on deciding which one to buy first. Of course there are also very expensive and exclusive hard-to-get Barbie dolls, but, at least with the people I spoke to, the very first Barbie is often a gift or a, not that expensive, impulse buy.

Thus, for the lesser known Blythe and Ball-jointed doll the start of the collection is sometimes the moment the collector-to-be learns of its existence and starts to research them in order to decide which one to buy first. Other ways in which a collection might start are through gifts, through emergence in the collection world, and by impulse buy. In the next section I will discuss how the collection continues to grow after that first one is acquired.

4.2.2. *Adding to the collection: gifts, buying, and trading*

In the previous section it was already discussed that some people start their collection with gifts. Gifts are also a way through which collections get expanded, although based on my data I think it to be the least common way in which dolls are added to the collection, this was at least the case with my respondents. With gifts the collector does not have the control to choose the doll and thus the relationship to the doll is immediately different since even a gift meant to add to a collector's collection, a gift chosen by the giver with the collection of the receiver in mind, might not be an object that would have otherwise been chosen by the collector to become part of the collection. As mentioned in the section on the extended self, gifts can be a way for the giver to expand their sense of self into the object and therefore the object has a link with the gift giver. In this way the meaning of the object that was a gift is not completely up to the new owner to portray their own meaning onto it. Therefore the meaning of the object and its place in the collection might be different than that of other collectibles. An example is that of Cynthia, a Barbie collector whose only vintage Barbies in her collection were those she had when she was a child and one she had received as a gift when she was already collecting them. She explained:

“I don't really care for vintage. The vintage that I have are the Quick Curls [from her childhood] and a fun time Barbie, but I got that as a gift once. I thought it was real nice of her so it's in the cabinet”

(Interview #25, translated from Dutch by author)

The vintage Barbie received as a gift is mainly there because it was a gift and would not have been part of the collection otherwise. However, on the Blythe forums I have regularly seen people who added to their collections by receiving gift, but these gifts were actually pre-chosen by the collectors themselves. They had either asked for that doll specifically for that gift-giving occasion, or had made sure that the dolls she wanted for her collection were known to the person getting them the gift. In this way, while it is still a gift, it was the collector's choice of what would be added to the collection. I mainly observed this on the Blythe forums in the topics where people introduce their new dolls.

When a new piece is going to be added by the collector there is the question of how a collector decides on the object that is to be collected. The two main ways that I have found during my research are the same as the last two in the previous section: coming across a doll you like and buying it on impulse or making a well thought through decision for a particular doll. With the latter I have also found two different ways in which people set out to find a particular doll. Either they already know which specific doll they want and they start to look for it, or they have a certain character or look in mind without already knowing a doll that fits that image and start searching for a fitting doll. While I have talked to people who always make a thought through decision and people who usually buy something that they like when they come across it, people told me that it depends on the situation and the doll. There are times when it is love at first sight, but also times where there is a need for a certain type of doll and the decision has to be well thought over to ensure that the right one is chosen.

Since there are very few Blythe and Ball-jointed doll offline stores available most Blythe and Ball-jointed doll collectors have to use the Internet to buy their dolls. This means that there is a waiting period in between purchase and actual arrival of the doll. While there are also online stores for Barbie there is often no need to wait as long as with Blythe or BJDs because a local store can often be found for Barbies. For ball-jointed dolls the waiting period is generally the longest because the dolls are often only made after the order and payment has been completed. This can take multiple weeks to even months. I have asked people what they do during the waiting time in order to perhaps prepare for the arrival. As already mentioned, sometimes a doll is purchased because its looks fit a character created by the collector. In this case, there are people who prepare for the arrival by buying or making clothes, wigs, and eyes, that fit the character. There were also people who created something for a new doll to feel welcomed. For instance, an Australian Blythe collector told me:

"I often make a little bed or a blanket or some clothes for her to come to, to arrive to. So she feels welcome. In the new house." (interview #8).

Several of my Blythe and BJD respondents told me that if they do not order a doll already with a certain character in mind they start to think about possible names and personalities before the doll arrives. On the biggest international Ball-jointed doll forum there is a section “waiting room” where people share their excitement about what is coming and frustration about the waiting period with others. My respondents told me that they check the tracking number of the package very frequently until the doll arrives. There was one person who told me she did nothing because she felt it made the wait even longer. She tried not to think about it. While the waiting period is dealt with differently by different people there tends to be a combination of excitement and frustration involved with waiting for a new doll to arrive.

After the waiting period is over and the doll arrives the next step in the collector-doll relationship can begin. I have asked people if they had a certain ritual for the arrival of a new doll. Most people I talked to enjoy unwrapping the doll straight away, looking at it, redressing it and perhaps taking some photos to share the arrival with other collectors online. However, some people told me that they prefer to take a moment alone with the doll to open it and sometimes wait with opening the package when they can have this alone time.

The final way in which new objects are added to the collection is by trading one doll for another. This is really a reshaping of the collection since a doll is added and removed from the collection simultaneously. Trading can be a way for those with limited space or monetary means to keep adding to and upgrading their collections. However, it might be more difficult to trade than to buy since you need to find someone who wants what you have to trade and who has something to trade that you want.

I also asked people when they felt like the doll was really theirs. Here I have found that people differentiate between having paid for something so it is theirs, and feeling like they have a certain bond with the doll and it is them. The process through which this bonding happens differs from person to person, but it is clear that something more than just buying a doll makes it a part of the collection and a part of the collector. For some people this bonding does happen the moment of arrival and when they unpack it and dress it in a way they like, but for some people it can take time. I will discuss the ways in which people form a deeper relationship with the doll than just owning it, in more detail in later sections of this chapter. First I will discuss the reasons and emotions involved with selling parts of the collection.

4.2.3. *Selling*

In the theoretical framework it was discussed that objects that have become part of the extended self come to carry a meaning other than a monetary one. Collectors are said to not be able to imagine selling (parts of) their collections. During my research I have asked people if they have ever sold dolls out of their collections. The people who had sold one or more dolls or doll parts I then asked why they decided to sell, if they regretted selling, and how they decided to sell that specific doll. People who had never sold

anything from their collections I asked if they could imagine ever selling a part of their collection and what a reason for selling could be. Furthermore, I asked all interviewees if they had any specific dolls that they could not imagine ever selling.

In contrast to what I had come to expect from the literature, that collectors do not and will not sell their collection or part of their collection unless it is absolutely necessary, over half of my respondents had sold or planned to sell part of their collection in the future. Furthermore, the marketplace sections of the forums I did my research on, especially the international ones, was a very active part of the forum. The most important reason for selling I found through my interviews as well as sales topics, next to needing money for a financial crisis such as an unexpected bill, was not feeling a connection to that specific doll or the bond they once had with the doll was not there anymore.

What I found to be most interesting about selling was the presence of guilt in the process. During the interviews there were quite a lot of people who expressed feeling guilty about selling their dolls, but also about keeping a doll that did not get enough attention and love. I also noticed this in the selling area of the forums. Feeling guilty about selling makes sense if you consider the dolls to be a part of your sense of self. Even so, there are people who decide to sell a doll because it did not get the attention and love the owner felt it deserved. One person told me about how she sold a doll she felt did not get enough love and attention with her:

“I always have a hard time selling dolls, because you have an emotional bond with them. I get attached to things very quickly and when I sell I’m like ‘I’m so sorry’. I put it in a box and then ‘it’s almost time, it will be ok with your new owner who will give you love’. I do think ‘why do I feel this way about a thing’, but...yeah” (interview #11, translated from Dutch by author).

The reason for feeling guilty can be that the owner of the doll feels sorry for the doll, they can imagine the doll being sad or lonely, even though all people I talked to who said these things also followed that with a comment that they did know they are objects and are not actually alive. However, it does indicate that the relationship between the collector and the collected object is an emotional one and projection of feelings on to the dolls plays a role in deciding to sell or having a hard emotional time selling one.

All the people I talked to had at least one doll from their collection that they could not imagine ever selling. Sometimes this was because it was a hard to replace doll, but I found that the reason that was given to me the most was having a certain bond with the doll. With Blythe collectors I have seen the term *“a forever doll”* or the phrase *“she has a forever home with me”* being used when talking about the dolls closest to them and they cannot imagine selling.

Selling shows not only the bonds people form with their dolls in specific, but also how they think about the dolls as objects that need attention and care. This aspect of doll collecting will be discussed further in the next section on the extended self and dolls.

4.3. Extended Self and Dolls

In section 2.5. of the theoretical framework I discussed the notion of the extended self. There it was discussed that there are four ways in which the self is extended into objects: creating/altering an object, control/mastery over the object, knowing the objects, and contamination. Furthermore, it was mentioned that the more an object is seen as part of the self, the more care and attention it receives. I will first discuss how people spend time on their collecting and the dolls, and how the notion of favorites plays a role in this. Then I will continue on to what I think is the most important way in which the self is extended into dolls for Blythe and Ball-jointed doll collectors: investing creativity.

4.3.1. *Time and Attention*

As explained in the theoretical framework in section 2.5 the more an object is seen as part of the self the more attention and care it will most likely receive. Therefore, the time spent on the objects of the collection as well as on the whole collecting experience around it is an indication of the relationship between the collector and the collection. Furthermore, if individual objects of the collection get more attention than do other collected objects this could say something about the relationship between the collector and these individual dolls. Finally, the ways in which time is spent on both the collection activity as a whole and on individual dolls are ways in which a relation with the collection is formed.

Time can be spent on the dolls themselves and on the collecting experience surrounding it. How an individual collector spends time on their collection and how much time will of course differ, but there are certain activities mentioned by most of my respondents and I also saw these activities on the online forums. I found that there were differences between how Blythe and ball-jointed doll collectors spend time on their collecting on the one hand and how Barbie collectors did this on the other.

Activities that were mentioned more than once by all three types of doll collectors were: researching about the dolls, redressing them, and displaying the collection. I found that the activities of customization, photography, character creation, and online interaction with other collectors were an integral part of the collecting hobby for most of the Blythe and BJD collectors I talked to, but I did not see this as much with the Barbie collectors I talked to. Furthermore, when I discussed these differences with Barbie collectors they confirmed to me that while for instance customization and photography is a part of Barbie collecting for some people, overall it is not a defining characteristic of the collecting hobby as it is with Blythe and ball-jointed dolls. This will also become clearer in the next chapter on collector

interaction where the ways time is spent on the actual dolls, not the collecting aspects such as buying and researching surrounding the dolls, is reflected in the interaction between collectors which also results in differences between Barbie on the one hand and Blythe and BJDs on the other.

Within the time that is spent on collecting and the collected objects I found that there are usually objects that are considered to be favorites in the collection and receive more attention and/or care. As I already discussed in section 4.2.3. on selling, people saw their dolls as objects that needed love and attention and that some people had feelings of guilt about not giving them enough. Nevertheless, people tended to have favorite dolls on which more time was spent than on the others. I have spoken to people who try to limit their guilt by trying to rotate which doll gets attention. However, sometimes an attempt to give them all equal attention will be made, but the favorite will just end up getting the most attention anyway. There were also people who said that while they did have favorites, which dolls were favorites changed over time and in the end they all got about the same amount of attention.

I found that with Barbie the answer to if they have a favorite doll is often answered more with a certain type of Barbie from a certain series, for instance the Silkstones, or Barbies from a certain time period, than with specific individual dolls. This could indicate that the relations formed with Blythe dolls and BJDs are more of a collector-doll nature whereas with Barbie it is more a collector-collection relation. I also did not find the level of personification of dolls with Barbie collectors like I did with the other two. Blythe and ball-jointed dolls are often subject to customizations and the creation of personalities. The creating of characters and personalities, as well as other creative investment, is the topic of the next section.

4.3.2. Creative investment: character creation and customizing

Creating or altering an object was identified in the theoretical framework as a way in which an object can become part of the extended self. In this section I will discuss this in relation to dolls as well as how customization and character creation of dolls is connected to mastery of an object and knowing an object as ways to incorporate an object in the sense of self. First want to take note of the differences I found between Barbie, Blythe and Ball-jointed doll collectors when it comes to the investment of creativity.

With Blythe and Ball-jointed dolls I found that it is very usual to give the doll names, a personality, and even whole background stories. For an example of a doll character profile for Blythe and ball-jointed dolls please see the appendix. Those are only examples but will give the reader an idea of the way in which doll characters are presented to other collectors. I have found that this character creation is not really the case with Barbie. Barbie tends to stick with the personality given to her by Mattel or just not really have a personality, but more a certain style or theme. There are one of a kind (OOAK) Barbies, but an outfit designed specifically for that Barbie might be enough to make it a OOAK in which case it is

more about the fashion. Even when the Barbie's face is also re-painted or the hair is changed it is about the beauty of the face or the fashion the Barbie is wearing, not so much about who she is in terms of personality traits and background story. It is still Barbie. When I was discussing this difference with a Barbie collector who also knew about Blythes and how common it is to customize them, she told me that with Barbie it is about adding certain objects to your collection or about buying a certain Barbie because it looks pretty and not so much about creating a doll yourself.

The difference in terms of personality and character creation between Barbie collectors on the one hand and Blythe and Ball-jointed doll collectors on the other, does not mean that Barbie collectors do not invest any creativity into their dolls and collecting. However, the ways in which this creativity is expressed and how it is a part of the whole collecting activity and creating a collector-doll relationship is different. The level of detail in creating personalities and stories for the doll tends to be the highest with ball-jointed dolls. This can also be seen in the two examples in the appendix.

Mentioned in the section about the history and characteristics of ball-jointed dolls is that a key characteristic is that they have certain features which are made to be easily customizable such as easily changed wigs and eyes. Furthermore, companies generally have the option to order a doll without the face-up so the owner can create a face-up the way they want it. While Blythe is less readily made customizable, for instance rooted hair and always comes with make-up, custom dolls are very much a part of the Blythe world. Blythe customization entails different things like applying face-ups and carving the doll's mouth to alter the shape of the lips.

In terms of character creation it is possible to make a distinction between physical creative investment and mental creative investment. Here I mean with physical creative investment any changes made to the dolls physical appearance, both non-permanent and permanent changes. With mental creative investment I mean the creation of a personality traits, background stories, and creating stories with these characters.



Figure 4 Example of a custom Blythe. Left: hair has been changed. Right: face was also customized. Photos by anashadow

Mental and physical creation are often not separate issues. As I mentioned in the section about buying sometimes people set out to buy a doll to fit a certain character and sometimes people have a doll they want and a character is created for it. The way in which characters are created is a creative process that will be different for each person. An interesting example of this process is from a ball-jointed doll collector who, when discussing the personality of her dolls, told me:

“It just happens. I dream about it and then there is a story which I follow for a while in my dreams. Then I get attached.” (interview #16, translated from Dutch by author).

In this case the character comes before the doll and a doll that fits the character will be looked for. Character creation is also mentioned as a reason for customization. By doing the customizations themselves it becomes exactly what they want it to be and through that process the doll becomes more than an owned object, but it becomes closer to the customizer through the investment of time and creative energy. I mentioned earlier in the section about buying that I asked when people thought of a doll as theirs. Here people tended to make a distinction between when a doll was theirs because they paid for it and feeling a certain connection with that doll and it was part of them. Many of my respondents named customization and creating a name and/or personality for the doll as a way in which this bond is created. Here it is important to note that even dolls that look the same can be seen as very different based on the personality invested in it by the owner. As one Blythe collector told me:

“I love how two of the same stock girls can have a totally different personality. It is obviously something that we project onto them...but it makes them just a little more personal to me”

Here it is only the mental creativity invested into the dolls that make them different. This shows that no visible changes have to be made for a collector to regard their doll, that looks the same as someone else's doll, as something different because of the link between them created through the investment of creativity. I have found, however, that physical and mental creativity often goes hand in hand.

While creating/altering a doll and investing creativity can be a way to create a deeper collector-doll relation the degree to which this happens is of course dependent on the person. Some people attach more value to the personality creation and some more to the physical creativity. Furthermore, customizing a doll is not an automatic way in which the owner will feel closer to the doll. When it does not work out in the way the customizer had wanted it to work out it can cause frustration with the process as well as feelings of resentment towards the doll. For instance, a Blythe collector who had trouble with the customization of a doll told me that the customization process of one particular Blythe had caused her so

much trouble and frustration that she did not love the doll anymore. She did also add though that those feelings were subsiding and she started to like her again, but there was still a very real possibility that she would sell the doll. To avoid this kind of frustration there were also collectors who chose to let others customize their doll because they did not have the skill to create the exact doll they wanted to create.

Customization and character creation is a creative process that can create a close collector-doll relationship. I think that mastery of the objects and knowing the objects also plays a role in these processes. Customization entails being able to do certain things to the doll and being able to successfully do these things, to successfully create what you wanted to create, is a form of mastery of the object which brings the object closer to the self. Furthermore, by creating a personality for the doll you are the one who knows everything about that doll and since the doll's personality came from your own creativity it, and the doll it belongs to, is a part of you. Even though the level of altering and personifying of dolls was not found with Barbie collectors they still use creativity and knowledge to create a relation with their collections. Knowledge of what is out there, what kind of terms to use, and the history of Barbie was something I found that the Barbie collectors I talked to valued and was a part of their collecting experience. Furthermore, creativity is also expressed through display, clothing, and shaping the collection.

4.3.3. The Doll Collection and Non-Collectors

The way doll collectors display their dolls in their homes and the way they talk about their dolls to non-collectors and how they feel about comments on their collections tells something about how they feel about their dolls. On the forums for ball-jointed dolls and Blythe I have seen discussions on how people deal with reactions from others and how that makes them feel or how they deal with it. These topics deal with both reactions from people close to the doll owners, such as spouses and parents, and reactions from strangers. One topic on the international Blythe forum asked how people dealt with negative comments about Blythe. The creator of the topic had a negative experience and felt very bad and insulted. Most respondents to that topic shared their own experiences and advice on how to deal with it. For instance, someone posted a list of witty replies to use against anybody who would say something negative about either the dolls in specific or the collecting of dolls. The emotional reactions to negative comments are an indication of the relationship people have with their dolls. An insult or negative comment about the doll is felt as a negative comment about the owner of the doll.

Negative experiences, or the avoidance of them, can result in not or selectively discussing the doll collection with non-collectors. This usually depends on the personality of the individual collector and how much they care about the opinion of others. However, it is not just about negative comments. It is also felt that non-collectors, even if they are not negative, do not really get what the doll collection involves and that is a reason that collectors seek out each other to be able to talk with people who do get it.

I discussed with my respondents as well how they felt about comments from others as well as if they were comfortable with people knowing about their doll collections. Because of the fact that they feel that many non-collectors do not get it they sometimes prefer not to discuss it with them in much detail. However, actively hiding or denying the collection all together is also not something that I came across. Many collections of the people I interviewed are in their living room or otherwise displayed that it would be hard to miss to anyone visiting. Thus, while there are negative experiences which cause some collectors to selectively share their collection with non-collectors it is still a part of them that, if the other people understood, they like to share or at least enjoy without hiding it.

4.4. *Defining a doll collector*

On the online forums the word collector is often used. For instance, in the headline of the biggest international Blythe forum it says: “*Share your Blythe knowledge, BUY/SELL/TRADE/BARTER Blythe dolls and accessories, or to just hang and chit/chat with other collectors!*”. Since there is no definite definition of collecting or a list of points that can be checked off to see if someone is a collector, it is interesting to see how people identify themselves, or not, as collectors and why. In the theoretical framework in section 2.2 on who collects it became clear that there are more differences in who collects what than there is in who collects. In my own research I found clear indications that there is a gender difference present in doll collectors with the vast majority being women. While I do not have representative data on this for the collectors, I found that, whether it is completely true or not, this is the general idea amongst doll collectors themselves as well. From what I found I did not see any significant differences between male doll collectors and female doll collectors. However, one of the men I interviewed did express that he was very aware of the stereotypes attached to being a male doll collector as people generally assumed that he was gay when they found out he collected dolls, while he was not. As for age and social and educational background I found that there is a wide variety present in the doll collecting world. I did not only find this in my interviews but also through discussions on the online forums about, for instance, age.

During all my interviews I asked if people saw themselves as a collector as well as what they saw as a difference between a person who has dolls and is a collector and someone who has dolls but is not a collector. Answers to these questions of course differed from person to person, but I found most interesting was that certain people who did not think of themselves as a collector actually fell into the image other people had of what a collector was. The biggest difference between views on what is and what is not a collector that was mentioned is the actively and passionate involvement with the objects versus only acquiring the object and putting them on display not to be interacted with beyond that. Some people indicated that active involvement with the objects was what being a collector was about, while

other people said they did not think they were collectors precisely because they were actively involved with their dolls. I'm going to use my knowledge, from the literature, as well as my own judgment, to say that I believe both people who are busy with their objects and people who only display them can be collectors. However, I think being involved with the object is not only doing things with it, someone who has them on display can enjoy his or her collection just as much, albeit in a different way. Furthermore, wanting to add things to the collection, it being dolls or other objects related to the dolls such as clothing, was seen as part of collecting.

In the theoretical framework I also shortly discussed that people who only acquire objects as an investment are usually not seen as a good collector by other collectors. I have not spoken with anybody "in it for the money", but I have talked to people who shared this view that an investor is not a collector. I saw this when someone in the Blythe community found a Kenner Blythe at a thrift shop for a few dollars. Many people who responded to the news expressed that they were glad the doll was found by a true collector opposed to someone who would have sold her to make a profit. One Barbie collector told me that investors are not collectors because they have no passion for the doll. He also stated that while there are many different kinds of collectors all collectors share a certain love for Barbie.

The idea of a passion or a love for the dolls as being what sets collectors apart was expressed by more of my respondents as well as the idea that there is no standard collector or a standard collection that you must have in order to be a collector. For instance, I have read topics on the online forums of people asking what a good number of dolls was to have. All answers basically came down to the fact that it depends on what an individual is comfortable with and the perfect collection will be different for each person. Therefore, it is not only what one does with the dolls that makes one a collector, but also how the object is regarded with passion and love.

5. Collectors and Collectors

"I think I enjoy it ten times more when I can natter with people. I think half the fun, maybe even more, is sharing. At this point." (Interview #5)

This quote indicates that being able to share own experiences of the dolls with other people can be an important part of the collecting experience. However, it also indicates that perhaps the importance of sharing and interacting with other collectors can change for a person over time. In this chapter the online and offline interaction between doll collectors is the main focus.

First, I will give an overview of the online interaction on selected forums and message boards. I will look at the rules these communities have, their structure, the kinds of topics that are discussed, and how the rest of life, non-doll related issues, plays a role in the online interaction. After this I will move on

to discuss offline interaction and will give three examples of events I attended. Following these overviews of online and offline interaction I will take a closer look at the online/offline interconnection of these interactions. After discussing the kinds of interactions that take place and the way the online and offline is connected the reader will hopefully have a sense of what goes on between collectors and I can go into more detail about the significance of the interaction between doll collectors for the whole collecting experience. Finally, I will explain how I think the collector-doll relationship and how it is formed is reflected in the collector-collector interactions.

5.1. Online interaction

5.1.1. *Rules and structure of online communities for Blythe, Ball-jointed dolls, and Barbie*

Before discussing the rules and structure of the online communities I did my research in I would like to take note of the differences which I think are significant for my research between the online communities for Blythe and Ball-jointed dolls on the one hand and Barbie on the other hand. As already mentioned in my methodology and practical reflection sections I did my online research for Blythe and Ball-jointed dolls in the largest and most active international forum and the largest and most active Dutch forum for each doll. For Barbie, however, there was no similar community to be found. Most websites for Barbie collectors contain a large amount of information, but have very limited to no options for interaction between collectors. Only one of my respondents had regular contact with fellow Barbie collectors through an online message board. It must be noted here that a message board is very different from a forum. On a forum you sign up, a forum has a structure with different sections in which you can post topics fit for that specific section. On a message board you simply post a message. It can be required to fill in a name, but there are no separate sections for different topics of interest, everything is on the same page. Furthermore, because you do not sign up and do not have to log in there is also no function to send a private message to another member or to create a member profile which contains information about the member.

When it comes to rules, all BJD and Blythe forums and the Barbie message board have them. Some have more excessive rules than others, but the rules for all can be categorized in four categories. First of all, there are rules and conditions that must be met before one can join the forum or message board. On both the international Blythe and BJD forum it is needed to either get an invite or a referral from an existing member. After that it is still needed for the membership to be approved by a moderator. This last rule also applies to the Dutch forums for Blythe and BJDs. Since the Barbie message board does not require you to sign up it is also not needed for membership to be approved. However, the message board does have a rule that you must use your real name and location when you post a message as well as a working e-mail address so that the other people posting on the message board and the moderators know, to some extent, who you are and are able to reach you by e-mail if needed.

Second of all, perhaps the most important rules of the forums and message board are the rules about content and conduct. There are certain practical rules about content such as photo-size, but most content rules are about what can be talked about, what cannot be talked about and, to a certain extent, how you should talk about it. While all forums are meant for collectors of a certain doll and wish to have a main focus on that doll, some are stricter about this than others. For instance, the international BJD forum has a list of criteria for a doll to be considered on-topic. Some of these criteria are straight-forward like the dolls have to be made of resin and strung with elastic, however, some criteria, such as that the doll has to be consistent with certain styles of aesthetics, are more subjective. It is up to the moderators to decide if a doll meets the criteria. Dolls that are considered off-topic may be discussed or photographed together with an on-topic doll, but it cannot be the main focus of the thread. There is also a list of banned dolls which is based on there being a legal or ethical issue with the company that made the doll or a specific doll sculpt. For instance, there are known sellers who make recasts, which are dolls made based on the mold of the original, and sell them as if it were the original doll. Banned dolls cannot be discussed or displayed anywhere on the forum.

Besides rules about what dolls can or cannot be talked about there are rules about non-doll related content as well. Mainly there is an emphasis to avoid any kind of personal drama, either doll or non-doll related. All forums had rules that stated that no foul language was to be used, no disrespect shown to other members, and that personal issues with another member should not be discussed publicly on the forum. Those rules basically come down to “if you do not have anything nice to say, do not say anything”. People are told, if they come across a topic that they do not like, to ignore it rather than respond to it or to report it to the moderators if the content is offensive. This does not mean that people are not allowed to voice their opinions, after all on some of these forums discussion is a big part of the forum activity. The biggest BJD forum has the most excessive rules on conduct, especially when it comes to providing feedback on photography and customization. For instance, there are separate sections for placing photographs and receiving critical feedback and for just sharing the photographs. In the latter section no critique can be given on the photographs but only in the section specifically meant for critique. In this way it is avoided that people who do not like or do not want critique get offended. In addition to rules about doll related content both BJD forums had rules that stated that the forums are meant to learn about and share the doll hobby and that it is not the place to share everything that goes on in your personal life.

Third of all, all of the online communities I researched have rules and regulations about buying, selling, and trading on the forums. The ball-jointed doll forums as well as the Barbie message board had restrictions about what could be sold. For instance, basically all forums allow the same dolls that are on-topic to be sold, since on the international Blythe forum there is no real restriction about what can be talked about (although not in all sections) there is also no real restriction on what can be sold (of course

doll/toy related things). Except for the Barbie message board, all forums had certain conditions that had to be met before a member had access to the market place area of the forum. Again, it differs per forum how strict these rules are, but on all four you had to have made a certain number of posts before you were allowed to sell or buy anything. In addition to a certain post count the international BJD forum requires a certain time period of being a member. Reasons for these rules are both for safety as well as to encourage people to not join the forum solely for buying and selling, but also to become an active member of the community.

Finally, there are statements about the consequences for not adhering to the rules. Basically you have to adhere by the rules or moderators can give you a warning and after several warnings you will be banned either temporarily or permanently depending on what you did. For instance, if you threatened people or if you scammed people you will most likely be banned for life, but if you had a small disagreement with another member and chose to discuss the issue publicly it might result in a warning or a temporary ban depending on previous warnings. Since the choice to warn and ban people is up to the individual moderators it differs from case to case.

As I already mentioned a message board is different from a forum and does not have a certain structure of sections meant for specific kinds of topics. Therefore, everything that is discussed on the message board, it being selling/buying, sharing photos, discussing a particular doll, is in the order it was posted in and has no other organization applied to it. Both the forums for BJDs and for Blythe do have a structure however. In many ways the four forums have a similar structure, but there are also some significant differences. As for similarities all four forums had sections for rules, for buying/selling/trading, for introductions, for doll photography, for asking questions and advice, and for organizing or announcing offline meetings and conventions.

While they thus all shared certain similar sections there were significant differences between forums. For instance, the BJD forums have a much more elaborate section for photographs with sub-sections for regular photos, photo stories, a database, and requests. Both Blythe forums just have one section for photographs. The international BJD forum, as already mentioned above, had very specific rules about which dolls can and cannot be discussed on the forum, this also shows in the fact that they do not have any section to discuss other dolls besides BJD. While the Dutch forum also does not have such a section it has a wider range of which dolls can be discussed on the forum. Both Blythe forums do have separate sections to discuss any kind of doll. What is also a significant difference I found between the two BJD forums on the one hand and the Blythe forums on the other was that on the Blythe forums there was a place to talk about non-doll related life. While the Dutch ball-jointed doll forum has a section for non-doll related topics it is not encouraged to talk about all the details of your life, as already mentioned about

the rules. This issue of sharing the non-doll parts of life on an online doll-focused community is the topic of the next section.

5.1.2. Non-doll parts of life as part of online interaction

One thing about online communities, and online communication in general, is that it can be very easy to not tell people a lot about yourself, about who you are. People do not see you, they do not know if anything you tell them is the truth. This is of course to a certain extent the case when you meet someone in person, but on the Internet it is much easier to choose what parts of yourself to show. Since the interaction between doll collectors stems from the common interest in the dolls it might be unimportant to really get to know each other to be able to share knowledge and enjoyment of dolls. I have found, however, that this does not have to be the case.

As already mentioned in the previous sections there are certain rules that say something about what parts of your offline life has a place on the forum. For safety issues it is desirable to know each other to a certain extent because the forums have sections for buying and selling. All forums encourage new members to introduce themselves and tell the other members something about who they are. It differs from person to person how much personal information is shared but from all the introduction posts I have read I can say that age, occupation, country, which dolls someone has and how they got into the collecting of these dolls and how they found the forum are topics often mentioned in an introduction post. However there are also rules on the ball-jointed doll forums that tell the members of the community to not tell too much about their private lives. Not for safety issues, but because the owners of the forum do not feel that their community is the place for that. This does not mean, however, that people do not share parts of their personal lives on the forums, but it is usually a part of their lives that is connected with the dolls. For instance, in a topic discussing how family feels about the doll collection personal issues are discussed, but it is in relation to the dolls.

On both the Blythe forums I participated in sharing very personal things was not discouraged and, especially on the larger international forum, topics such serious illness, death in the family, work related issues, were placed on the forum. The creators of such topics either stated that they needed a place to vent or that they needed the emotional support of the members of the Blythe community. Moreover, not only serious issues are discussed but also a variety of lighter non-doll related topics about such things as books, movies, and clothing could be found. On the small Barbie message board I also found a few topics related to personal issues, but not a lot. I would like to note that just because serious personal issues are not discussed much on the BJD forums, it does not mean that individual collectors do not discuss these things with each other. When a friendship is formed and there is contact outside the public of the forum, such as chatting or private messaging, it might well be that someone seeks the support of fellow collectors.

However, the online community as a whole, on the specific forums I did my research, is not presented as the place for that.

From my own research findings I can say that non-doll parts of life are more present in the online Blythe communities than in the others. The range of topics discussed in the Blythe community indicated that the forum is not just a place to share the doll-collecting hobby, but also a place to find a community to share other parts of life with.

5.2. *Offline interaction*

Of course interaction between collectors also happened before the Internet era and it continues to do so now next to and in connection to Internet interaction. In this section I have made a distinction between large and small scale offline interactions. Under large scale I include conventions and doll shows. Small scale are unofficial meetings (referred to as meets by most people) of collectors and in-store events.

5.2.1. *Large scale events: conventions and doll shows*

I will first discuss the information given to me about such events by my respondents as well as what I have read and seen on the forums. Then I will describe two conventions I went to myself: BlytheCon UK 2011, and Barbie convention “*In Holland*”. These examples will illustrate the offline interaction on large scale events, but will most likely not include all kinds of offline interaction that happens at such occasion since I only had the chance to go to two of these events and there might be significant differences dependent on for instance location. For instance, the owner of the Dutch Barbie specialized store told me that the Barbie conventions in the US are very different from the smaller one I attended in the Netherlands. I was also told about this by a Barbie collector from the US. Barbie conventions usually last for several days. Unlike doll shows it is not only about selling and buying, but there are many activities such as a group lunch, presentations, themes, and mainly a lot of chitchat and interaction between collectors. Here selling is still a part of the convention, but it is different from a doll show because at a doll show that is the main purpose. Moreover, the American Barbie collector told me that on conventions you will find people from all over the world, but doll shows tend to be more local. Conventions for Ball-jointed dolls or Blythe are one day only and there are things like competitions, a raffle, buying and selling, workshops, and, of course, interaction between collectors.

While browsing, buying and selling are a big parts of the conventions the chance to meet and interact with other collectors can be just as important. From my own experience as well as from what people have told me, it is quite common to bring your own dolls to conventions. For Barbie this does not seem to be the case when the occasion is just for selling and buying, but with Ball-jointed dolls it is

convenient to be able to try out clothes and wigs before purchasing, because of the many sizes available, and a convention is the perfect occasion.

5.2.1.1. *BlytheCon UK 2011*

For several years there has been a yearly Blythe convention in the UK and it was the only convention in Europe until this year when in the summer of 2012 there will be the first BCEU in Berlin. The location and organizers change every year and the continuation of the event is dependent on the own initiative of collectors. In October 2011 BlytheCon UK took place in London. While the convention itself was one day, from 10 am to 4 pm, there was also a *pre-con* meeting at a bar the night before as well as an after-party the night of the convention organized by the organization of BCUK.

The pre-con meet was held at the top floor of a bar. When I arrived most of the tables were already filled and on the tables were drinks, snacks, and a variety of Blythe dolls. Me and the three people I came with (one friend who I know in person and two who I only knew through the Internet before that day) sat down at the only available table. Throughout the evening there were some people who moved through the room to talk to people, but most people tended to stay in their seats and only interact with the people sitting at their table. The interaction between different tables was somewhat minimal and overall people tended to stick with the people they knew. Of course this was partly due to inconvenience of moving around the room, but it was also more an occasion for catching up with people or meeting people you knew from the Internet in person, than it was to meet new people. Since the theme of the convention had to do with scouts everybody got a tiny Blythe-sized badge with a glass of beer on it for attending the pre-con meet. People chatted to each other, mostly about Blythe and the upcoming convention, looked at each other's dolls and some made photos of dolls .

The next morning it was time for the actual convention. Stall holders and helpers were allowed in first to set up their stall. People who wanted to have first picks at the things being sold were the first to arrive. When handing in your ticket, which had to be purchased beforehand through the Internet, every attendee got a goodie-bag containing a name button (you had to write down your name), magnet, Blythe sized t-shirt with the BCUK logo and some flyers and coupons. The event took place in a large hall.

Circled around the room were stall/stands/tables for the sellers who had purchased a table beforehand in order to sell their goods. The variety of goods were mainly hand-made clothes and accessories and some customizers selling their custom dolls. At the back of the room there was a stage that was used for several Blythe related workshops throughout the day. Workshops were about sewing and customizing. In front of the stage was a long table that had the raffle prizes displayed on it encouraging people to buy raffle tickets. All raffles prizes are donated by individual collectors and the money made from the raffle is donated to charity. The middle of the room was filled with several large

round tables and chairs where people could sit down to take a break from buying and browsing and chat with other people. Those tables were soon filled with Blythe dolls and people sharing and enjoying each other's dolls. At the front of the room were two tables displaying the entries to the clothing design contest and the photo contest. Throughout the day people could vote for their favorite entry and at the end of the day the winner would receive a prize. Here I would like to note that in the literature on collecting competition between collectors is mentioned, but the competitions at BlytheCon were not about who has the better collection. The competitions were about creativity and skill as opposed to who has a somehow better collection than others. Furthermore, while it are competitions and people entering hope they win, the whole atmosphere around these competitions were friendly and uncompetitive.

Throughout the day there were also a few special photo moments. The first was a Goldie group shot. A Goldie is a rare Blythe and it has become a tradition at BlytheCon UK for people to bring theirs and make a photo of all of them together. At the end of the day there was the over-all Blythe group shot. People placed their dolls together and many photos were made. In addition to these special photo moments for the dolls people also had the chance to get their own picture taken at the photo booth. There were a number of accessories, such as bow-ties and mustaches, to pose with and take a funny picture either with or without doll. Besides these special photo moments people were making photos of dolls and people throughout the day. People did not only take photos of people they knew or dolls they liked, but it also happened that someone liked a doll and asked the owner to pose with it.



Figure 5 Me and a fellow Blythe collector at BCUK. Photo credit: Stuart Gleave for BlytheCon UK 2011

The whole atmosphere of the convention, at least in my own personal experience, was informal and pleasantly crowded. Especially around the buying and selling areas it was crowded, not only because people were browsing but also because people often started talking. Either about the doll someone was

carrying with them, the items being sold, or it was a moment of recognizing someone. To me it was very interesting how almost everybody had written the nicknames they used on the Internet in addition to their real names. People often recognized each other either through the dolls which they had seen in pictures, or through the nicknames.

The after party was similar to the pre-con meeting. It took place at a bar, a different one, as well. The main difference was that most people were tired and instead of discussing what was to come, people were talking about how it had been and the things they had bought. The tables were again filled with drinks and Blythe dolls.



Figure 6 Blythe group shot. Photo credit: Stuart Gleave for BlytheCon UK 2011

5.2.1.2. *Barbie Convention “In Holland”*

The Dutch Barbie convention *Barbie in Holland* takes place twice a year, once in the fall and once in the spring. I attended the 2012 spring edition. Like BCUK it took place in a large event hall, located in a hotel. The largest part of this hall was filled with long tables for sellers, similar to BCUK although the amount of self-made merchandise was far less. At BCUK everything was handmade, customized dolls, or something other than Blythe (although there was only one such stand). There were sellers who sold new Barbies, sellers who only sold clothes and accessories, and a lot of vintage sellers. Browsing, selling, and buying were definitely the main activities for most attendees. While I myself am not a Barbie collector I could not resist a little participation in addition to my observation and I bought two Ken dolls and some outfits for my mom’s old childhood Barbie (must be that collector’s spirit Bal talks about).

In addition to all the seller tables there was a stage on which a table stood with prizes for the raffle. Similar to BCUK the Barbie in Holland raffle is held to raise money for charity and the prizes are donations. However, besides the raffle there were no other activities like at the Blythe convention that had competitions and photo-moments. Furthermore, there was little to no room for people to sit and chat.

Except a few little children nobody had their own Barbie dolls with them and there was little interaction between collectors beyond small talk. Again I want to note here that I have been told about larger conventions that last a few days in the US which are very different from the above description. There people do have their own dolls with them and it is more about interaction than just buying and selling as it was with this event.



Figure 7 The venue for Barbie in Holland, photo credit convention organizers

5.2.2. *Small scale interaction: meets and in-store activities*

Besides large somewhat official conventions there are meetings of a smaller number of collectors. Meets are generally organized through an online forum and it can be at someone's home or at a public location such as a restaurant or café. People take dolls with them, usually their favorites or they ask beforehand if anybody who is coming would like to see a specific doll. In this way it is simultaneously an occasion for socializing with people who share the same interest, but also an opportunity to do some research on BJDs or Blythe themselves. The Barbie collectors I spoke with either did not meet with other collectors in such a way or it was with a group that had become friends through Barbie over the years. The owner of the Dutch Barbie specialty store, told me that in the Netherlands Barbie meetings do not happen that often, but that in the US the Barbie interaction is very much club related and club members do have meetings. I myself, however, did not get to talk with someone who was still actively doing so.

Besides meets organized by collectors individually, there are also moments of interaction in the specialized stores that exist. There is no specialized Blythe store in the Netherlands, and not to my knowledge anywhere outside of Asia, but the Netherlands does have a specialized ball-jointed doll store and a specialized Barbie store. Even though I do not know the situation in other such stores I could see similarities with the two stores here.

Both stores are run by people who are collectors of the dolls themselves and this immediately created a different connection to the customers than if they would not. One of my respondents expressed

that she did not really like buying Barbies in regular toy stores because the sellers do not understand it, they do not understand that she would buy a doll for herself instead of her children. These sorts of feelings are unlikely to occur if the seller is also a doll collector. The more intimate and personal connection between customers and sellers is seen and felt in the stores in their lay-out and atmosphere as well. The specialized BJD and Barbie stores both have a "socialize area", a table for customers to sit down and chat and get offered something to drink. The atmosphere is also very informal.

In these specialized stores there are sometimes special events. The owner of the Dutch Barbie store organizes a few special Barbie days a year. All his regular customers get an invitation. On these special Barbie days there are special store offers, but it is also an occasion to have a drink and a snack and talk to fellow Barbie collectors. According to the owner it is always a fun and chatter filled occasion. While I did not go to one of these days, I did attend a different in-store event: a Ball-jointed doll re-string workshop at the specialized BJD store Think Pink!

5.2.2.1. re-string workshop

As I already mentioned in the history and characteristics of ball-jointed dolls, they have elastic string throughout their bodies that enable the doll to take on a variety of poses. Over time and through use this string loosens and needs to be replaced or taken out and tightened to correct the issue. This is called re-stringing. I noticed on the Dutch forum that there would be a re-string workshop organized in Think Pink!, the Dutch specialized BJD store, and thought it was a good opportunity to see some offline BJD collector interaction. I do not have my own doll to re-string, but the ladies who own the store told me that was not a problem. I could either just look or use one of their dolls.

I arrived when the first group was almost finishing up. The people from the first group stayed for a while after they had finished to chat and look around the store. The atmosphere of the workshop was very informal and friendly. I had already visited the store a few times before and it was no different at those times. I was a little skittish at trying to re-string a doll worth a few hundred euros that was not even mine (and that re-stringing really requires some pulling and yanking that could easily go wrong), so I used my time mainly to observe the process as well as the interaction between the collectors and between the collectors and theirs and other people's dolls.

For those present, including myself, it was not just about learning how to restring your doll. People browsed through the store, looking at and getting excited by all the dolls and doll-related items on display. People tried on clothes and wigs on their dolls. Since buying items and interacting with other collectors is generally something done on the Internet (not much occasion to do it in person) the restring workshop was also a chance to be social with others and interacting with the objects in a different surrounding and in different ways than is possible on the internet.

5.3. The online-offline interconnection

While I have discussed online and offline interaction separately, they are in reality of course not completely separate. First of all, there are practical ways in which the Internet is connected to doll collecting. The Internet is a way to buy and sell dolls and for Blythe and BJDs this is often the only way for people to buy a doll since there are few offline stores who sell them. Furthermore, doll events such as conventions and meetings can be announced and organized through Internet communication. Second of all, the Internet is a social medium for collector interaction. However, people who interact with each other online are of course also people in the offline world.

The interconnection between the online and the offline sphere is best seen in the ways offline things are shared online and how the online is reflected in the offline interaction between collectors. Take for instance the Blythe convention I attended. People wrote their online nicknames on their name badges together with their real names so people who they only knew online could recognize them. I cannot say if this happens for other people as well, but the way it went for me was that I knew some people by name from the Internet, it was to those people I talked to on BCUK and later I gained a closer relationship with them on the Internet. For me it was an interconnection of knowing someone online first, then meeting them offline, which in turn influenced the way I interacted with them online again. I have asked people if they talked and interacted differently with fellow collectors when talking to them online and when meeting someone in person and while there were a few people who said it was a little different, people saw a bigger difference in what was talked about depending on how well they knew each other than a difference depending on whether it was online or offline.

The reasons I found people had for offline interaction are generally the same as for online interaction. Information, buying and selling, and meeting fellow doll collectors. However, offline interaction is much more irregular and less frequent since there are only a few events or meets a year. In contrast, the Internet can be available 24/7 and people can choose when and how long to be active on forum or have online contact with a fellow collector in another online way. Furthermore, for some people the step to go to a meeting and actually meeting people in person when they do not know anybody else can be a bit scary or just too much of a hassle.

A final online/offline connection that I found that was interesting was that people who were members of both an international as well as a Dutch forum found that the Dutch forum had a more personal and intimate feel to it as opposed to the large international forum. Partly this might be because the Dutch forums have fewer members and therefore it is easier to get to know a larger part of the members. However, it was expressed by these respondents that they thought it was mainly because on the Dutch forums most people had met each other in real life as well and there was already a closer

connection to other members from living in the same country. Here not only the size of the forum but also the fact that members are from the same, offline, location plays a role in the online interaction.

5.4 Interaction as part of the collecting experience

The above two sections were an outline of the online communities I did my research in and the offline interaction as well as the interconnection between the two. In this section I will go beyond this and look at how interaction with fellow collectors is actually a part of the whole collecting experience.

While it is not impossible to avoid any contact with other collectors, I have found that interaction is a part of different aspects of collecting. First of all, when buying something for the collection, especially when buying second-hand, other collectors can be the one selling the object and there is an amount of interaction even if it is only for the time it takes to make the transaction. Furthermore, as I mentioned in section 5.2.2. the buying experience can be different when the seller is a fellow collector. Moreover, I discussed that a reason for selling could be that the doll does not get enough love or attention. In that case the seller wants to sell so that the doll will get this love and attention from the new owner. In this way interaction with other collectors plays a role in selling as well, as people would prefer to sell their dolls to a fellow collector.

Second of all, there is of course the sharing part of interaction where the collecting and the collection is shared with others at events and in online communities. The importance of this interaction to the collector will of course differ from person to person. For some people it is an important part of the collecting experience because they enjoy it more when they can share their experiences of the collecting with others. There are also people who do interact with other collectors, but who do not see it as an essential part of collecting dolls.

Furthermore, as the quote at the beginning of this chapter indicated, the importance of interaction can change for a person over time. For instance, when initially getting into the world of collecting, when joining forums for the first time or going to an offline event for the first time, it is about information and meeting new people. Over time the collector will know more and have less need for knowledge, and will perhaps also know more people. I have found that with several collectors the contact with a select group of people they had met became more important over time, but the overall interaction subsides. I think that for some people interaction with fellow collectors adds to the ways they enjoy the dolls, but I also think that for the people who do not value the interaction as highly it plays a role in the collecting experience. It might not make them enjoy their actual dolls more, but it can make the experience of having these dolls in total more fun. After all, if it added completely nothing there would be no reason for interacting beyond information exchange and buying and selling opportunities.

As discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, the interaction, especially online, between Barbie collectors tends to be different in terms of structure and in how far it was a part of the collecting experience. What is interesting is that I found that people who had both Blythe and Barbie did not treat their dolls in the same way and did also not interact with fellow collectors in the same way or had a different need for interaction. For instance, one collector of both Blythe and Barbie told me that she did not interact with Barbie collectors while she was an active member of the online Blythe community. With Barbie she did not have the need to interact with fellow collectors and she stated that “*the Barbies are just for me*”. This, together with what I learned from other Barbie collectors as well as the differences found in online interaction, would suggest that, at least for the people part of my research, with collecting and having a collection of Barbie there is a different need for interaction and the interaction is less a part of the whole collecting experience.

5.5. The collector-doll relation reflected in the collector-collector interaction

In the previous chapter I have discussed ways in which collectors form a relationship with the dolls they collect: deciding which one to buy, researching it, caring for the objects, creating and altering the dolls physically as well as creating personalities for them. I also discussed the differences that I found between collectors in the ways they create a relationship with their dolls. In section 4.3.1. I concluded that perhaps the relations formed with Blythe dolls and BJDs are more of a collector-doll nature whereas with Barbie it is more a collector-collection relation. This is reflected in the time spent on the collecting and the interaction between collector and collection. This collector-doll interaction is in turn reflected in the collector-collector interaction.

From what I have found Blythe and ball-jointed doll collectors spent more time on their individual dolls than did Barbie collectors. Because of this they have more to share with others which might explain the difference in amount of online interaction that I found. The kinds of activities undertaken by Blythe and BJD collectors is reflected in the structure of the online forums with, for instance, separate sections for buying/selling, photography, and sections about customization. These activities are also reflected in the offline events in for instance workshops and what is being sold. At the Blythe convention I went to the majority of items sold were hand-made items, while at the Barbie convention I went to hand-made items were only a small part of all the items for sale. This reflects the investment of creativity in the dolls.

Since the ways in which a relation is formed between a collector and the dolls tends to be different for the collectors of different dolls, there is also a difference in what they do with the dolls and, consequentially a difference in the way they interact.

6. Conclusions

I will first discuss each sub-question presented in section 3.1 separately, after which I will continue on to the main research question. Since I already address the differences I found between Blythe, Barbie and ball-jointed doll collectors, when interesting, with each sub-question I will not address this question again separately as well.

When do people consider themselves and others to be a collector?

In the theoretical framework I found that there is no clear-cut definition of collecting or of what precisely it is that makes someone a collector. In my own research I have also found that there is no such thing as *the* collector. People's views of what a collector was had to do with how the objects were treated after they had become part of the collection. Some felt that being actively involved with the dolls, customizing them, taking photos, was what made a collector. Others felt that only displaying the dolls was something a collector would do. I concluded in section 4.4 that I think it is not simply a question of what one does with the doll, but also how someone feels about the doll.

Passion and love for the collector objects as a defining characteristic of a collector is something that arose both from the literature and my own research findings. While I found that the Barbie collectors I spoke to tended to be less actively involved with their collected objects, in the sense of physically doing something with the doll such as customization or taking photos, than the Blythe and ball-jointed doll collectors I spoke to, they all share a passion or love for the dolls that they collect. Therefore, what a collector is and how a collector deals with their collection can have different meanings for different collectors.

How do objects enter and possibly leave a collection?

Gifts, buying, selling, and trading are the ways in which items are acquired for the collection. With my respondents I found that gifts were not often used as a way to add to a collection, possibly because the collector does not always have control of what is received. Furthermore, because the gift giver might still be associated with that doll the meaning invested into that doll is not completely free and the collector-object relation can be different because of that.

While for some people the moment a doll is acquired can be the moment it becomes part of the collection, I have also found that the moment the dolls actually become part of the collection can be a different moment. In section 2.3 of the theoretical framework it was discussed how an object's meaning is changed in order to become part of a collection. Respondents have differentiated between owning a doll, having paid for it, and between it really being theirs, feeling like they have a certain bond with the doll and it is them. I have found that this change in meaning, from being a certain doll to being a doll owned

by someone who has invested particular meanings into it and regards it in a certain way, happens in different ways for different people. Some people feel like they have a connection with a doll the moment it arrives, for some people it takes time or certain things, such as customizing it or coming up with a personality for the doll, are part of the process.

The discussion on how and why people decide to sell their dolls and the presence of guilt in the selling process showed that dolls were seen as objects that required love and care. Because people personified their dolls there was both guilt about selling them as well as guilt about not selling them if the owner felt the doll did not get the love and attention it deserved. Here the collector-doll relation is reflected in the guilt.

How is the self extended into the dolls and the collection as a whole and how does this self investment show in the collector-doll relation?

In the theoretical framework creating or altering an object, intimately knowing an object, and mastering an object were identified as possible ways through which the sense of self can be extended into an object.

I have found that creativity, creating and altering dolls both physically and mentally, plays an important role for some collectors of Blythe and ball-jointed dolls in the formation of an intimate collector-doll relation. Knowing and object and mastery of an object is related to this because the collector masters certain aspects of the doll during the customization process and as the creator of the dolls personality intimately knows it. While customization and personality creation does not play the same kind of part in Barbie collecting, creativity, knowledge, and mastery are also ways in which Barbie collectors can form a relation with the doll although differently. Creativity is present in shaping and displaying the collection and mastering the knowledge about Barbie's history and the dolls that exist or are present in the collection can be important ways for the Barbie collector to form a bond with their collection.

The investment of self in the doll, and the collector-doll relation that is shaped by that, is seen when an object is being sold and in the time spent on the dolls. I have concluded that because of differences in self-investment as well as time spent on the dolls the relationship of Blythe and ball-jointed doll is more collector-doll related whereas with Barbie it tends to be more collector-collection related.

How do collectors portray their collecting/collections to non-collectors?

In the discussion of this question in section 3.1. I have said that the answer to this question might provide insight in the investment of self through reactions and emotions people have to comments made about their doll collections from non-collectors and through how they display their collections.

In my research I found that negative comments about and reactions to the dolls are perceived as negativity towards the self. People have shared that they felt insulted and hurt by the comments made by

other people. This is an indication that people have a relation with the doll were the doll is considered to be part of the sense of self in such a way that a comment directed towards the doll is felt as a comment directed at the person.

Because of negative experiences or because of the feeling that non-collectors do not get it, people can choose to only share their collections selectively. It being only sharing certain aspects or it being only sharing it with certain people. However, actively hiding or denying the collection was not something I came across and indicates that while people might be uncomfortable sharing this part of themselves with everybody, it is a part of them that is important enough to take up time, space, and creativity.

What are connections between the collector-doll interaction and collector-collector interaction?

In my research I did not only look at what kinds of online and offline interaction takes place between different doll collectors, but also at the interconnection between online and offline interaction, the collector interaction as part of the whole collecting experience, and the reflection of the collector-doll relation in the collector-collector interaction.

I have found that with the Barbie collectors I spoke to the interaction with other collectors was less a part of the collecting experience than with the Blythe and ball-jointed doll collectors I spoke to. This was also reflected by the ways they interact, especially online where I found many similarities between Blythe and ball-jointed doll online interaction that I did not find with Barbie collectors. Moreover, it was also a reflection of the collector-doll relation and time spent on the dolls where I also found differences between Blythe and ball-jointed dolls on the one hand and Barbie on the other. Furthermore, I have found that the involvement of non-doll related parts of life on the online forums is more a part of the Blythe communities than for the others.

When collectors do different things with their dolls they will have different things to share with others and therefore the relation collectors have with their dolls and how they spent time on them is reflected in the interaction between collectors. In this way the interaction between collectors is a result of the collector-doll interaction, but is also a part of the collecting experience as a whole.

From the answers to the sub-questions I now move to the concluding answer to the main research question as posed in the introduction of this thesis:

What kind of relationships do people form with their doll collections, how are these relationships formed, and what kind of interaction is there between collectors?

This question is already answered, for the most part, by the answers to the sub-questions, but I will highlight the most important conclusions once more to answer my main research question.

In my research, both through interviews and participant observation online and offline, I have found people who see their dolls as objects that require love and attention. Passion and love for the collected object seems to be a vital part of what it is to be a collector. Collectors can form relations with their dolls in several ways. Through creative investment, knowing and mastery of specific aspects of the dolls the collector can form an intimate bond with the doll that makes the doll a part of the sense of the collector's self. I have found that this process is not only different from person to person, but differences between the ways a collector-doll relationship is formed can also be found between Barbie, Blythe, and ball-jointed doll collectors. Just as the ways in which different people incorporate their collected objects in to their sense of self differ, the value they attach to it as part of the self might also differ from person to person.

The collector-doll relation is reflected in the time spent on the collection and on individual dolls, reasons and emotions involved with selling, reactions to comments by other people, and in the interaction between collectors. The collector-doll relation is reflected in the collector-collector interaction in what they share and how they share it. Overall the importance of interacting is different for each person, but is a bigger part of the whole collecting experience for Blythe and ball-jointed doll collecting. Because of differences that I found I have concluded that the relation of Blythe and ball-jointed doll collectors with their dolls is more collector-doll related whereas with Barbie it tends to be more collector-collection related.

Thus, the relationships formed and the ways in which they are formed are diverse and differ from person to person, from doll to doll. The ways I have discussed in which people form a relationship with their dolls are ways in which a sense of the self can be extended to include the doll or the doll collection as a whole. In addition to the collector-doll relation that is formed, collector-collector interaction can be an important part of the collecting experience. In this interaction the collector-doll relation and the way it is formed is reflected. Collecting cannot be defined so easily because the collecting experience, what it involves, and the relationships between collector and collected and between collector and collector that are part of it, can take many shapes and meanings.

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Appendix I Examples of doll character profiles

Name: Rembrandt 'Rem' Constantijn Harlingh

Sculpt: K-doll Kael on a Domuya 1 SD lichaam

Gender: male

Eyes: 14mm Kanis Augen PA146 (greygreen)

Wig: Crobidoll CW07 (Milky Blonde)

Age: 21

Clothing style: borderline hipster

Personality: Rem is an open, friendly and social person who makes new friends easily. He is a comic relief character but can still be very insecure from time to time. While he loves to joke around, he keeps people at a distance of his true self.

Background story: born in Singapore as the second child of cosmopolitan expat parents, young Rembrandt doesn't actually remember much of his life there. Three months after he was born his parents moved back to The Netherlands, where they raised him and his older sister Johanna. When Rembrandt came out as gay when he was 15, his father had a hard time coping with his sons identity, and it resulted in a fight that never really got talked out until his untimely death of a stroke. Rembrandt always felt like he let his father down, so he decided to study Photography in his Dad's honor - he had been a sports photographer during his life. But, Rem never had the talent nor the motivation to become good at photography, as his classmate Pippa (belongs to **Nordica**) pointed out. And after his high school sweetheart broke up with him after a two-year relationship, Rem decided to take it into another direction and became a graphic designer. He cut and bleached his hair and started going out to meet guys, to get over his shyness and fear of social contact. Nowadays he spends his time doodling on his drawing tablet, cooking and fooling around with his now-best-friend Pippa. Only a sweet boyfriend is missing from the picture...

Sexuality: homosexual

Hobby's: drawing, reading, wasting time on Tumblr.

Extra: Rem's natural hair colour is brown, hence his dark brown eyebrows.

Relationships: none romantically, has an older sister.



Figure 8 Rembrandt, photo credit Mardie Feikens

Blythe personality example

Name: MoMo

Likes: orange/yellow, animals (especially lions and Mr. Goat), sleeping.

Dislikes: People (or dolls) who wake her up. She's also a little scared of Beetle (Pullip) who tried to use Mr. Goat in some sort of ritual.

Customizations: She is a custom Simply Mango with new make-up, foils added to eye chips, new eye lashes, custom eye lids, and custom pull charms. Everything sprayed and sealed using MSC.

Personality: MoMo is very quiet and spends most of her time sleeping. She has a pet goat named Mr. Goat. MoMo is kind and she likes spending time with her fellow Blythes, although to her sleeping when in the same room with them is good enough.



Figure 9 MoMo and Mr. Goat, photo credit Fenneki