

Feminism meets Artificial Intelligence: On Technological Progress and its Impact on Women, Girls and Trans* People

Stefan Lacina

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1 Preface

The song "**Love Robot**" and the cross-media campaign "**#LetRobotsBeRobots**" deal with sexual relationships between humanoid sex robots (non-human/non-sentient, NHNS) and humans and the problems these cause for feminism. The goal of the project is to raise awareness of the negative impact of female-looking sex robots on women, girls and trans* people in order to definitively dehumanize sex robots. The project will be implemented through the existent song "**Love Robot**" and the cross-media campaign "**#LetRobotsBeRobots**". In addition, it will support/promote a feminist organisation/initiative. The song enables a critical discussion about this technological progress for the general public freely on sharing platforms like Youtube and TikTok. This problem needs to be addressed *now* so as to be able to influence the pernicious development of this kind of artificial intelligence (AI).

In 2016, a survey by Scheutz and Arnold showed that more than two-thirds of the male participants in the survey could imagine using a sex robot, [1] while, in their 2017 study, Szczuka and Kraemer noted that 40.3 per cent of their male participants could imagine buying a sex robot at the time or within the next five years. [2]

2 Scientific basis for the project

According to John Danaher, a lecturer at the National University of Ireland Galway School of Law, the term “sex robot” is defined as any artefact that is used for sexual stimulation and/or release and that has the following three properties: (1) a humanoid form; (2) the ability to move; and (3) some degree of artificial intelligence.

Female-looking sex-robots that are designed to resemble women are treated like objects. This objectification of the feminine ultimately leads to increased objectification of women, girls and trans* people themselves in that it fosters the idea that women equal objects. Recent positive developments in women’s rights issues and modern feminism are thus confronted with the negative reinforcement of gender stereotypes depicting women as submissive, compliant and indecisive objects that are there to be handled by men. Because the treatment of robots that resemble women as objects is legitimate while real women need to be treated differently, this causes cognitive dissonance in the human brain. Since sex robots are built to look as human as possible in order to create a perfect illusion of a person who can then be treated as an object, this ultimately leads to the connection between feminine appearance and objectification.

Kathleen Richardson, Professor of Ethics and Culture of Robots and Artificial Intelligence at De Montfort University, United Kingdom, warns that owning a sex robot is comparable to owning a slave and that “human empathy will be eroded, and we will treat other people as we treat robots: as things over which we are entitled to govern”. In a position statement published in 2015, Richardson advocates her Campaign Against Sex Robots (CASR) and underlines that:

“Using a sex robot appearing female, one solely designed to give pleasure and thus based mainly on a pornographic model, will exacerbate a sexist, degrading and objectifying image of women. Existing gender stereotypes and hierarchies will be furthered.” [3]

For Richardson it is certain that:

“The development of sex robots will further reinforce relations of power that do not recognize both parties as human subjects. Only the buyer of sex is recognized as a subject, the seller of sex (and by virtue the sex robot) is merely a thing to have sex with.” [4]

Sophie Wennerscheid, a well-respected cultural studies scholar at the University of Ghent, Belgium, supports Richardson’s theses. She sees Richardson’s arguments as solid from a feminist point of view. She is of the opinion that:

“The marketing of dolls and robots that are equipped with oversized breasts and whose 'genitalia' are advertised as 'masturbation-holes' is revolting, since it operates on paradigms

of mere usability, while simultaneously triggering the feeling of dealing with a real woman.”
[5]

The information technology scholar Kate Devlin, whose specific area of research is AI and human-computer-interaction (HCI), classifies the resemblances between sex robots and women as problematic for women, girls and trans* people. She agrees with the CASR that contemporary sex robots negatively impact perceptions of the female body and that these prototypes of robots are (in more than one sense of the word) over-sexualized embodiments. [6] Devlin notes further that almost all available sex dolls (including sex-robots) are portrayed as women and that, while there are a few male versions, they make up only a very small portion of the market. [7] Hence objectification is aimed directly at women, girls and trans* people.

In addition, there have been numerous debates in recent years about the appropriate norms of consent, mainly regarding sexual assault against women, girls and trans* people. Concerning human to NHNS relationships especially, the symbolic-consequences argument has been on everyone's lips. Danaher states:

“It is true that if robots are not moral persons, then they cannot be victims of unwanted sexual contact. But the robots themselves will presumably engage in objective performances in response to their users. Thus, they might respond approvingly, or disapprovingly, to their users’ sexual advances. These objective performances will either symbolically mimic or differ from the normatively accepted consent standards in society at large. This mean that both the robot itself (in its appearance and behaviour) and the act of having sex with the robot will have important symbolic properties when it comes to norms of sexual consent and interpersonal sexual ethics. The presence of these symbolic properties is what opens up the door to the symbolic-consequences argument.” [8]

He continues:

“The common argumentative structure is as follows:

- 1) Sex robots do/will symbolically represent ethically problematic sexual norms. (Symbolic Claim.)
- 2) If sex robots do/will symbolically represent ethically problematic sexual norms, then their development and/or use will have negative consequences. (Consequential Claim.)
- 3) Therefore, the development and/or use of sex robots will have negative consequences and we should probably do something about this. (Warning Call Conclusion).” [9]

Firstly, as described above, ethically problematic symbolism, in the consent case, is linked to socially accepted norms of consent being ignored by the user of a sex robot, leading to the brutalisation of individuals and certain sections of society. Another symbolic representation of

ethically problematic sexual norms is their gendered stereotypes of human-like appearance, body shape, voice and behaviour (e.g. a thin, porn-star-like body shape, high-pitched voice and coquettish and overly deferential manners). Secondly, the development and use of sex robots is strengthening a culture of sexism, patriarchal social order, misogyny and sexual objectification. Thirdly, the dehumanisation of sex robots would minimise potential negative consequences for women, girls and trans* people.

Danaher concludes:

“The mere presence and cultural acceptance of symbolically problematic sex robots might have negative consequences for the experience of women living in the societies that accept their existence. The women might feel less welcome and less respected. They might acquire a ‘false consciousness’ about their position and place in society.” [10]

The ones who suffer are girls, women and trans* people, who are negatively affected by hypersexualisation through the media and feel objectified and replaceable. The availability of humanoid sex robots on the global market is adding pressure on women to be sexually available and willing at all times. They now have to compete not only with each other, but also with robots that are designed to satisfy every wish and need.

2.1 Philosophical basis for the project

Sophie Wenerscheid supports the thesis of Mark Coeckelbergh, Professor of Philosophy of Media and Technology at the University of Vienna, Austria, as follows:

“With regard to an intimate connection between human and robot, [Coeckelbergh] notes that the question as to whether there can be real love between humans and robots might be asking the wrong thing, since one cannot assume an objective perception of this love, but it is dependent on experience and practice of the interactions between robots and humans. But if it is this concrete interaction between human and robot that causes affective tension, it is important to reflect on how these robots and the interfaces of desire are designed. My thesis is that only if robots and other post-human beings are designed as something different rather than an anthropomorphic alter ego can we achieve a sexually appealing, emotionally interesting and mind-expanding interaction. In concrete terms this means not developing robots as humanoid, maybe not even giving them human-like social behaviours, but acknowledging and respecting their existence as machines, that look like machines and do as they please.” [11]

3 Concept “#Let robots be robots”

Under the motto “Show - don’t tell” the song “**Love Robot**” acts as a bridge between message and target group. The **message** “#LetRobotsBeRobots“ of the song is to promote the idea that humanoid sex robots should be designed to be less realistically human so as to prevent a negative impact on gender roles in today’s society. Their function as robots should prevail over their human appearance. That human-like appearance is the crucial problem for feminism. The differentiation between AI and humans should remain clear without dismissing the value and role of AI, as Sophie Wennerscheid points out:

“I would thus like to submit that technology will be better capable of enhancing humans’ interaction with robots if it does not build its hopes around the human-likeness of robots, but on their otherness. Only by virtue of their otherness will robots be capable of helping us to create new networks of desire.” [12]

Julie Carpenter, PhD, a consultant, researcher and educator on human interaction with emerging technologies, with a focus on human-robot interaction research, concludes as follows:

“While robots remain largely mechanical, and not biological or biologically integrated, their collective subjective experiences will be demarcated from humans in very purely physical ways. Even a highly human-like robot that is a mechanical system may have senses, capabilities, and functionality a human does not have without machine augmentation. Therefore, an RSW (robot sex worker, synonymous with sex robot) will always have a different subjectivity from any human, although possibly some commonalities with other RSW experiences.” [13]

The **goal** of the project is opening the eyes of society to the negative impact of humanoid sex robots for women, girls and trans* people. The ultimate goal is the dehumanisation (and/or neutralisation of gender) of sex robots, which will eliminate the association between female-looking sex robots and women, girls and trans* people, in order to solve the problems mentioned above. **Implementation** would be carried out through society and the media (**target group**), since the project would encourage people to influence politicians to take legal action towards the dehumanisation of sex robots.

3.1 Implementation alternatives

The extensive cross-media campaign “#LetRobotsBeRobots” will have as its purpose to focus further on the goal of the project. Through the gender-neutral motto of the cross-media campaign “**Let’s join forces, all-together**”, men and those who are identified-as-male in particular should feel addressed and encouraged to engage with recent feminist thought and ideas.

In addition, the song and music video could supply the musical motto for a supporting feminist organisation/initiative. The range of influence of this feminist organisation/initiative would consequently be enhanced through the song and video.

In contrast to so many recent initiatives and campaigns, this artistic portrayal of the theme will address various groups throughout society. The created contents are going to be inclusive and freely accessible for the general public on sharing platforms like Youtube and TikTok.

4 Conclusion

As a consequence of the development of female-looking sex robots, women are degraded to objects, which leads in turn to further gender inequality in society. This technological progress is developing very rapidly. The coming five years will be crucial as regards laying down ethical, moral and legal principles relating to the use of humanoid sex robots. Urgent action therefore needs to be taken to raise the awareness of society and political circles to the fundamental significance of the problem. These issues should be addressed *now* in order to counteract proactively the possible effects of this potentially high-impact technology. Preventive methods are key to achieving the dehumanization of sex robots. As soon as the integration of robots into society has reached a normative status, even politicians will have insufficient influence to counteract this integration. As Danaher states:

“During the early phases of development, the technology will be easy to control and change in response to feedback, but its social effects will be poorly understood. But during later phases, as the technology becomes ubiquitous and its social effects (possibly) better understood, it will be effectively impossible to control and change.” [14]

The genre is electro pop with a classical touch to it. By creating a thoughtfully and insightfully produced music video to accompany the project, its impact can spread on a global scale. Music has played a crucial role in the feminist combat since the second wave of the feminist movement and continues to do so still. [15] [16] [17] [18] If promoted sufficiently, the song and music video developed as part of this project could become a new hymn for the feminist movement and have considerable influence on society, media and politics worldwide.

As a non-binary, identified-as-male person I feel strongly connected to the idea of solidarity and hope to encourage especially identified-as-male identities to participate in the fight for equal rights and feminism actively. Following the gender-neutral motto "**Let's join forces, all-together**".

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