Contemporary Young Women's "Child-Rearing" Behavior from the Perspective of Attachment

Yifan Xia

School of Education, Hunan First Normal University, Changsha, China
2798617847@qq.com

Abstract: As time progresses, the cloth dolls/toys that young women often hold have become cotton dolls that are as cute as children, with noses and eyes. These dolls are distinct from ordinary toys; they are more like real children. In the process of "raising children," doll mothers develop emotional bonds and a one-sided interactive relationship with their "children," substituting some of their attachment relationships in the adult world. To explore this, six cotton doll enthusiasts were interviewed, and the interview data were analyzed. The results show that "doll mothers" of all attachment types have an emotional dependency on cotton dolls, with the degree of dependency varying according to the attachment type. Cotton dolls serve a substitutive role in life, and the role they replace also varies with the attachment type. Securely attached individuals view cotton dolls as substitutes for friends, while those with insecure attachment consider them substitutes for lovers/children. This paper discusses this positive emotional connection, which is termed substitute attachment.

Keywords: Adult Attachment, Cotton Dolls, Players, Raising Dolls, Emotional Dependency

1. Introduction

In recent years, especially among young women, there has been a growing trend of "raising children," specifically referring to the care and attention given to cotton dolls. Cotton dolls are toys sewn with cotton as stuffing and mimicking real humans as their exterior, originated as merchandise within fan culture, with a strong companion attribute. However, in recent years, as subculture rapidly developed, cotton dolls evolved beyong fan products to also encompass social and entertainment attributes. "Raising children" refers to players who buy dolls and treat them as their real children, caring for and accompanying them, with the players themselves being designated as "doll mothers." "Doll mother" is a form of "cyber motherhood," anexpansion of motherhood by young women who play with dolls, and it also represents a redefinition and identity recognition of the mother role [1-2].

In the process of "raising children," "doll mothers" form a one-sided interactive relationship with cotton dolls, including taking photos of the dolls, dressing them, preparing food, and sharing daily activities. This type of one-way interaction provides ample support for the players, hence this article studies this one-sided interactive relationship. Therefore, this paper investigates the nature of this one-sided interaction. From an attachment perspective, the study explores the expression of attachment emotions among contemporary women who "raise children," based on interviews and surveys with six participants. This study offers a new lens for future research on intimate relationships and attachment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Adult attachment

The concept of attachment was first proposed by scholars led by Bowlby, based on the dependency observed in the relationship between infants and their mothers, initially referring to the relationship between infants and mothers [3]. However, as more scholars recognized and focused on attachment, the scope of attachment gradually expanded and extended into the adult realm, thus fostering the development of the field of adult attachment research. Collins developed the AAS scale to measure adult attachment types, originally dividing adult attachment into three dimensions: discomfort with closeness, discomfort with dependence, and attachment anxiety [4]. It was found that responses in the dimensions of discomfort with closeness and discomfort with dependence were highly similar, setting the basis for Brennan to advocate merging these into a single "attachment avoidance" dimension [5]. According to the new scale, attachment types can be categorized into four: secure, avoidant, preoccupied, and fearful. People with a secure attachment style find it easy to get emotionally close to others and feel comfortable both depending on others and being depended upon, without worries about being alone or rejected. People with a preoccupied attachment style (also known as obsessive) desire to invest all their emotions in intimate relationships but often find that others are reluctant to become as close as they would like. People with an avoidant attachment style, being self-sufficient is more important, and they are comfortable without close relationships, preferring not to depend on others or have others depend on them. People with a fearful attachment style crave close relationships but find it difficult to fully trust or depend on others, fearing getting too close and being hurt [6].

The field of adult attachment is broad, often discussed and researched together with intimate motivations and relationships. Studies have shown that attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are significantly negatively correlated with motivations for intimate relationships and the quality of intimate relationships. Moreover, the motivation for intimate relationships is significantly positively correlated with the quality of intimate relationships [7]. Scholars have also explored its impact on problematic online social networking, examining the relationships between adult attachment, loneliness, and fear of missing out [8].

Typically, attachment is used to discuss human relationships because it is foundational to relationship research, and some scholars have extended it to a broader range of relationship studies.

2.2. Place attachment

Williams & Roggenbuck suggest that place attachment is an emotional bond that maintains the connection between people and specific places [9]. This emotional link between "people" and "places" reflects the spaces where individuals tend to stay and use, where they often feel safe and comfortable. Williams posits that place attachment consists of two components: place identity and place dependence. Place identity is the emotional identification of a person with a place, recognizing its cultural, historical, and social values, often stemming from an individual's internalization and acceptance of the local culture and history. Place dependence refers to a person residing in a place long-term due to educational needs, work requirements, or other practical demands, where the residence is not out of emotional attachment but because the place provides necessary resources and facilities [10].

Building on the foundation of attachment theory, place attachment theory explores the emotional connections between people and places. Similarly, the interaction between inanimate cotton dolls and humans, and whether such interactions can create emotional bonds akin to those between people and places (similar to objectophilia), is the main focus of this paper. This paper refers to the

interaction between players and dolls as substitute attachment, a positive emotional relationship that forms between players and cotton dolls. This includes players' emotional investment throughout the "child-rearing" process, and their emotional identification with and dependency on "raising" the dolls. Emotional investment involves players' anxiety while waiting for cotton dolls to arrive home (the process from manufacturer to player), the enjoyment of photographing/dressing the dolls, and the sadness of accidentally losing a doll, among other emotions evoked by the dolls. Players' awareness of these emotions and their emotional dependency on the cotton dolls constitute their emotional identification with and dependency on "raising" the dolls.

3. Methodology

3.1. Interviews combined with surveys

This study primarily collected qualitative data through structured online interviews, selecting respondents based on the activity levels of users with high relevance to cotton dolls on various social media platforms (such as Weibo/Xiaohongshu's topic squares, as well as customer groups on shopping platforms like Taobao/Weidian). Factors considered included posting frequency, likes, and comments on cotton doll-related topics. Six avid cotton doll enthusiasts were chosen as interviewees. The interviews were conducted via voice calls on social media apps from January 8 to 9, 2025. Additionally, the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) was used during the interviews to provide reference data for subsequent qualitative analysis [11].

All participants in this study were informed of its purpose and agreed to participate in the interviews and surveys, signing informed consent forms. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, some personal information is anonymized in this paper without compromising the integrity of the research. The coding method for interview materials is "F-Interview Batch-Interview Order."

3.2. Interview and survey materials

The interviews were designed with open-ended questions across two dimensions: the basic information about respondents' "child-rearing" activities and their descriptions of "attachment" emotions. The "child-rearing" information was subdivided into three categories: intensity, interactive activities, and cognition. There were a total of 13 questions, with 11 questions about basic information and 2 questions about attachment emotions. The number of questions were flexibly adjusted based on the actual responses from the interviewees. The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide a reference for analyzing attachment emotions, using the latest revised Chinese version of the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS).

3.3. Results

The results of the interviews are presented in tabular form, as shown in Table 1. Among the six interviewees, three were classified with a fearful attachment type, one with a secure attachment type, one with a preoccupied attachment type, and one with a dismissive attachment type. All six participants spent varying amounts of time and financial resources on raising their dolls. In self-assessments of dependency on cotton dolls, three rated themselves a 3 out of 5, one rated a 2, one rated a 4, and one rated a 5. During the interviews, all respondents mentioned a variety of interactions with their cotton dolls, including the pre-identified activities like photographing and dressing up the dolls, and communicating with fellow enthusiasts, and some of the "doll mothers" also make clothes for their dolls by hand (Table 1 - F0102).

Regarding the emotional connection, all six interviewees tended to believe that cotton dolls have brought them positive emotional value, although some mentioned negative emotions due to the

dolls or their community. Overall, they viewed the emotional connection with the cotton dolls as positive.

Table 1: Summary of interview results

	How long have you been "raising" the doll?	How many dolls do you currently have?	How frequently do you buy dolls and doll-related merchandise?	Financial investment in "raising" dolls so far	Level of addiction to "raising" dolls
F0101 (Fearful type)	Started in 2018 and 2019	About a dozen	Not very frequently	Unable to calculate	2
F0102 (Fearful type)	Started in 2018 and 2019	About a dozen	Bought quite a few in the last two years	3k+	3
F0201 (Secure type)	Started in 2021	8 dolls	Quite frequently, buys every four to five months, considers holidays (like Spring Festival, Halloween, Christmas) factors	Unable to calculate	3
F0202 (Dismissive type)	Started in 2024	3 dolls	Quite a lot, buys several times a month	About $600	5
F0203 (Fearful type)	Started in 2020	3 dolls	Bought quite frequently in 2020	Unable to calculate	3
F0204 (Preoccupied type)	Started in 2017 and 2018	10 to 15 dolls	Bought a lot from 2018 to 2022, high demand due to the pandemic	5k~1w	4

4. Analysis

In the interview process, "substitute" was a frequently mentioned term. Several respondents repeatedly mentioned the term "substitute" when describing the personal significance of cotton dolls.

Initially, the understanding of "substitution" was limited to using cotton dolls as a replacement for their inherent attributes, such as substituting for a favorite celebrity/anime character to be by one's side. However, this perception changed when interviewee F0202 mentioned their poor interpersonal relationships at school and the absence of close friends to confide in. They explained how they turned to cotton dolls as a source of emotional support (F0202), despite the lack of understanding from others around them. Normally, in social environments, people with secure attachment styles would seek help or express their need to confide in close friends when facing problems or difficulties. However, this interviewee, lacking such support in their interpersonal environment, developed a high dependency on cotton dolls, which exemplified the "substitution" role in this attachment relationship. Cotton dolls substitute for the unresponsive other in the attachment relationship. Although cotton dolls are inanimate objects, the love and roles assigned by the players imbue them with a sense of life, allowing them to take on an almost animate presence.

It is noteworthy that respondents with different attachment styles have various interpretations of "substitution." A securely attached respondent (F0102) expressed an inability to accept cotton dolls as children/lovers, as they see the dolls substituting for "unconditionally supportive friends." In contrast, respondents with insecure attachment styles tend to view the cotton dolls as substitutes for their children/lovers, as these individuals experience more profound empowerment from the cotton dolls in their intimate parental/romantic relationships.

Building on the impact of adult attachment on interpersonal relationships, Zhang suggests that for people with insecure attachment styles, a comfortable way to maintain intimate relationships is self-awareness. By observing their behaviors and emotional states in daily life, individuals can better understand their attachment styles and make necessary adjustments [12]. While "doll mothers" may not always recognize their attachment style, they can continuously adjust their

interpersonal relationships through raising cotton dolls, determining whom in their relationships the cotton dolls are substituting for.

As "doll mothers" invest more in raising their dolls, the dolls' presence becomes more integrated into their lives. This deepens the dolls' substitutive role, creating a cycle where interactions that would typically occur with other people in social settings are replaced by interactions with the dolls. The presence of the dolls substitutes for other significant roles in some respondents' lives. As the dolls take on more significant roles in the players' lives, the dependency on them increases, making the dolls an integral part of their emotional worlds [13].

Besides "substitution," in terms of interactions with cotton dolls, the respondents' answers show high similarity. Beyond routine activities like changing clothes, taking photos, exploring shops, and making clothes, all respondents mentioned taking their dolls to enthusiast group activities. These groups, formed around shared interests, often lead to offline gatherings, where participation not only serves as an external manifestation of the doll mothers' dependence but also provides a sense of self and group identity through interactions with other doll mothers.

Additionally, when calculating the self-assessed dependency scores of respondents on cotton dolls, a comparison with their attachment styles revealed that dismissive and preoccupied respondents rated themselves higher, with scores of 5 and 4 respectively. Other fearful and secure attachment style respondents had more concentrated scores, averaging around 3. From the scores on the AAS scale, people with a dismissive attachment style have low scores for closeness and anxiety, with an attitude towards attachment figures of "if you are here, I ignore you; if you leave, it does not concern me." Since attachment figures may leave at any time, they find it easier to depend on cotton dolls, which are completely theirs and will not change or leave them. In contrast, those with a preoccupied attachment style, who score the opposite on the AAS scale, have an attitude of "if you are here, I am close to you; if you leave, I am inconsolable." This group deeply craves the companionship of attachment figures, and since cotton dolls are inanimate and cannot leave, this increases their dependency on the dolls.

Several respondents noted that the current cotton doll community has become chaotic due to some uncontrollable factors such as capital investment and market liberalization. For example, dolls originally priced in the tens are being hyped by resellers and sold at high prices, leading to significant profits. Excessive marketing strategies, including limited-time offers and out-of-print sales, have contributed to this trend. The respondents took the opportunity of this interview to call for an end to these practices. This also indirectly highlights that the doll mothers are not "enslaved" by cotton dolls; while they gain new emotional outlets through these dolls, they still maintain a focus on self-care. According to symbolic interaction theory, the interactions between cotton dolls, doll mothers, and the broader community of enthusiasts occur within a vast field of symbolic exchanges. However, the doll mothers are not trapped by these "symbols"; instead, they demonstrate their agency and proactive nature as independent individuals within these symbolic interactions [14].

Through a combination of interviews and questionnaires, this study discusses how the behavior of "raising" dolls expresses the attachment emotions of contemporary young women. Since cotton dolls substitute for significant others in attachment relationships, they undoubtedly influence the intimate relationships formed with these significant others. However, as the focus of this paper is on exploring the impact of "raising" behavior on intimate relationships, this aspect will not be further discussed.

5. Conclusion

The research reveals that cotton dolls play a substitutive role in adult attachment, with the nature of the substitution varying according to attachment style. For those with a secure attachment style,

cotton dolls substitute for friends (providing stable, ongoing support), while for those with insecure attachment styles, cotton dolls substitute for children/lovers (offering more intimate interactions). The influence of attachment style differences also manifests in the degree of dependency on cotton dolls, with respondents having dismissive and preoccupied attachment styles showing greater dependence.

However, this paper acknowledges limitations in its analysis due to a small coverage of respondents, a limited sample size, and an uneven distribution of attachment styles among the cases, resulting in a lack of case diversity which is not conducive to generalizing the conclusions.

For future research, efforts will be made to involve a larger and more varied group of people with different attachment styles in the interviews to accumulate more information, thereby enriching the reliability and outcomes of the study. Additionally, future research should delve deeper into issues such as whether long-term emotional investment in inanimate cotton dolls affects the ability of this group to develop intimate relationships, and whether there is a difference between substitute attachment to inanimate objects and common objectophilia. Researches should also explore whether the cycle of "dolls integrating into life and their substitutive role" mentioned in the interpretation of the results is benign or malignant.

References

[1] Long Y.Q. (2023). *The Construction of Identity Among Female Cotton Doll Players. Toy World (05), 129-131.*

[2] Huang W. & Xiong Y. (2023). *Cyber Motherhood and Young Female Players' "Child-Rearing" Practices. International Journalism (10), 49-68. doi:10.13495/j.cnki.cjjc.2023.10.006.*

[3] Bowlby, J. (1979). *The bowlby-ainsworth attachment theory. Behavioral and brain sciences, 2(4), 637-638.*

[4] Collins, N. L. (1996). *Revised adult attachment scale. Behavior therapy.*

[5] Du J.H., Wang H.X., & Li Y.X. (2015). *Revision of the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) in a Chinese College Student Sample. Journal of Huzhou Teachers College (01), 63-69.*

[6] Bartholomew, K. (1990). *Avoidance of intimacy: An attachment perspective. Journal of Social and Personal relationships, 7(2), 147-178.*

[7] Qiu S.S. (2010). *A Study on the Relationship between Adult Attachment, Motivations for Intimate Relationships, and the Quality of Intimate Relationships Among College Students Master thesis. Shaanxi Normal University.*

[8] Wu Z.X. (2022). *The Impact of Adult Attachment on Problematic Social Network Use: The Chain Mediating Role of Loneliness and Fear of Missing Out, Master thesis. Jilin University. https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27162 /d.cnki.gjlin.2022.007894doi:10.27162/d.cnki.gjlin.2022.007894.*

[9] Williams, D. R., & Roggenbuck, J. W. (1989, October). *Measuring place attachment: Some preliminary results. In NRPA symposium on leisure research, San Antonio, TX (Vol. 9).*

[10] Wang B.X., Li X.Y., Zhou J.L., & Liu J. (2024). *Study on the factors affecting public spaces in complex street markets in Macau under place attachment theory. Furniture and Interior Decoration (09), 122-128. doi:10.16771/j.cn43-1247/ts.2024.09.019.*

[11] Zhu T.H. (2012). *A Review of Adult Attachment Measurement Tools. Popular Science & Technology (02), 200-202.*

[12] Zhang Q. (2021). *The Impact of Adult Attachment Styles on Interpersonal Relations. Science Education and Culture Collection (First Half of the Month) (34), 148-150. doi:10.16871/j.cnki.kjwha.2021.12.046.*

[13] Sun M.J. (2022). *Emotional Sharing and Identity Construction in Ritual Interactions within the "Douban Doll Circle - Cotton Dolls" Group. New Media Research (20), 69-72. doi:10.16604/j.cnki.issn2096-0360.2022.20.011.*

[14] Li Z.B. (2024). *A Study on the Interaction Behaviors of Cotton Doll Players from the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (Master's thesis, Zhejiang Media College). Master. https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27852/d.cnki.gz jcm.2024.000177doi:10.27852/d.cnki.gzjcm.2024.000177.*