

# The Harmful Effects of Sex Robots on Women and Society

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Human fascination in creating the ideal lover is long-standing and has manifested itself today in the development of sex robots. The use and advancement of this technology is both anti-women, in its portrayal of the female body, and anti-human, in its fostering of anti-social behaviour. This article will examine the potential negative consequences of such machines and attempt to refute arguments supporting the integration of sex robotics into our everyday life. It ultimately concludes that sex robots are damaging to women and society by allowing the user to engage in consent-less sex with an over-sexualised representation of the female body.

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*“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;  
If snow be white why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head  
.....And yet, by heaven I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.”<sup>1</sup>*

Shakespeare satirizes a societal tendency to unrealistically depict and fantasise about women. This propensity continues today and has manifested itself most recently in the development of sex robots. Although sexual interest can exist in a variety of forms, this article argues that sex robotics are harmful to both women and society. It will examine the current reality of sex robots, their portrayal of women and the effects of the potential uses of these devices.

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1 Sonnet 130.

## Defining Sex Robots

Human fascination in creating the perfect and ideal lover has been persistent throughout history. In the great myth of Pygmalion and Galatea<sup>2</sup>, the protagonist sculptor, becomes disinterested in women, viewing them as flawed creatures. Devoting all his time to his sculptures, he eventually creates Galatea, a statue of a beautiful woman. When Pygmalion falls deeply and passionately in love with his creation, Aphrodite, goddess of love sees this and gives life to the statute. Pygmalion and Galatea wed and live out their lives together, continuing to thank Aphrodite for the great blessing she has given them.

Today, several companies are working to make the fictitious relationship of Pygmalion and Galatea, a reality. This began with lifelike sex dolls and has now progressed to the development of sex robots. David Levy, a London-based artificial intelligence researcher, defined sex robots as the use of artificial intelligence, sensory perception and affective computing to facilitate sexual interaction and provide companionship.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the defining difference between sex dolls and sex robots is the use of artificial intelligence to give the robots a personality which allows the robot to provide both sexual and social gratification.

Physically, sex robots consist of life-sized, pornographic representations of the human body (usually female), with silicon skin to simulate human touch.<sup>4</sup> True Companion boasts itself as having created Roxxxy Gold, the “*world’s first sex robot*”.<sup>5</sup> Her abilities include the faculty to have an orgasm, “*carry on a conversation*” and “*interact just like a human*”.<sup>6</sup> Roxxxy comes with pre-programmed personalities including “*Frigid Farrah*” and “*Wild Wendy*”.<sup>7</sup> RealBotix also focus on their robot’s personality allowing you to choose traits and emotions you find appealing.<sup>8</sup> They aim to provide a robot which can act as a full companion with conversational abilities. The company has released a programmable app which connects to their

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2 Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

3 David Levy, “*Love and Sex with Robots*” 2008 New York: HarperCollins p.68

4 Our Sexual Future with Robots, a Foundation for Responsible Robotics Consultation Report, Noel Sharkey, Aimee Van Wynsberhe, Scott Robbins, Eleanor Hancock, pg 4

5 <http://www.truecompanion.com/shop/roxxxy-truecompanion-sex-robot/roxxxy/>

6 <http://www.truecompanion.com/shop/faq>

7 <http://www.truecompanion.com/shop/faq>

8 <https://realbotix.com/Harmony>

sex robot, producing an avatar for virtual interactions.<sup>9</sup> Manufacturers of sex robots strive to produce robots that their customers can form genuine intimate relationships with, seeing emotion and conversation as absolutely necessary for authentic intimacy.<sup>10</sup>

The innovation of sex robots lies in their artificial intelligence. Defining and understanding artificial intelligence is not an easy feat, given that there is no conclusive definition of human intelligence.<sup>11</sup> It has been argued that artificial intelligence could be defined as the robot's ability to draw conclusions and make decisions based on the information at the machine's disposal.<sup>12</sup> In the case of sex robots, this would consist of the machine's capacity to respond and converse with the purchaser. While the artificial intelligence of sex robots is far from that portrayed in science fiction novels, it is becoming more complex and advanced.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, while it is easy to simply view sex robots as mechanical tools or devices, it is submitted that they are actually much more than this. Their ability to engage in emotional and sexual intimacy and potential sentient capacity means that they have significant social implications.

### **Portrayal of Women**

Sex robots are a manifestation of society's persistent portrayal of women in an unrealistic and unattainable fashion. From these robot's exaggerated breasts to their flawless skin and made-up faces, sex robots are a personification of the extensive beauty standards that women are expected to achieve. Furthermore, the race and body types of these robots lack diversity. Kathleen Richardson has campaigned extensively against the use of sex robots. She argues that this pornographic representation of women constitutes a coercive attitude towards their bodies. Sex robots reinforce a view that the female body is a sexual commodity and reiterate what this body should look like.<sup>14</sup>

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9 <https://realbotix.com/Harmony>

10 Our Sexual Future with Robots, a Foundation for Responsible Robotics Consultation Report, Noel Sharkey, Aimee Van Wynsberhe, Scott Robbins, Eleanor Hancock, pg 3.

11 Tobias Rothkegel Mark Taylor "What characterises artificial intelligence and how does it work?" C.T.L.R. 2016, 22(4), 98-99.

12 Tobias Rothkegel Mark Taylor "What characterises artificial intelligence and how does it work?" C.T.L.R. 2016, 22(4), 98-99.

13 Our Sexual Future with Robots, a Foundation for Responsible Robotics Consultation Report, Noel Sharkey, Aimee Van Wynsberhe, Scott Robbins, Eleanor Hancock.

14 Published on the ACM Digital Library as a special issue of the ACM SIGCAS news

The fact that sex robots are designed to serve and satisfy the needs of the user, re-enforces male entitlement and power over women's bodies. Even the concept of "owning" an object designed to represent a woman's body sends the message that a woman's body is something that can be bought, owned and controlled.<sup>15</sup> However, sex robots go even further than this, in that you can not only control their body, but also their personality. The added use of artificial intelligence means that we are now simulating control over every aspect of women. This need to control is not about desire or attraction, but is an issue of power, and a lust to dominate and control. Sex robots send out the message that the ideal lover is one that exists to serve their partner, lacking any personal sexual preference or desires. Therefore, it is submitted that sex robots are fundamentally anti-human, in that they idealise a woman who never says no. Gutiu has accurately summarised this idea:

*"sex robots, by their very design, encourage the idea that women are subordinate to men and mere instruments for the fulfilment of male fantasies. This type of harm has been explored in the context of pornography and is reproduced in the harm caused by sex robots. Like pornography, use of sex robots, sexualises rape, violence, sexual harassment and prostitution and eroticizes dominance and submission."*<sup>16</sup>

### **An Absence of Consent**

Consent has been cited as fundamental to the fostering of healthy and safe sexual relationships.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the inability of sex robots to provide consent is alarming. While you cannot rape a robot, sexual intercourse with a life-like robot can accurately simulate rape and allow users to act out rape fantasies.<sup>18</sup>

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letter. SIGCAS Computers & Society | Sept 2015 | Vol. 45 | No. 3 290-293 The Asymmetrical 'Relationship': Parallels Between Prostitution and the Development of Sex Robots Kathleen Richardson CCSR

15     ibid

16     Robot Law, Sinziana Gutiu "the roboticization of consent" in Michael Fromkin, M. Ryan Calo, Ian Kerr (ed) Robot Law (2016).

17     Thomas O'Malley "The New Law on Sexual Offences" 2017 Criminal Law journal 27(3), 78-89.

18     Kelly Cue Davis, Jeanette Norris et al., "Men's Likelihood of Sexual Aggression: The Influence of Alcohol, Sexual Arousal, and Violent Pornography", 2006, Aggressive Behaviour, Volume 32, pages 581-589 (2006). Rape myths refer to the idea that rape is enjoyable for the victim.

As robots are not people, the concern is not for the robots but for the wider impact of the use of these robots on human behaviour.

Engaging in sexual relations with a robot, thusly disregarding the need for consent, will have the natural consequence of the user beginning to disregard consent when initiating sexual relations with other human persons. Harm is caused to the individual user through this repeated exposure to a dehumanized form of sex.<sup>19</sup> This harm can be further extended to the risks it exposes women to, this being a society that no longer values consent. Sex robots allow the user to circumnavigate consent and alleviates any necessity for meaningful communication or mutual respect. This is concerning when considering how this will affect our ability to identify and understand actual consent. Technology can have a huge effect on the way in which we, as human beings, interact with each other.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it is not difficult to observe how sex robots foster antisocial behaviour and diminish consent in male-female sexual interactions.

The nature of sexual relations is a dynamic which requires balance between the parties involved. An absence of consent represents a fundamental imbalance within this dynamic, and the ability of sex robots to simulate this imbalance is worrying. This is furthered when we consider that robots may be programmed specifically to fulfill a rape fantasy. Consider for example True Companion's sex robot which has the preprogrammed personality "*Frigid Farrah*".<sup>21</sup> The idea behind this personality appears to be that the robots would display signs of non-consent while the user fulfils their sexual desires. This allows the user to act out and experience their rape fantasies.

How then, should we deal with a robot's inability to provide consent? If we consider consent to be an important value of our society, engaging in sexual activities with robots void of consent should be repressed. Therefore, within the context of sex robots, the law should have a part to play in socially conditioning people to act in a way deemed acceptable by our society. Danaher has suggested that we should criminalise what has been described as "*robotic rape*". Danaher justifies this idea believing firstly that robotic rape

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19 Sinziana Gutiu "the roboticization of consent" in Michael Froomkin, M. Ryan Calo, Ian Kerr (ed) *Robot Law* (2016).

20 *Our Sexual Future with Robots*, a Foundation for Responsible Robotics Consultation Report, Noel Sharkey, Aimee Van Wynsberhe, Scott Robbins, Eleanor Hancock, pg 22.

21 <http://www.truecompanion.com/shop/faq>

is an inherent public wrong and secondly, that such acts are harmful to the perpetrator's moral character.<sup>22</sup>

It has also been argued that robots should be programmed to only engage in sexual activities once the user has sought and obtained consent.<sup>23</sup> However, the technical requirements of this are complicated. It furthermore fails to encompass the complexity and nuanced nature of obtaining consent. However, allowing men to engage in sex with what is essentially a submissive and unrealistic female sex slave is harmful to not only the user, but also to women and society.

### **An Outlet for Aggression**

Among the most controversial of suggestions regarding the application of sex robots, is the idea that sex robots could be used in sex therapy for the prevention of crimes such as violent assault, rape and paedophilia.<sup>24</sup> There are those who believe that sex robots could prevent offences and reoffences of such crimes. The idea is that the opportunity to express and act out such desires with sex robots would alleviate the desire to harm actual human beings in this way. Sex robots could be medically prescribed to redirect these perverse tendencies towards machines rather than real people. This proposal accepts that human beings have such prepropensities and attempts to allow them to express these desires in a safe way rather than repressing them.

However, the idea that sex robots could act as an outlet for male aggression is deeply worrying and represents an acceptance that male sexual violence is an inevitable fact. This approach fails to challenge this anti-social behaviour but instead passively accepts it as an inevitable norm. It is submitted that sex robots serve to normalise male sexual aggression. Consider how ludicrous it would be to suggest that a racist should be allowed to shout racial abuse at a dark-skinned robot. How then can we propose that allowing men to attack and molest objects designed to look like women would prevent such actions? It would simply allow the user to live out and experience their dark and violent fantasies despite how offensive they are to women's rights.

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22 Danaher, J. *Criminal Law, Philosophy* (2017) 11: 71.

23 Sinziana Gutiu "the roboticization of consent" in Michael Froomkin, M. Ryan Calo, Ian Kerr (ed) *Robot Law* (2016).

24 *Our Sexual Future with Robots*, a Foundation for Responsible Robotics Consultation Report, Noel Sharkey, Aimee Van Wynsberhe, Scott Robbins, Eleanor Hancock pg 22.

## Dehumanising Love and Interactions

The objective of sex robot companies to create a product which allows for a meaningful relationship and companionship, calls into question whether love and intimate relationships can be accurately replicated. Levy has argued that there is nothing about human love and sex that could not be replicated by a robot.<sup>25</sup> He believes that we even may begin to find these robots preferable to human suitors. He further predicted that by 2050 humans would have sex, fall in love and even marry robots.<sup>26</sup> Supporters of sex robots believe that they will result in social misfits and outcasts becoming better balanced human beings.<sup>27</sup> They believe that the aim of the sex robot is to provide intimate relationships to people who are unable to form these relationships with other humans, thereby decreasing loneliness and increasing happiness.

Love and intimate relationships are an innate part of human existence. Plato argued that love is the best way to expand our moral horizons, meaning that falling in love can make us morally better. Irving Singer states that "*Love, like the creation of meaningfulness in general, reveals the ability of life in general- above all, as it appears in human beings- to bestow value on upon almost anything that catches our attention and makes itself available for this unique mode of self-realisation*".<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the pursuit of love has essential benefits for self-improvement and development. While programmers may be able to create machines, which cause illusions of love, passion and intimacy, it is difficult to see how these robots will make us better at being with one another. These machines only serve to distract us from pursuing authentic love that could have the capacity of improving us as people.

Furthermore, the argument that sex robots would improve the ability of the socially-inept to interact with other people is flawed. The use of sex robots could have the effect of stunting emotional development in creating an inability to compromise or handle rejection.<sup>29</sup> Thus, sex robots would

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25 Levy, D. (2007). Falling in Love with a Companion. *Artificial Companions in Society: Perspectives on the Present and Future*.

26 Levy, D. (2008). *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*. New York: Harper Perennial.

27 Levy, D. (2008). *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*. New York: Harper Perennial. Retrieved from

28 Singer Explorations in Love and Sex [33, p. 114].

29 Robins , B , Dautenhahn , K & Dubowski , J 2005 , Robots as Isolators or Mediators for Children with Autism A Cautionary Tale . in Procs of the AISB 05 Symposium on Robot Companions : Hard Problems and Open Challenges in Robot-Human

solidify a person's antisocial habits, confirming their fragility and social failings.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, sex robots would serve to increase social isolation and dehumanise human-relationships.

### Sex Trafficking

Proponents of sex robots have also argued that sex robots could have a role in disrupting the sex trafficking industry. Levy has submitted that in the future brothels will be staffed by sex robots.<sup>31</sup> Yeoman and Mars have also predicted that the red-light district in Amsterdam will have robot sex workers by 2050.<sup>32</sup> While this only amounts to mere speculation, Doll No Mori is a sex doll escort service in Tokyo that has been running successfully since 2004.<sup>33</sup> Lumidolls is a sex doll brothel in Barcelona that claims to provide “*totally realistic dolls, both in the movement of their joints and in the touch, which will allow you to fulfil your fantasies without any limit.*”<sup>34</sup> These businesses show the growing social acceptance of sex dolls. Furthermore, surveys have shown a growing public conception that the notion of robot prostitutes is acceptable.<sup>35</sup>

However, there has been no actual indication that sex robot prostitutes will end prostitution or sex trafficking.<sup>36</sup> Sex robots cannot currently replicate the genuine feeling of a relationship that some frequenters of brothels wish to experience.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, sex robots fail to address the need for domination which can be characteristic of the use of human trafficking victims. Further-

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Interaction. . AISB , pp. 82-88 .

- 30 Matthias Scheutz “The Inherent Dangers of Unidirectional Emotional Bonds between Humans and Social Robots” p216 in *Robot Ethics* by Patrick Lin, Keith Abney and George Berkey 2011 eds.
- 31 Levy, D. (2007). *Robot Prostitutes as Alternatives to Human Sex Workers*.
- 32 Ian Yeoman, Michelle Mars, Volume 44, Issue 4, May 2012, Pages 365-371 *Robots, men and sex tourism*.
- 33 *Robot Prostitutes as Alternatives to Human Sex Workers* David Levy ICRA '07 Rome, April 14th 2007.
- 34 <https://lumidolls.com/collections/rent-sex-doll>
- 35 Scheutz M, Arnold T, & 11th Annual ACM/IEEE International Conference on HumanRobot Interaction, H. 2016. (2016). Are we ready for sex robots? ACM/IEEE Int. Conf. Hum.-Rob. Interact. ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction, 2016–April, 351–358.
- 36 Our sexual future with robots, a foundation for responsible robotics consultation report, preparation noel sharkey, aimee van wynsberhe, scott robbins, Eleanor hancock
- 37 Our sexual future with robots, a foundation for responsible robotics consultation report, preparation noel sharkey, aimee van wynsberhe, scott robbins, Eleanor hancock



more, the mere assertion that sex workers could be replaced by sex robots is degrading to these women and shows a clear disregard for them as people.<sup>38</sup> Prostitution is “immutably dangerous”<sup>39</sup> to women and arguably the mere assertion that it should be continued through the use of sex robots instead is deeply questionable.

## Conclusion

The use of sex robots epitomises the male fantasy that women exist to be controlled and to serve. Yet while these robots represent a blatant sexual objectification of women, it is difficult to advocate an absolute ban of sex robots. The sex industry is thriving and bases itself on both the objectification and commodification of women. Banning sex robots would not provide a quick fix to this commodification. In fact, it has been argued that banning sex robots could create an uncontrollable black market for these products and would merely serve to block any research and understanding of the effects of this new interaction.<sup>40</sup> Consider the vast and infinite amount of pornography that exists on the internet depicting women in the same degrading way. While the use of sex robots is far more alarming than pornography, in that it allows the user to physically experience sex with an ever-consenting sex slave, it is not the sole cause of the commodification of female bodies. Sex robots are the symptom of a deeper and more sinister social problem.

Firstly, the need and market for sex robots could represent a sign of both physical and emotional withdrawal of interested customers from society and an inability to connect with other humans on an intimate level.<sup>41</sup> More importantly however, is the fact that sex robots are an exemplar of society's obsession with the over sexualisation of women. The consistent portrayal of women as passive and submissive does nothing other than encourage fantasies about controlling and dominating women. We should not allow ourselves to be objectified in this way, nor should we encourage a product which injures the absolute importance of consent. Technology

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38 Baron-Cohen, *Zero degrees of empathy: A new theory of human cruelty* (S. 2011 Penguin UK).

39 David JJ Ryan, The Proposed Reform of Prostitution Law in Ireland—Moral Discourse and the Perpetual Exclusion of Sex Workers, 2017, 27(1), 12-23.

40 Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge, The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (1998, Hurley, R., trans., UK: Penguin Books).

41 Matthias Scheutz “The Inherent Dangers of Unidirectional Emotional Bonds between Humans and Social Robots” p216 in *Robot Ethics* by Patrick Lin, Keith Abney and George Berkey 2011 eds

has an incredible capacity to influence our interactions with each other. We should therefore strive to develop technology that enhances who we are and the society we live in, rather than dehumanizing women and sexual interactions.