

## Augustana College Augustana Digital Commons

---

Augustana Center for the Study of Ethics Essay  
Contest

Prizewinners


---

Winter 4-16-2018

# Sex Robots: Negative Impact Towards Society

Jeraldine Hernandez  
*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/ethicscontest>

 Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

### Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Hernandez, Jeraldine. "Sex Robots: Negative Impact Towards Society" (2018). *Augustana Center for the Study of Ethics Essay Contest*. <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/ethicscontest/15>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Prizewinners at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Augustana Center for the Study of Ethics Essay Contest by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

Jeraldine Hernandez

## **Sex Robots: Negative Impact Towards Society**

Table of Contents:

- I. Empathy & Human-Robot Interactions 2
- II. Sex Robots: An Outlet for Peadophiles 4
- III. Sex Robots Will Lead to Mistreatment of Human Beings 5
- IV. How Sex Robots Target Women 7
- V. Does Consent Matter with Sex Robots? 8
- VI. Human & Sex Robots Are Not Real 9
- VII. Conclusion 11
- VIII. Works Cited 12

## **I. Empathy & Human-Robot Interactions**

In Japan, there is an emotion-detecting robot named Pepper that worked for a bank because the company thought it would bring in more customers. Indeed, it did. However, one day a 60-year old man assaulted Pepper because he was mad at the clerk in the bank and instead of taking it out on him, he took it out on Pepper (Weber, 2015). Some would say that just by hearing about this incident, people may feel bad for Pepper. That leads to the following question: can humans empathize with humanoid robots? A study wanted to answer this question and they used pictures of a human and humanoid robot hand experiencing pain while they measured participants' brain wave reaction using an electroencephalography. They found neural responses in participants that show that humans can attribute humanity to humanoid robots and feel their pain. This study was done through an interesting method where they used pictures of a human hand and a humanoid robot hand that was similar to a human hand and triggered pain stimulus to those hands by cutting them with a knife. They measured the human observer/participants' neural response and found that in the beginning of the experiment, their brain reacted by triggering parts of the brain where empathy is made when they saw both the human hand or robot hand being cut by a knife. However, when they were asked how unpleasant they felt after observing the pictures and whether they thought the robot felt pain, they said they did not feel so unpleasant and that robots could not feel pain. But their brains suggested otherwise (Suzuki, 2015).

These empathetic responses show how humanoid robots are becoming more popular and familiar in our everyday lives. It is important to understand how humans socially interact with humanoid robots, but that is difficult to test since the majority of people do not have access to

them yet. However, newer generations who are using technology such as having a phone at a young age are experiencing change in their brain wiring (Suzuki, 2015). This change in brain wiring can ultimately change the way we feel and think about robots and potentially one day normalize the idea of sex with humanoid robots. The participants that the study used were adults who probably did not have an iPhone at the age of 6 years old. If we do the same study for younger generations, maybe in twenty years there could be a stronger empathetic response to pain stimulus against humanoid robots. Having a real relationship with someone means you are able to connect on an emotional level and empathize with them. The true reason why we have relationships with humans and not animals is to be able to connect. If we are able to connect emotionally with humanoid robots, then theoretically, we are able to have true relationships with them. Regardless if human-robot relationships can exist, this paper will discuss how sex robots negatively affects society due to a lack of empathy and understanding of how our patriarchal society continues to sexually objectify women.

In a study, some males were asked questions in regards to how they feel about buying sex and many shared statements where they put their needs above the other person. One stated "I feel sorry for these girls but this is what I want" and another said "It's [prostitution] like renting a girlfriend or wife. You get to choose like a catalogue" (Campaign Against Sex Robots). In prostitution, only the buyer of sex is attributed subjectivity and the seller of sex is reduced to a thing. Denial of women's subjectivity can also be understood as sexual objectification. These men lacked empathy towards women in prostitution. Men who will use sex robots will more likely than not construct an image of what they want "her" to be in their own minds. Men switch from understanding the woman's situation and feelings to attribute to her what they want her to

feel during or after sex. Prostitution becomes the model of Levy's human-robot sex relations.

These men who were interviewed in the study are arguable not empathetic because they are not taking into account another person's genuine thoughts and feelings which is something that occurs every time one buys sex (Richardson, 2015).

## **II. Sex Robots: An Outlet for Pedophiles**

Levy, believes that sex dolls will decrease women sexual objectification by decreasing prostitution (Wiseman, 2015). However, Levy did not discuss who has access to these sex dolls. The cheapest sex doll one can get is in Dublin, for about \$200 (Morgan, 2017). Not everyone in the world is going to go to Dublin just to get a sex doll. There are places in Africa such as Morocco where prostitution is a huge problem to the point that the term "sexual tourism" is very popular in google search.

Anthropology Kathleen Richardson, who is a senior research fellow in the ethics of robotics at De Montfort University, states that "pedophiles, rapists, people who cant make human connections.. Need therapy, not dolls". Again, it is a question of accessibility. Do these pedophiles have access to these sex dolls? In Morocco there is a huge reputation for attracting foreign pedophiles because it is cheap and child trafficking is not heavily regulated. One Spanish pedophile openly stated that "with money you can get anything you want" in Morocco and many other pedophiles agreed. Sex robots are not cheap, and they are also probably not going to be accessible there for a very long time in Morocco given that homosexuality is still stigmatized and there are stringent laws against homosexuality (Tennent, 2013). Imagine what the Moroccan government feels about sex dolls. Levy's ignorant belief that robots "will eventually treat pedaphiles" is wrong.

Levy also believes that “it would be better for the paedophiles to use robots as their sexual outlets than to use human children” (Wiseman, 2015). Again, not only does the development of sex robots further sexually objectifies women, but it will also sexually objectify children. This idea does not fix the problem because it does not treat the pedophile. This is a huge problem: society is finding more and more ways to excuse men from their insane sexual desires.

### **III. Sex Robots Will Lead to Mistreatment of Human Beings**

In Richardson's research article, she states that the individuals who buy sex dolls recognize them as things and not recognize them as human subjects, which is problematic when one thinks about empathy, relationships, and connection with humans. She also states that Levy believes that robots can be an alternative to women or children but this same view is also proposed by some towards those who sell sex. As mentioned before, Richardson also pointed out that Levy thinks prostitution will be reduced through the development of sex robots; however, studies have shown how new technology supports and contributes to the expansion of the sex industry. The National Crime Agency in the UK has identified the web as a new source of threat to children including the proliferation of indecent images of children and online child sexual exploitation. In 1990, 5.6 percent of men reported paying for sex in their lifetime and by 2000, has increased to 8.8 percent. There has not been a correlation found where sexual artificial substitutions decrease the purchase of sex (prostitution or human trafficking). Sexual artificial substitutes include vibrators, blow-up dolls, and RealDolls (Campaign Against Sex Robots). This morally problematic and gendered attitude is likely to be “reproduced” in the relationships between humans and sex robots (Frank & Nyholm). There are more women that are employed by

the sex industry than any other time in history. On the contrary, Levy states that many of the reasons that people use the services of prostitutes are the same reasons why people will use sex robots because of a lack of empathy. He defends sex robot by stating that there a huge number of sexual encounters throughout the world every day in which empathy plays no part, and the lack of empathy does not necessarily diminish the pleasure for the partners. In a interview with Tabi Jackson Gee, a writer for Telegraph.Co.Uk, Richardson rebuttals Levy's' ideas by stating this:

A machine, like the portrayal of women in pornography, prostitution and the media are entirely objects for male gratification. But women aren't like what males see in pornography or in prostitution or in popular media. In these areas women are coerced or told how to be have act or behave with a threat of money or violence. In real life, women really have their own thoughts and feelings and preferences and desires. It seems logical that if this extreme control can't be experienced by men with real women, the only next step is to create artificial objects.”

Although Richardson does not explicitly address the issue of consent, she is engaging with closely related moral concepts like autonomy, agency, and subjectivity. Her position is compatible with the view that consent is a key moral requirement for some things that we do to others precisely because it is a way of showing respect for their autonomy.

Levy believes that human-robot sexual relationships only help those buyers that use prostitution to meet their needs: which he claims is the desire for variety that men want in their sexual experiences (Levy, 2017). Variety means that if one wants to have sex with a blonde,

brunette, tall, skinny, fat, short person, they can do so with a customizable sex robot. Not only can owners of sex robots be able to change the physical appearance, but also personality traits. The owner can decide whether they want the sex robot to be more sassy or jealous through an application where you can control everything. This includes facial expressions, head movements, and dictate what the sex robots say (Trout, 2018). What Levy fails to see is how this robotic companion that is so endlessly amenable can affect how humans treat other fellow humans.

#### **IV. How Sex Robots Target Women**

Levy fails to see how the development of sex robots and the ideas to support their production shows the immense horrors still present in the world of prostitution which is built on the perceived inferiority of women therefore justifies their use of sex objects. Although it is true that it is better that individuals take their sexual outlets on robots rather than children or women, it still further reinforces power relations of inequality and violence. An example of this is how people designing robots are assigning gender to them depending on their function. A 2014 Nesta study titled 'Our Work Here Is Done: Visions of Robot Economy' found that 'male' robots are thought to be better at repairing technical devices while 'female' robots are thought to be more suited to domestic and caring services (Gee, 2017). People who are making these robots are only perpetuating existing stereotypes, like how sex robots generalize the idea of female beauty.

Is it possible, that one day we will prefer the kinship of machines rather than people or animals? If this is true, it is a negative impact to our society. Unfortunately, people like David Mills believes it will positively impact the world. He is the owner of RealDoll which sells lifelike sex dolls and believes that men are stigmatized and told Eva Wiseman, a writer for The Guardian, that he wants "to be the Rosa Parks of sex dolls. Men are not going to sit back of the



bus any more” (Wiseman, 2015). These sex dolls however set a high unrealistic male expectation that women are supposed to achieve. Young womanhood awaits market availability of a robot that will remove all body hair, for example. Hypothetically, young women may feel pressured to perform like robots in the near future: always available and always eager to please. These are topics that David Mills fails to think about. The idea of creating your own personal sex doll only degrades woman even more. Woman, before sex dolls were ever created, get treated as sexual objects. By creating sex dolls, we are only making things worse by exacerbating sexual objectification. Men who buy these sex dolls will have their sexual needs met whenever they want and in reality, relationships do not work that way. There always needs to be two people to give consent.

#### **V. Does Consent Matter with Sex Robots?**

This leads to a different question: can robots give consent? Do they have the ability to do so? David Levy, author of “Love and Sex with Robots”, states that sex robots are functionally autonomous, capable of learning, have physical support, and adapt to their environment. These characteristics fit the legal framework that the European Parliament is trying to make in order to incorporate robots into the legal community so that they have specific rights and obligations (Frank & Nyholm, 2017). This legal framework is an interesting EU perspective that will prevent sex-slaves from happening. If one buys a sex robots and gets to do whatever they want with it, this is not a desirable result in a robot-human community. These robots are social robots that can interact and communicate with humans on a social level, and humanoid sex robots fit this description. If these robots do not have a conscious, they cannot give consent. Giving consent is

not only important between two people so that rape or assault does not occur, but it is a basic act that all humans must respect in order to respect each other on a human level.

## **VI. Human & Sex Robots Are Not Real**

Since relationships with robots are fictive and part of an illusion, it may decrease our ability to interact with other humans and allow to be empathetic. Empathy is essential for motivating prosocial behavior toward others including complying with social rules and engaging in altruistic behavior. It not only enhances the quality of meaningful relationships, but it is a huge indicator of how successful one may be. Emotional intelligence is a very important aspect of one's emotional and cognitive abilities. The ability to empathize begins at an early age with infants as young as 18 hours showing some responsiveness to other infants' distress. During the second year of life, toddlers responses to others' distress typically transform from an overwhelming personal distress reaction to a more oriented empathetic reaction. This ability develops with contributions from various biologically and environmentally based factors. These factors include genetics, facial mimicry and imitation, and subserving areas of the brain such as the mirror neuron system and the limbic system, child temperament, parenting factors such as the mirror neuron system and the limbic system, child temperament, parenting factors such as warmth, parent-child synchrony, and other qualities of the parent-child relationship. If one or more of these factors function atypically, they may contribute to empathy deficits (Siegler, et al., 2017). It could be possible that many of men who buy sex and do not feel empathy towards people may prefer sex robots over human companions. However, there is no study that shows this potential correlation.

The type of relationships humans can have with robots is an illusion, and can affect how we treat other humans. Humans can easily be deceived by attributing mental states and behaviour to robots because of our natural tendency to project human characteristics onto appropriately configured inanimate objects. This illusion can be created with sex robots by creating the perception of a genuine human sex partner. If the robot looks very close to a human, the easier this illusion can become. Manufacturers' goal of sex robots is to create an experience as close to a human sexual encounter as possible. However, this is difficult for manufacturers because it is difficult to completely make their robots to look like a full human. If the robot is in between looking like a full or nearly human, this gut feeling that one gets because they are not convinced that the robot is completely human is called the uncanny valley state ( Sharkey et al). Since robots cannot feel love, tenderness, or form emotional bonds, they can manage to fake it. Their lack of presence and engagement required for complete sex in which we desire to be desired will be a flaw that no robot will ever be able to satisfy. However, faking it might be enough for some people as evidenced by existing fictive relationships between men and their silicon sex dolls (Sharkey et al).

These fictive relationships could lead to greater isolation instead of treating loneliness in people who can not seem to start or keep real relationships with human partners. Since companion sex robots are not common yet, there is no direct evidence to answer this question and would be considered unethical to set up controlled experiments. However, an article by Responsible Robotics has studies by experts that believe that:

An individual who consorts with robots, rather than humans, may become more socially isolated...intimate relations with robots will lead to more isolation for the human race, because robots are not able to meet the species specific sociality of human beings, only other humans can do that” (Whitby, 2011).

## **VII.Conclusion**

It is important to understand the potential effects of human-robot relationships and how it influences empathy, human relationships, and gender issues such as sexual objectification.

Empathy plays an important role on how individuals connect with robots and humans. Different levels of empathy affects how we treat women and children. Additionally, there are two extreme sides of sex robot acceptance; there is David Levy who completely supports the idea of “Love and Sex with Robots” and then there is Kathleen Richardson who believes that sex robots will only damage our society even more. It is essential to understand how empathy works in relation to the ability to make connections with robots. However, with the lack of sex robot use in society, it is not quite sure how much change this will have on society.

### VIII. Works Cited

- “About.” *Campaign Against Sex Robots*, 30 Oct. 2017, [campaignagainstsexrobots.org/about/](http://campaignagainstsexrobots.org/about/).
- “David Levy (Chess player).” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 9 Jan. 2018, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Levy\\_\(chess\\_player\)#cite\\_note-Golombek\\_p.\\_180-1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Levy_(chess_player)#cite_note-Golombek_p._180-1).
- Frank, Lily & Nyholm, Sven. “Robot sex and consent: Is consent to sex between a robot and a human conceivable, possible, and desirable?” *Artificial Intelligence and Law*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2017, pp. 305–323., doi:10.1007/s10506-017-9212-y.
- “FRR Report: Our Sexual Future with Robots.” *Responsible Robotics*, 5 Nov. 2017, [responsiblerobotics.org/2017/07/05/frr-report-our-sexual-future-with-robots/](http://responsiblerobotics.org/2017/07/05/frr-report-our-sexual-future-with-robots/).
- Richardson, Kathleen. “The Asymmetrical ‘Relationship’: Parallels Between Prostitution and the Development of Sex Robots.” *SIGCAS Computers & Society*, vol. 45, no. 3, Sept. 2015.
- Siegler, R., Saffran, J., Eisenberg, N., DeLoache, J., & Gershoff, E., & Leaper, C. (2017). *How children develop* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.
- Suzuki, Yutaka, et al. “Measuring empathy for human and robot hand pain using electroencephalography.” *Scientific Reports*, vol. 5, no. 1, Mar. 2015, doi:10.1038/srep15924
- Tennent, James. “Is Morocco the Latest Haven for European Paedophiles?” *Vice*, 3 Sept. 2013, [www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/dpww9w/is-morocco-replacing-southeast-asia-as-a-haven-for-european-paedophiles](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/dpww9w/is-morocco-replacing-southeast-asia-as-a-haven-for-european-paedophiles).
- “The Men Committed to Replacing Women With A.I. Sex Dolls.” *MEL Magazine*, MEL Magazine, 28 July 2017, [melmagazine.com/the-men-committed-to-replacing-women-with-a-i-sex-dolls-7d451b56](http://melmagazine.com/the-men-committed-to-replacing-women-with-a-i-sex-dolls-7d451b56)

d655?gi=3808c869b06f.

Trout, Christopher. "There's a new sex robot in town: Say hello to Solana." *Engadget*, 11 Jan.

2018,

[www.engadget.com/2018/01/10/there-s-a-new-sex-robot-in-town-say-hello-to-solana/](http://www.engadget.com/2018/01/10/there-s-a-new-sex-robot-in-town-say-hello-to-solana/).

Weber, Greta. "Study: Humans Feel Empathy for Robots Experiencing "Pain"." *Slate Magazine*,

5 Nov. 2015,

[www.slate.com/blogs/future\\_tense/2015/11/05/study\\_shows\\_humans\\_feel\\_empathy\\_for\\_robots\\_in\\_pain.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2015/11/05/study_shows_humans_feel_empathy_for_robots_in_pain.html).

Wiseman, Eva. "Sex, love and robots: is this the end of intimacy?" *The Observer*, Guardian

News and Media, 13 Dec. 2015,

YouTube. (2017, January 17). Top searches on YouTube: August - November 2012 [Video file].

Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yx5L2LAJUSE>