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Melanie Hurley

## Dolling Up YouTube Playbor in the DollTube Creator Economy

### ABSTRACT

This article argues that DollTube—the collection of YouTube channels and videos dedicated to doll-related topics—is a digital space that is both a play environment and a work environment. Through an analysis of five DollTube channels that were drawn from a sample of 26 channels, it shows how DollTubers transform their play with dolls into carefully curated ‘digital video play’ (that is, play that involves the capture of moving images and the uploading of the resulting footage to a video-sharing platform). In curating their play, the DollTubers also perform work within and for the creator economy; most importantly, they become involved in the process of self-branding. The aim of this paper is showing that the DollTubers’ activities meld play and work together, but that each DollTuber melds these two types of behavior together in their own way. As such, DollTube channels variously (co-) emphasize imaginativeness, critique, education, consumption, personal aggrandizement, or community building, and each thereby demonstrates an individual ‘playbor’ style that contributes to a uniquely branded persona and an individual niche in the doll community.

### KEYWORDS

dolls, YouTube, play, creator economy

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Melanie Hurley, PhD, Department of English, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Independent scholar. Current publications: “Studying Pretty Pink Garbage: Neo-feminism in Disney Princess™ Ephemera” (In: *Artifact & Apparatus* 1, 2021); “Jem, She-Ra, and My Little Pony: Combating Misogyny, Homophobia, and Racism in Girl-Centred Reboots” (In: *The '80s Resurrected: Essays on the Decade in Popular Culture Then and Now*, edited by Randy Laist, 2023); and “Plush, Plastic, and Plato: Purpose and Being in *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *Toy Story*” (In: *The Velveteen Rabbit at 100*, edited by Lisa Fraustino, 2023). Research areas: Children’s media, girl studies, and popular culture.

Melanie Hurley

## Dolling Up YouTube

### Playbor in the DollTube Creator Economy

#### Introduction

Long before Margot Robbie starred as Mattel’s iconic doll in the 2023 summer blockbuster *Barbie*, there were adults who collected Barbies and other types of dolls. As the Internet, especially social media, has expanded the possibilities for adults’ play with toys and for adult toy fans to connect with one another (cf. Heljakka 2015b, pp.137f.), many adult doll fans have come to double as social media content creators who regularly upload or post doll-related content on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit. As such, one can recognize a distinct doll genre on social media, a genre that demonstrates adult doll fans’ creativity, their skill in manipulating objects and in using various technologies for documenting and sharing their play, and their deep knowledge of and enthusiasm for their hobby.

This article analyzes the doll-related videos that adult doll fans upload to YouTube, and, using the doll community’s own language, it refers to this YouTube content as ‘DollTube’ and to the creators who produce and upload it as ‘DollTubers.’ It recognizes DollTube as a complex digital and public space that is both a play and work environment where doll fans turned YouTube content creators express their thoughts, share their creations and their knowledge, connect with their viewers, and construct their individual brands. DollTubers expand their doll play beyond private dwellings, clubs for toy enthusiasts, and Instagram and Flickr’s toy photography (cf. Heljakka 2015a, p.105; Heljakka/Harviainen 2019, pp.358ff.), turning it into ‘digital video play’ – play that involves the capture of moving images and the uploading of the resulting footage to a video-sharing platform. However, it would be wrong to construe DollTubers’ activities as something engaged in solely for pleasure. DollTubers participate in the *creator economy*, a labor market based around independent contractors who produce social media content in the hope that they will gain enough views, likes, follows, and shares to earn financial and social rewards (cf. Duffy/Ononye/Sawey 2023, pp.355f.; Glatt 2022, pp.3856f.; Haborak 2020; High 2022). To acquire a sizeable YouTube following, DollTubers—like other social media content creators (cf. Duffy/Hund 2015, pp.2f.; Haborak 2020; Glatt 2022, pp.3860-3862)—must develop a personal brand. Their self-branding process involves what Avi Santo calls “curatorial mediation” (2023, p.68), which is the practice of constructing a social media identity through showing off and promoting their purchases, using (often mass-produced) merchandise to express their fan lifestyles and to stand out among their peers, and meticulously composing and selecting photographs and personal details to share on their social media accounts (cf. Duffy/Hund 2015, pp.7-9; Santo 2023, pp.68-70). YouTube allows doll fans to become public ‘players’: they become both adults who play with their dolls in public and people who are public figures within the doll-collecting community and who have their own fans.

DollTube is a digital space in which the intersections between toy fandom, play, consumerism, and labor become discernible. Through an analysis of five DollTube channels that were drawn from a sam-



ple of 26 channels, this article examines how DollTubers use their dolls for creative self-expression and for self-branding, and how members of this group of content creators enact a variety of strategies to negotiate the demands of play-turned-work, or ‘playbor’ (cf. Kücklich 2005). These analyses reveal that, on DollTube, creative doll play and the labor of self-branding blend and become inseparable from one another. Not only is there no simple divide between affirmational and transformational forms of fandom (cf. Booth 2015, p.13; Santo 2023, p.69; these terms are discussed in more detail below), but there is also no easy divide between work and play once a toy fan becomes involved in social media’s creator economy. However, each DollTuber engages with this playbor environment in their own way, each using their playbor in a distinctive manner to transform the combination of themselves, their playthings, and their documented play into fodder for self-expression, social connectivity, and monetizable self-branding.

### Theoretical Framework: Academic Playboring at the Intersections of Fan Studies, Toy Studies, and Platform Studies

Primarily, this article draws and builds on fan studies, toy studies, and platform studies analyses of fans’ meaning-making activities in digital spaces, including their play, work, and identity construction. This section highlights the ways in which fans’ meaning-making activities, especially those that occur on social media, dissolve both the ‘affirmational/transformational’ and the ‘work/play’ binaries.

The distinction between affirmational and transformational forms of fandom is well-known in the fan studies literature; however, scholars have cogently argued that these categories are not absolute and that fans engage in more complex meaning-making strategies. The term ‘affirmational fandom’ refers to fan behaviors that explore a text’s details, celebrate its creator(s), and use close readings of it and reverence for it to create shared meanings. By contrast, the term ‘transformational fandom’ refers to fan behaviors that manipulate and recreate the source text, bending it to suit the fans’ own needs and desires (cf. Santo 2023, p.80; Stein/Busse 2012, p.15). Often, affirmational fandom is associated with cultural hegemony, mainstream identities, and the uncritical consumption of texts, while transformational fandom is associated with resistance, critical engagement, and emancipation (cf. Booth 2015, p.13). Over the last decade, several scholars have challenged this binary, often with reference to fans’ play and to their interactions with material culture (e.g., Booth 2015; Santo 2023; Scott 2019). Thus, through greater attention to a range of fan objects and fan practices, the field of fan studies is evolving to provide more nuanced pictures of fan activities that do not rely on a strict classificatory binary.

Paul Booth’s *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* (2015) develops one of the most significant theoretical challenges to the ‘affirmational/transformational’ binary. Booth observes that often one cannot easily or accurately describe fans and their practices as either affirmational or transformational; rather, fans may enact both types of fandom in their various interactions with texts (cf. Booth 2015, p.13). Fan practices therefore always exist somewhere between supporting the media industries and their ideologies and resisting those ideologies (cf. Booth 2015, pp.14f.). Consequently, Booth suggests that it is more productive to understand fan activities through ‘media play;’ that is, through the idea that fans make meaning by engaging creatively with mainstream texts and using the boundaries of the texts as a guide for the imaginative manipulation of plot, character, setting, and so on. Media play can affirm, transform, or do a little of both, and it is always meaningful, always an act that expands the fans’ shared understandings of the source text (cf. Booth 2015, pp.15-17). It is therefore best not to rigidly categorize and judge fan activities according to their perceived investment in hegemony,

but to see them as a group of lively and creative acts of meaning making that respond to commercial texts in a wide variety of ways.

As one might anticipate, play is likewise an overarching lens in Katriina Heljakka's extensive work on adults' interactions with toys, and, although adult toy fans are resistant to the characterization of their practices as play, this lens highlights how toy fans use material culture for their own ends. Heljakka has examined how adults use toys for learning new skills, forging social connections, expressing themselves creatively, and responding to and even revolutionizing industry-created narratives (e.g., Heljakka 2015a; 2015b; 2022; Heljakka/Harviainen 2019). In examining these different facets of adult toy fandoms, Heljakka often refers to 'photoplay,' the practice of photographing toys to (re)tell stories, explore identities, (re)build worlds, and document interactions with toys (cf. Heljakka 2015a, p.105; 2015b, p.145; 2022; Heljakka/Harviainen 2019, pp.359f. and p.366). Since photoplay is only possible with cameras and since it only gains widespread public visibility through social media posts, she understands cameras and social media applications as tools that extend play and transform it into a public, digital practice (cf. Heljakka 2015b, p.142; 2019, p.362). Notably, adult toy fans are apprehensive about using the word "play" to describe their uses of toys; they prefer to identify themselves as "collectors" (Heljakka 2018, p.249) and call their toy-related activities "hobbying" or "dollyng" (Heljakka 2018, p.250). However, Heljakka argues that adult toy fans' refusal to refer to their activities as 'play' and their reframing of toys as collectibles obfuscates toys' "function as *playthings* – as products intended to be used in casual and free-form types of play, such as imaginative and creative storytelling" (Heljakka 2018, p.254). It is through the lens of play that it becomes clear that adult toy fans' activities are more than an acquisition of items that affirms the toy companies' narratives, aesthetics, and status: they are artistic, expressive, and innovative practices that both affirm and transform the plaything.

Understanding adult toy fans' activities as play allows one easily and productively to place Heljakka's work in conversation with Booth's. As Booth suggests of fans more generally, toy fans manipulate texts and objects—in this case, playthings—to respond to, interpret, and innovate the toys' attached narratives, characterizations, and story worlds. For example, in "From Toys to Television and Back: *My Little Pony* Appropriated in Adult Toy Play" (2015), Heljakka notes that adult *My Little Pony* players use the toys in a variety of ways: they indulge in the tactile experience of grooming their colorful plastic ponies; they arrange aesthetically pleasing pony displays; they photoplay the ponies to (re)interpret the toys/characters and their worlds and to further their enjoyment of the toys' aesthetics; they customize new pony characters; and they build a community around their shared interest in the toys (cf. Heljakka 2015, pp.103ff.). Similarly, in "From Displays and Dioramas to Doll Dramas: Adult World Building and World Playing with Toys" (2019), Heljakka and J. Tuomas Harviainen show that Susanna Mattheiszén's photoplay with her doll Ken of Finland (a customized Ken doll with the Instagram account @kenseikkaalee) subverts Mattel's construction of Ken as a normative heterosexual male. Instead of wearing normative masculine clothing and dating Barbie, Ken of Finland wears handmade dresses and lives in a meticulously decorated dollhouse with his boyfriend Hector (cf. Heljakka/Harviainen 2019, pp.368-370). Through their play, adult toy fans subvert corporate narratives and make their own meanings with their playthings, and when they document and share their play on social media, these meanings become public and communal.

Still, content creation, especially when a creator's blog, channel, or account gains a sizeable following, is not all fun and games: in the creator economy, labor and leisure comingle and become indistinguish-



able from one another. In “FCJ-025 Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry” (2005), Julian Kücklich coined the term ‘playbor’ to describe the slippage between work and play that occurs in the digital games industry through the activity of computer games modification or ‘modding.’ He argues that although modding provides the digital games industry with many benefits, including innovation, test markets, branding opportunities, the extension of games’ shelf lives, and the recruitment of talent, modding remains understood primarily as an extension of play rather than as productive labor. The digital games industry commodifies and capitalizes on the digital games that fans produce in their spare time, transforming their leisure time into work time and their playful creation into a monetizable product, typically while depriving the modders of intellectual property rights and making them bear the financial and legal risks of their activities. As such, modding exemplifies an activity in which labor and leisure bleed together and which quickly becomes exploitative (cf. Kücklich 2005).

Although Kücklich described the unique situation he saw developing in the world of digital gaming with the term ‘playbor’, one can productively apply it to social media’s transformation of hobbies into economically viable activities. In “‘Having It All’ on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding among Fashion Bloggers” (2015), Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund argue that fashion bloggers trouble the binary distinction between labor and leisure. Fashion bloggers present their content creation as part of a glamorous lifestyle that they pursue out of passion (cf. Duffy/Hund 2015, pp.4-7). However, despite this staging, the bloggers’ self-branding practices require them to manage their public personae diligently, build and maintain an extensive network, exercise a great deal of self-discipline to produce high quality content frequently, and balance the work of travel, event attendance, writing, and photographing (cf. Duffy/Hund 2015, pp.5ff.). Content creation thus requires creators to be ‘always on’: always thinking about their content, always looking for an opportunity, and always managing their brands. Indeed, Duffy and Hund found that some bloggers no longer even differentiate between labor and leisure, for the enjoyable pursuit of fashion and the laborious pursuit of content creation have thoroughly bled into one another (cf. Duffy/Hund 2015, p.8). As for modders, for fashion bloggers, content creation can cause a pleasurable activity to become labor. Work and play become the same pursuit and all time becomes potential work time.

Similarly, Avi Santo’s “Fanning the Flames of Fan Lifestyles at Hot Topic” (2023) shows how social media content creation completely blends fan lifestyles and labor. He observes that there is a subset of fans who deftly use curatorial mediation to parlay their fandom into personal brands. These fans buy Hot Topic’s fan merchandise, take selfies with it, and compose posts bearing the store’s #HTFandom and #HTFanatic hashtags, and through this process, such fans forge distinctive social media personae. Santo discusses this phenomenon in relation to the affirmational/transformational binary, arguing that such use of Hot Topic’s merchandise affirms the store’s status as a purveyor of quality goods that support fan lifestyles, while also transforming the fans’ personae into recognizable and marketable commodities that have their own followings (cf. Santo 2023, pp.69f. and pp.75-80). Consequently, he claims that Hot Topic and its fans demonstrate that the binary is a false one, and its two terms are in truth interdependent and inseparable from one another (cf. Santo 2023, p.69 and p.80). Even more strikingly, as with the modders and fashion bloggers that Kücklich and Duffy and Hund respectively discuss, these content creators’ fandom has become work. Santo notes that fans who create Hot Topic-related content provide free advertising for Hot Topic, presumably with the hope that their work will result in better professional networks, stronger personal brands, and larger or more stable social media followings, all of which

can produce greater financial rewards. Some individuals who affix the #HTFandom hashtag to their selfies share their photographs with Hot Topic's official website, allowing others to browse the photographs and find links to the featured merchandise. Others become official Hot Topic brand ambassadors through the Hot Topic Fanatics program, which requires that applicants be well-versed in popular culture, have strong photography skills, and have at least five thousand followers on a single social media platform (cf. Santo 2023, p.69 and pp.75-80). Fans' play with media and merchandise has become deeply attached to monetizable self-branding, and as such, for fans involved in the creator economy, the distinction between leisure and labor is quickly vanishing.

## Analyzing DollTube's Playbor: Methodology

This article theorizes DollTube as a digital site of playbor, a space in which adult toy fans' play with material objects, narratives, characters, worlds, video production, and digitization create shared meanings and in which their curatorial mediation of these pleasurable activities transforms their play into the labor of content creation. This theorization stems from a survey of 26 DollTube channels. The aim of the survey was initially to understand DollTube as a place where adult doll fans share their creativity, expertise, and critiques, but, after surveying the literature outlined above, the research evolved to focus on DollTubers' playbor. In alphabetical order, the 26 surveyed channels were: Adult Doll Collector; Angel Loza; Barbination; Beauty Inside A Box; Darling Dollz; DisneyD Prince; The Doll Circle; The Doll Daddy; The Doll Studio by Kris; DollThighs; dontcallmedoll; Faery Tale Dolls; The Haus of Dollz; Jessica's Dollhouse; Just Dream Studios; Kes Collects; MmDisney200; Muñecas, Poupees, and Dolls; MyFroggyStuff; My World; PeachY Reviews; Plutozdollz; Rodney Rainbow; Tori's Reborn Babies; Vintage Doll Collector; and xCanadensis. As a note, since not every DollTuber's real name is public knowledge, this article uses the channel names to refer to both the channel and its creator.

The first DollTube channel that the author discovered was The Doll Studio by Kris, found while she was teaching a class on girl culture and was searching for information about American Girl, a doll brand in which the students were interested but about which she knew little. As she began seeking more information about other doll brands that the students were eager to discuss but which she had not experienced as a child (e.g., Bratz, Monster High, and Maplelea), she came across Darling Dollz, dontcallmedoll, and xCanadensis. YouTube then began recommending doll content, and she found many other channels through these recommendations. However, once her research on DollTube began in earnest, she began searching terms such as 'doll collecting' and 'doll collecting community' on YouTube, and these searches led to other channels, including The Doll Daddy, DollThighs, and Muñecas, Poupees, and Dolls. Finally, reading content on the r/Dolls subreddit brought her to other channels still, most notably to Faery Tale Dolls.

The sample includes channels that range from having millions of followers (e.g., MyFroggyStuff) to having just over a thousand (e.g., The Haus of Dollz). Due to the interests of the author's students and her own interests, the sample is severely biased towards channels that primarily or exclusively discuss mass-produced plastic dolls that have a height between ten and eighteen inches and that often emphasize fashion and hair play (e.g., Barbie, Disney, American Girl, Licca-chan); limited-release collectors' dolls from such popular doll lines; and expensive, detailed plastic dolls from collector brands (e.g., Integrity Toys). However, the author did make an effort to locate and include channels that discuss other types of dolls, including ball-jointed dolls (dolls that artists create, have highly articulated bodies, sell for high



prices, and are commonly called BJDs), antique dolls (e.g., bisque and porcelain dolls from the 1800s), vintage dolls (e.g., Raggedy Ann, Madame Alexander’s Cissy, and Vogue Doll Company’s Jill), and baby dolls. Notably, the channel Muñecas, Poupees, and Dolls primarily discusses ball-jointed dolls; Vintage Doll Collector primarily discusses antique and vintage dolls; and Tori’s Reborn Babies exclusively discusses baby dolls. Other channels in the sample, including xCanadensis, MmDisney200, and Faery Tale Dolls, also discuss BJDs or vintage dolls from time to time.

To understand the self-branding of each DollTuber, the author scanned the list of videos on each channel, noted the types of content that each DollTuber produces, and watched each DollTuber’s first video, most popular video (as of the day the channel was checked), and most recent video (as of the day the channel was checked). Due to the initial interest in videos with a clearly imaginative, critical, or educational purpose, the author scoured each channel for such content. However, due to her personal interest in doll collecting, she also found herself watching many unboxing videos and reviews, hauls, and doll room tours—videos that also influenced this analysis. Finally, she closely analyzed videos of interest, paying careful attention to what content creators say and how they say it; how they present the merchandise that they purchase and the objects that they make; how they film and edit their videos; and how they use these factors to fashion a distinctive social media brand. Having now watched and examined many hours of DollTube content, the author can confidently state that DollTubers are passionate, knowledgeable, and imaginative public playborers who thoughtfully curate the digital representations of their play to craft personal brands, several of which have become successful business enterprises.

### **Broadcasting Barbie: Analyzing DollTube**

The following analysis of DollTube is divided into three sections. The first examines content that emphasizes imaginativeness, criticism, education, or community building. The second examines content that either displays rampant consumerism or openly resists such behaviors. The third examines content that so thoroughly combines art, consumption, toy manipulation, commentary, and community building that these different elements of digital video play and its self-branding dissolve into one another.

### **We DollTubers Can Do Anything: Creativity, Critique, Education, and Community Building**

This section looks at two DollTube channels, namely Rodney Rainbow and Darling Dollz, to show how DollTubers’ digital video play doubles as the entrepreneurial labor of curatorial mediation. It examines how these DollTubers use their digital video play to augment the doll community’s expressiveness, connectivity, and conviviality, while also using curatorial mediation to promote their personal brands. It further shows how, within the context of DollTube, social media’s invitation to others to play and become active in the adult toy fan community (cf. Heljakka 2015a, p.106) is actually an invitation to playbor: the content creators and their fans all work together to keep the fan community and its consumable content going.

Rodney Rainbow, who has a large following (455,000 subscribers as of Oct. 9, 2024), primarily creates content about styling Rainbow High, Bratz, and Monster High dolls’ hair; transforming his hair play with his dolls into shareable and monetizable digital video play that inspires and aids his viewers in their own play. Rodney Rainbow provides his viewers with ideas for and sometimes with explicit tutorials about how to wash, curl, straighten, and arrange different dolls’ hair, thereby inspiring others to

attempt creative hairstyles with their own dolls. His videos typically start with the delivery of a new doll to his home, a shot of him carrying a new doll upstairs to his room, or shots of him shopping for a new doll and bringing her home. After obtaining a new doll, he begins the process of unboxing the doll and restyling her hair. He shoots his videos predominantly as close-ups of his hands and of the dolls, allowing the viewer to see the details of his hairstyling processes and of his handiwork, and he includes slow-motion shots that flaunt the beauty of doll hair and the fun of styling it. His voiceovers give explanations, and, when he is not speaking, music creates a relaxing mood. This consistency of format makes Rodney Rainbow's channel highly recognizable. What is more, he has turned this branding into an affiliation with Amazon. With the uploading of *The It Girl! Rainbow High Series 5 Olivia Woods Unboxing + Hair Wash + Restyle* (2023), Rodney Rainbow's video descriptions began linking his viewers to his Amazon storefront; prior to this video, the descriptions had contained a series of affiliate links. If a doll fan wants to learn about, get ideas for, and easily acquire products necessary to hair play, Rodney Rainbow's channel is a valuable resource, and it is likewise an excellent means for this content creator to enhance both his play and his income.

Rodney Rainbow creates a feeling of intimacy with his audience, references other DollTubers, and includes viewers in his creative process, situating his videos as moments of interactive play within a larger yet closely linked network of doll fans and other doll playborers. The consistent settings for his videos are his home's intimate spaces, especially the bedroom and bathroom, and videos often include shots of his television, showing the viewer what he watches as he goes through the (often long) process of giving a doll a new and complicated hairstyle. Sometimes the shots of his television reveal that he is watching other DollTubers; for example, in *SHE'S ELECTRIC! Fantastic Fashion Jade Hunter Unboxing + Review + Restyle* (2023), one can see a video by My World playing on the screen. Such moments give the viewer access to Rodney Rainbow's private world, suggest his passion for dolls and for DollTube content, promote other DollTubers, and create the sense of the doll community as interconnected and mutually supportive. More importantly, he consistently asks viewers for their input on what content they would like to see. At times, he simply requests that they leave their suggestions in the comments section, but at others he invites them to vote for which doll they would like him to restyle next, or for which restyle they would like to see on a given doll (e.g., Rodney Rainbow 2023a; 2024). Through these interactions with his fans, he allows the viewers to become active players (and perhaps playborers) in his world: they direct his playbor, telling him what they want to watch for inspiration, learning, and pleasure. Rodney Rainbow's digital video play is a collective production that enhances viewers' sense that they belong to a community of like-minded people who play and work together to keep that community going.

Darling Dollz's digital video play substantially differs from Rodney Rainbow's, largely taking the form of critiquing dolls, discussing doll history, and ranking dolls, but it similarly expresses the content creator's creativity and knowledge, invites the viewer into the doll community, and gives the channel a clear brand identity. Darling Dollz, whose following is much smaller than Rodney Rainbow's but still sizeable (73,400 subscribers as of Oct. 9, 2024), films their videos while sitting in their tall pink office chair in front of a camera in their doll room, their shelves of colorful dolls providing the backdrop for their commentary. One of the most notable aspects of Darling Dollz's channel is their "Yass or Pass?" videos, an ongoing series that has humorous, informative, celebratory, and critical dimensions (e.g., Darling Dollz 2024c). In this series, Darling Dollz lists upcoming doll releases, comments on the designs, and explains why they do or do not want to purchase each doll. The videos always end with an invitation to the



viewers to comment respectfully with their own opinions on the dolls and to note which dolls they do or do not want to buy and why. As with Rodney Rainbow, Darling Dollz's digital video play has repetitive, identifiable features that make it eminently recognizable, allowing it also to do the work of branding and accruing its own fans.

Sometimes Darling Dollz invites their viewers to participate in the making of the content and to playbor along with them. For example, to make their ranking videos for the best and worst Rainbow High dolls, Darling Dollz asked their viewers to submit a list of up to three dolls that they considered to be the brand's highest quality offerings and another list of up to three dolls that they considered to be its least desirable. They then counted down the fifteen best (cf. Darling Dollz 2024a) and the fifteen worst (cf. Darling Dollz 2024b) Rainbow High dolls, interjecting their own high praise, biting criticism, and confusion. All Darling Dollz's videos exhibit the creator's dry humor and sarcasm, but the joy they take in dolls is clear from their regard for some dolls, their commitment to producing high-quality content, and the overall blithe mood of their videos. Darling Dollz's videos not only allow the viewer to watch the content creator play and gain inspiration for their own play, but they also permit the viewer to take an active role in the digital video play, creating an interactive community of doll fans and playborers.

Through the analysis of Rodney Rainbow's and Darling Dollz's unique playbor styles and their careful curation of their digital video play, DollTube becomes visible as a nexus of leisure and labor comparable to modding and fashion blogging. The play world becomes more expansive through its conversion into digital video play, allowing it to be documented, shared, and communally enjoyed and to be an inspiration for other (potential) players. At the same time, it becomes a workplace where content creators perform labor for the purpose of branding the self, the channel, and their play to gain attention and amass followers.

### Will We Ever Have Enough Dolls? Playbor and (Over)Consumption

Despite its apparently affirmational nature, (over)consumption in the doll community supports the transformation of self, work, and play into unique brands. Collecting, of course, requires consumption, but when consumption becomes a major part of digital video play, that play can come to appear as a seemingly endless spectacularized cycle of shopping, purchasing, displaying, and promoting. Through examining two DollTube channels, namely, xCanadensis and The Doll Daddy, this section shows how DollTubers creatively respond to the pressure to consume, transforming the doll industry's commercial imperative into an opportunity to find new ways to playbor and thereby carve out more distinct niches and create stronger self-brands.

xCanadensis is a popular DollTuber (94,100 subscribers as of Oct. 9, 2024) whose playbor initially appears to affirm the doll and wider consumer industries' products and processes. A striking maximalist aesthetic and an emphasis on acquisition characterizes her living space and videos: when at home, she typically films in front of or among her many packed shelves of dolls and other toys; she often unboxes multiple dolls in one video and films large hauls; and much of her footage is of thrift stores, doll shows, and doll displays (e.g., xCanadensis 2024a; 2024b; 2024c). xCanadensis's effervescence and zeal are highly noteworthy. She displays a keen interest in a wide range of dolls, animatedly discussing and showing love for everything from popular lines like Barbie and Monster High, to lesser-known lines like Spinmaster's Liv and MGA's Lalaloopsy, to obscure doll lines (at least in North America) like Balala the Fairies and Teenieping. Moreover, despite the many dolls she already owns, she is consistently excited

to visit a thrift store, open a new item, attend a doll show, or put together a new display. At a glance, an unreserved love for all things doll typifies xCanadensis's channel, and it may be hard for a cynical or anti-consumerist viewer to see beyond her conspicuous and spectacularized consumption to find anything transformative in her content.

However, xCanadensis's apparent reverence is the result of the great deal of work that she puts into curating both her enormous collection and her social media content, and it allows her to fashion a strong and personally beneficial self-brand. xCanadensis's diverse purchases allow her to create unique content. Given the frequency with which she uploads—she typically uploads multiple full-length videos each week, as well as several short videos that she cross-posts to her Instagram and TikTok accounts—she must spend many hours traveling to thrift stores, shows, and events; shopping both in-person and online; and filming and editing content. Her efforts have led to affiliations with Entertainment Earth (an online retailer and wholesaler of toys and other collectibles) and with ZenMarket and Superbuy (a Japanese and a Chinese proxy shopping service, respectively); sponsorships from the latter two companies; and invitations to industry events such as the L.U.V. Doll launch party and Sweet Suite. Furthermore, in 2023, she founded Dollect, a volunteer-run, interactive database for doll fans (cf. xCanadensis 2023), and she recently posted about the first Dollect meet-up on her community tab. xCanadensis's discerning curatorial mediation has allowed her to amass her sizeable following, to gain industry support, and to become a major playborer in the doll community.

Whereas xCanadensis cleverly turns rabid consumption to her advantage, The Doll Daddy rebels against it, subverting and inventively playing with the consumer demands of collecting to craft his personal brand and to form connections with other content creators instead of large companies. The Doll Daddy has a much smaller following than the previously discussed DollTubers (9,220 subscribers as of Oct. 9, 2024), which liberates him from having to keep himself in the good graces of doll companies and other large businesses: unlike Rodney Rainbow and xCanadensis, he does not have to worry about pleasing affiliates and selling their products, or about staying on guest lists. The Doll Daddy does not have an Amazon storefront, does not list affiliate links in his video descriptions, and does not attend industry events. Indeed, The Doll Daddy has stated that he does not aim to forge such business relationships; rather, he wants to maintain his sense of integrity as a doll reviewer and commentator, continuing to state his opinions and connect with his audience through honesty and blunt, frequently adult, humor (cf. The Doll Daddy 2020d; 2021b). He has even (somewhat jokingly) declared that he would like to get on a company's public relations list just to make a biting critique that results in his removal from said list (cf. The Doll Daddy 2022). As such, his unboxings and reviews offer scathing critiques of the dolls and doll-related products: he makes candid statements about the quality (or lack thereof) of hair, clothing, facial screenings, articulation, and accessories and directly states whether he thinks products are worth their price tags.

The Doll Daddy goes so far as to produce the “anti-doll anti-haul” series, a rebellious form of digital video play in which he openly combats consumerism. In these videos, instead of showing off a series of already-made purchases, he critiques a series of dolls and talks himself (and perhaps his viewers) out of future purchases (e.g., The Doll Daddy 2020a; 2023). Such content distinguishes The Doll Daddy from other DollTube channels that produce unboxings, reviews, and hauls, and appeals to viewers looking for content creators who curate more openly critical or more obviously transformational content. Importantly, rather than networking with companies, The Doll Daddy networks with other content



creators, forming a productive and joyful DollTube community. He has collaborated with The Dollist multiple times (e.g., *The Doll Daddy* 2020b; 2020c), and he promotes other DollTube channels that he likes, including *MyFroggyStuff* and *My World* (e.g., *The Doll Daddy* 2020d; 2021a). The *Doll Daddy*'s digital video play defies the desires and aims of the doll industry, while constructing an interconnected and supportive fan community, and his playbor thus emerges as a subversive response to corporations, consumerism, and DollTube itself.

xCanadensis and *The Doll Daddy* represent two effective responses to (over)consumption, with the first using the guise of affirmation to transform herself, work, and play into a powerful brand, and the second subverting the commercial imperative, transforming it into fodder for rebellious playbor and networking with fans instead of with companies.

### Play Reborn as Work and Work Reborn as Play: The Playbor of *Tori's Reborn Babies*

Finally, this section is dedicated to *Tori's Reborn Babies* to show how playbor can smoothly combine art appreciation, consumption of mass-produced items, creativity, and simple pleasures into a unified product. Since neither play nor work dominates this channel's content, of the DollTube channels that this article discusses, *Tori's Reborn Babies* is the one that offers the most complete example of playbor.

*Tori's Reborn Babies* is a popular channel (127,000 subscribers as of Oct. 9, 2024) that openly discusses both work and play and transforms each term into the other. The channel primarily discusses reborn dolls, which are highly realistic baby dolls that individual artists sculpt and paint (although the same artist does not necessarily do both) and that sell for high prices. The channel's content includes role-playing, photographic reels, toy tourism (traveling with toys; also known as "toyism" [Heljakka 2018, p.252]), footage from doll shows, and doll room tours. However, one of the channel's most notable series is "Change and Chat," in which the DollTuber changes the outfit of one of her dolls while discussing a topic of interest to other reborn doll collectors. These videos have a set format: 1) the statement of the topic; 2) the introduction of the reborn doll, including the name that the DollTuber has chosen for it, how long she has had it, and the names of the artists who sculpted and painted it; 3) the presentation of the outfit that she will be putting on the doll, often stating the brands of the individual pieces, where she got them, and how much she spent; and 4) the change of outfit and the discussion of the chosen topic. The topics for "Change and Chat" range from baby brand Lou Lou and Company's use of a reborn doll in an advertisement (cf. *Tori's Reborn Babies* 2023c) to *Tori's Reborn Babies*' journey as a DollTuber and tips for other DollTubers who focus on reborn dolls (cf. *Tori's Reborn Babies* 2023b). However, all the videos visually focus on the DollTuber's tactile play—especially her fashion play—with the selected doll, while they aurally focus on anything from products for enriching play, to critique of issues in the reborn doll community, to the labor involved in being a DollTuber. *Tori's Reborn Babies*' work and play become indistinguishable in these videos, showing how digital video play and content curation can support one another to the point that they become one and the same.

Remarkably, even when *Tori's Reborn Babies*' "Change and Chat" videos deal with intensely serious topics or the topic is at odds with some aspect of their format, they follow the same pattern. Both her video that discusses what it is like to be a legally blind and completely colorblind reborn fan and content creator (cf. *Tori's Reborn Babies* 2019) and the one that expresses disgust at the use of reborn babies in social media content that sexualizes breastfeeding, has pedophilic overtones, and guides the viewer to pornographic content (cf. *Tori's Reborn Babies* 2024b) still have all the same parts. Similarly, in the

video in which she expresses jealousy of collectors who practice a minimalist collecting style, managing to enjoy their dolls without maintaining huge wardrobes and sets of accessories for them, she still highlights every individual item that she uses in the video to play with the doll (cf. Tori's Reborn Babies 2023a). In all these videos, she provides free advertising for doll artists, baby brands, and places where she shops. No matter what, "Change and Chat" videos demonstrate the tactile, aesthetic, and social pleasures of the doll play; the sharing (and advertising) of information about dolls, their clothing, and their accessories; and the work of branding a channel through consistent, recognizable formatting. In the "Change and Chat" series, play and work meld, producing a fascinating and effective combination of self-expression and self-branding.

### Conclusion: Branding and Broadcasting the Playboring Self

Through a close look at the five DollTubers' play and work on YouTube, this article has argued that DollTubers transform their play with their dolls into branded digital video play that they share with their own fans, use to gain popularity and notability in the doll community, and even monetize. Due to the demands of building a brand and of attracting and maintaining a YouTube fan base, they must thoughtfully curate their play, turning the play into work. As such, rather than performing either play or work at any given time, they engage in 'playbor' – a combined term that emphasizes the creator economy's merger of the two types of activity. On DollTube, work and play become inseparable: digital media provide new ways to play, but they also situate the play in the creator economy and thereby metamorphose leisure activities into labor. However, as the analysis shows, each DollTuber playbors in their own way, variously emphasizing or co-emphasizing imaginativeness, critique, education, consumption, personal aggrandizement, or community building. These unique playbor styles allow each to carve a creative and expressive niche in the doll community that allows doll fans to become inspired, join the play(bor), and connect with like-minded people.

DollTube is a rich site for fan studies that this article only begins to explore. The author's survey of the DollTube channels uncovered many potential topics for further research. Most notably, DollTubers are a strikingly diverse group: the sample includes content creators from six different countries (the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, and Switzerland), and of different races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, religions, ages, body sizes, and abilities. It would therefore be worth comparing DollTube with other YouTube fandoms to see if it is truly more diverse than other fandoms, and to interview DollTubers' about how their identities impact their interest in dolls and the content they create.

This article's sample purposefully includes channels about many kinds of dolls, but since doll fans often have highly specific interests (e.g., reborn dolls, BJDs), focusing on the content of a smaller subsection of DollTubers would provide insight into differences between the playbor of different types of doll fans and into how different types of doll fans diverge from one another in terms of diversity and their reasons for playboring with dolls.

Finally, although this article characterizes community building as a major aspect of DollTubers' playbor, doll fans exhibit many negative behaviors that work against community building. For example, in reading the comments on DollTube videos, the author has noticed both rude comments from viewers and aggressive and condescending replies to viewers from the DollTubers. Furthermore, on both Reddit



and YouTube, the author has read or heard many complaints about several popular DollTubers who exhibit rude, cliquish, and entitled behaviors. The doll-collecting community is not a utopia, and how such actions impact the doll fandom is an important line of inquiry.

To conclude, DollTube promotes the marriage of creative play and creative labor, and it allows doll fans to channel their interests into the creator economy and use their consumer behaviors to transform themselves into notable personalities within the fandom and to sell their carefully curated product to a fan base of their own. Looking at DollTube reveals how YouTube provides a playbor environment that changes the nature of both play and work and expands the number of fans who do playbor within and for the fandom.

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