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What Would Happen If Sex Robots Could Replace Human Partners?

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Abstract

This paper begins by presenting several key societal reasons for the rise of sex robots and defining them. By analyzing multiple themes in relevant academic books, articles, essays, and digital media discourses, this thesis explores the current debate about the possibilities and dangers of sex robots replacing human partners. In the context of the humanization of sex robots, the future of human relationships, and a media discourse that associates the use of sex robots with rape, paedophilia, and gender equality, we are seeing the artificial attributes of robots as a threat to a perceived gradual blurring of human subjectivity. However, there are positive aspects of human interaction with sex robots. For example, for the elderly or the socially challenged, sex robots can enable them to have a more satisfying sex life, even if they have difficulties in establishing relationships.

Keywords

Sex Robots, Digital Media, Discourse Analysis, Gender Equality, Social Morality

1. Introduction

Sex robots are now permeating our lives. A North American supplier of online sex dolls reported a 30 per cent increase in sales in 2020, with some European retailers reporting increases of over 100 per cent (Arafat & Kar, 2021). The prevalence of modern consumerism has led to a de-emphasis on complete love and the rise of sex robots. Levy (2009) mentions several reasons for the rapid growth of sex robots in his book Love and Sex for Robots: in modern consumer society, love has been alienated into a never-ending machine that creates pleasure. Modern humans have lost interest in a full-blown relationship; they only want a quickie, one-time encounter. Sex robots could be a delightful solution. This op-

tion puts an end to the morally disturbing human sex industry. Physical or emotional impairments in certain groups that make finding a human partner impossible may be alleviated by robot-assisted sex therapy. He predicts that by 2050, people will be willing to let sex robots be their romantic partners. However, behind the technological advances is the neglect of human emotional needs. Humans not only seek physical fulfilment, but also crave emotional response and connection. This complexity is far from being replaced by simple robotic interactions. In addition, the emergence of sex robots challenges our existing structure of social relationships. In traditional family and social relationships, sexual partners often play multiple roles, including emotional support, life partners, and part of a social identity. The prevalence of sex robots may weaken the emotional bonds in these relationships, which in turn affects the stability of social structures. Sex robots are primarily used by women and children, and this market trend is gradually placing them in an unfavorable social position. What's more, the moral and ethical issues of sex robots are widely debated. Should they be granted rights similar to those of humans? Should they be subject to moral and legal constraints? These questions are not only about the status of robots, but also about how we define human beings and how we understand the boundaries of morality and ethics. Before moving into a deeper exploration, it is important to clarify that the sex robots we are talking about in this paper are robots that are more human-like in appearance and in the way they interact with their human users, and that have a fairly sophisticated artificial intelligence that can perform a variety of different types of functions and agents, including, but not limited to, sexual behaviors (Danaher, 2014; Locatelli, 2022; Gersen, 2019).

2. Moral Implications

In life, the confirmation of a couple's relationship often involves questions and consent. In general, consent is often considered to be a 'morally transformative act' (Wertheimer, 1996). This means that if we consent to what someone else does to us, their behavior changes from morally impermissible to permissible. Consent not only distinguishes between criminal and non-criminal behavior, but it also has a 'legitimizing function' (Miller & Wertheimer, 2010). Giving consent requires consciousness, which the sex robot lacks, and its very setting is passive (Danaher & McArthur, 2017). Therefore, sex robots cannot be considered capable of consenting or not consenting to marriage and sexual behavior. Gutiu (2016) also discusses the issue of consent in humanoid sex robots, arguing that mutual companionship with a sex robot that is incapable of consenting would have an erosive effect on many people's attitudes towards consent in human-human sexual interactions. However, I argue that it would be equally unethical to design sex robots that are capable of explicitly refusing to consent to sex. This is because in this case, it would entice some users to attempt to rape them, as well as increase the incidence of actual rape (Sparrow, 2017). Robotics expert Bryson (2008) argues that the relationship between humans and robots is

like that of a master and a slave. As the right of refusal is taken away from sex robots, when people take sex robots as their life partners, then the legality of having sex with them will become a problem for the legal profession.

Horst (2022) argues that being partners with sex robots cannot be healthy or meaningful because sex robots cannot respond, whereas humans can do so. Therefore, sex with a robot cannot provide as satisfying a sexual experience as sex with another human being. In the sex robot debate, reciprocity is understood as the act of being perceived by another human being as a thinking, feeling, and intentional being, which is often seen as a central feature of binary interactions between humans (Leader & Judith, 2010). Sex robots are programmed to appear to have a mental state like humans and therefore offer users a fantasy of reciprocity. Humans may mistake interactions with sex robots for true reciprocity and become emotionally dependent on the robot rather than others (McGowan, 2016). Ruddick (1984) argues that in order to experience 'full sex', partners need to actively desire and respond positively to the desires of others, which Strikwerda (2017) suggests is the level at which partners achieve reciprocity. Conversely, incomplete sex is sex that lacks reciprocity because it is private, inherently auto-erotic, unresponsive, unmemorable, passive, or imposed. This means that becoming partners with a sex robot can make our sexual experience a self-projected fantasy. It is worth noting that Ruddick's argument does not imply that incomplete sex is morally wrong per se, as she argues that sex that provides pleasure is usually good. However, she claims that the more incomplete the sexual experience, the greater the risk of harm to one of the partners, which is morally wrong.

Furthermore, intimate relationships with robots will lead to greater isolation for humans. However, sex robots can provide emotional compensation and fulfillment for certain specific groups (Langcaster-James & Bentley, 2018). For those who do not have access to sexual experiences other than digitally, such as people with disabilities, the elderly, and people with mental illnesses, sex robots provide them with the opportunity to have romantic sexual relationships, thus overcoming loneliness and isolation (McArthur & Twist, 2017). However, as sex robots do not help their users to build strong friendships that are essential for a moral society (Sullins, 2012) and, as the human-robot relationship is ultimately an illusion, over-reliance on them can lead to us retreating socially and becoming increasingly lonely (Hernandez, 2018). Those who see sex robots as mates see their avoidance of the opposite sex intensified as a result, as they can rely on the robots to fulfill all of their sexual needs and thus avoid being hurt in real human relationships. But they also put themselves at risk of loneliness.

3. Family Implications

Sex robots blur the lines between people. Traditionally, couples are structured in families based on deep emotions, mutual commitment, and intimate physical contact. But when sex robots become partners, this intimacy can become less pure (Cheok et al., 2017). Sex robots are robots that mimic human sexual be-

havior and emotional responses, and they were originally designed to satisfy human sexual needs. Unlike traditional partnerships, sex robots do not develop emotions, nor do they develop a sense of responsibility or commitment to their partners. As a result, when people choose sex robots as partners, the relationship is often based on fleeting sexual gratification rather than a deep emotional connection (Kolivand et al., 2018). In addition, the emergence of sex robots has blurred the line between humans and machines. By simulating human bodies and behaviors, sex robots are able to provide sexual experiences similar to those of real humans. The level of realism of this simulation makes it easy to see sex robots as real partners, which can lead to neglect or alienation from real human relationships (Danaher & McArthur, 2017). In traditional family structures, intimacy between couples is an important means of maintaining relationships. The popularity of sex robots may have a negative impact on couples' relationships. When one or both members of a couple choose to use sex robots for sexual gratification, they may have less intimacy and genuine emotional connection with their partner. This behavior may lead to a less-than-wonderful relationship for couples and may even lead to emotional distancing and separation, as well as negatively affecting the mental health of children (Fan, 2021).

The popularity of sex robots may prompt family members to focus more on the realization of their self-worth and the satisfaction of their individual needs (Cherry, 2021). In traditional family structures, intimate relationships between couples are often based on mutual sacrifice and accommodation, where one partner may sacrifice his or her own wishes for the needs of the other, which largely limits individual freedom and self-realization. However, with the advent of sex robot partners, this paradigm may gradually change. Individuals may be able to better fulfill their needs with the help of sex robots and will no longer be completely dependent on their partners. This may prompt family members to focus more on the realization of their self-worth and the satisfaction of their personal needs (Kolivand et al., 2018). This shift in perception may have a positive impact on the relationships between family members. Family members may become more equally involved in family decision-making and no longer be limited by traditional gender roles and divisions of labor. Everyone would be able to express their views according to their own needs and wishes, rather than making compromises based on gender or family roles. Such an environment will help to increase the democratic and open nature of the family, allowing each member to freely express their needs and wants (Cheok et al., 2017). This change may also have a positive impact on family education. With a greater focus on the realization of self-worth and the fulfillment of individual needs amongst family members, children will grow up in a more open and egalitarian environment. They will learn to respect the rights and needs of others, and at the same time be able to bravely pursue their own dreams and goals. Such homeschooling will help foster independence and autonomy in children, making them responsible and empathetic citizens (Cherry, 2021). However, we must also be aware of the potential risks posed by sex robots. An over-reliance on this technology could lead

to emotional distancing and interpersonal alienation among family members. In addition, if an individual satisfies his or her needs solely through sex robots and neglects deeper communication and emotional connection with humans, it may lead to superficiality and alienation in relationships.

4. Social Implications

Currently, the majority of the sex robot market is female or children (Cox-George & Bewley, 2018). Becoming partners with sex robots will not only further sexually objectify women, but also children (Troiano et al., 2020). Levy argues that sex dolls will reduce the sexual objectification of women and that pedophiles would be better off using robots as their sexual outlet than using human children (Wiseman, 2015). The discussion around child sex robots produced in Asia and sold globally is highly controversial (Döring et al., 2020). Some ethicists and clinicians argue that people with pedophilic tendencies may use these dolls or robots as a substitute to avoid sexually abusing children in real life and that these devices may also have therapeutic potential (Behrendt, 2017). Conversely, many ethicists and therapists strongly disagree with this view, warning that child sex dolls or robots can be extremely harmful (Brown & Shelling, 2019). While it is true that individuals are better off venting their sexual desires on a robot than on a child or woman, this contributes to the normalization and habituation of sexual abuse or violence by male users when they engage in aggressive or non-consensual activities with female- or child-like sex robots (Sperber, 2023). According to Richardson (2015), founder of the Campaign Against Sex Robots, sex robot partners may harm society by further deepening and perpetuating issues such as gender-based power dynamics. However, at the same time, becoming partners with sex robots may change people's perceptions and attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and partnership, triggering a rethinking and re-examination of traditional gender roles and gender relations (Headleand et al., 2020), thus contributing to gender harmony in society. Richardson (2015) argues that for those who suffer from fetishism, pedophilia, or sexual predators, sex robots may not be the best way to solve the problem, but rather therapy and counseling should be used to help them overcome their problems. Richardson's view reflects concerns about the potential misuse of sex robots. Society is finding more and more ways to forgive men for their wild sexual desires, which could lead to more people choosing sex robots as a substitute for meeting their sexual needs rather than seeking true intimacy and emotional connection. Richardson (2015) also argues that human-robot sex may undermine human attitudes toward human sexual partners. Referring to the available evidence on whether violent video games and pornography lead to violence and rape, Danaher & McArthur (2017) argues that there is no clear empirical evidence to support this conclusion. Therefore, he argues that we should be cautious in concluding that interactions with sex robots are likely to lead to undesirable behaviors against humans.

The effects of becoming mates with sex robots are not always negative. Robot-

ic companions can help solve many practical problems related to sexuality, and once they become commonplace, they will reduce the probability and risk of teenage abortions, sexually transmitted infections, pedophile crimes, human trafficking, etc. (Sperber, 2023). Futurist Yeoman and sexologist Mars made predictions about Amsterdam's 'red light district' in 2012 (Yeoman & Mars, 2012). According to them, by 2050, sex robots will completely disrupt the "red light district". There is a market of hundreds of millions of dollars in the sale of young women every year, and the presence of sex robots in the sex industry will make human trafficking in the sex industry disappear by the 1940s. At that point, pornography, which breeds disease and crime, will be transformed into a profession that is not associated with crime and is even respected. However, there is currently no data to prove that the replacement of sex robots will reduce human trafficking or the sex trade, and there is no evidence to support that the use of sex robots will reduce sexually transmitted infections (Cox-George & Bewley, 2018). In fact, if a sex robot suffers a technical malfunction, then it is likely to increase the risk of users contracting STIs and also disable human reproductive function. Its dysfunction can lead to damage to the user's sexual organs and may also reduce human intimacy, emotion, and libido, which can lead to impotence and result in infertility (Onwuka, 2023). A study by Eichenberg et al. (2019) surveyed sex therapists and doctors about the therapeutic benefits of sex robots and found that these professionals believe that sex robots can help with social anxiety, lack of sexual partners, and premature ejaculation in sex therapy. Some therapists have suggested through preliminary case studies that sex robots can be used as a beneficial healing transition experience, especially in conjunction with professional therapy after traumatic events (Knafo, 2015). In contrast, other clinicians caution their colleagues that the health-related claims trumpeted by the sex robot industry are dubious at best (Cox-George & Bewley, 2018). Furthermore, sex robot partners contribute to sexual redistribution. Many incidents of terrorist violence have been attributed to individuals who are "involuntarily celibate," meaning that some men blame women for their celibacy (Donnelly et al., 2001). The abuser feels that he has been denied his rightful opportunity for premarital sex by women and society and decides to retaliate (Ciocca et al., 2022). One could argue that women are the first victims of groups like "involuntary celibacy". However, sex robots contribute to the redistribution of sexual volition and can appropriately regulate or downplay the gender imbalance, both for the protection of women and for the stability of society (Migotti & Wyatt, 2017).

5. Conclusion

In the face of sex robots, a technological product of the new era, we should not only see the convenience and satisfaction it brings but also think deeply about the moral and ethical, family, and social implications behind it. When we enjoy the pleasure brought by technology, we should not ignore its impact on traditional values and challenges to family and social structure. Sex robots may be

able to satisfy the physiological and psychological needs of individuals, and may play a role in sex therapy, but they cannot replace real interpersonal emotional communication and responsibility. In a future where sex robots become human companions, we need to strengthen the regulation of sex robots and the norms governing their use to ensure that their design and use do not violate ethics and the law. At the same time, we also need to find a balance between technology and morality and ethics to ensure the healthy development of the family and society, so that the development of science and technology can truly serve the well-being of human beings, rather than becoming a tool to dismantle traditional values.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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