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Evaluation of the MA Thesis “*Fears and Fantasies in Human Interaction with Sex Robots: US Media Discourse Analysis 2016-2023*” by Iuliia Gavrilova

In this thesis, Iulia Gavrilova presents a qualitative analysis of media discourse around human sex robot (‘sexbots’) uses that examines fantasies, fears and moral diagnoses and forecasts with a focus on the potentials and limits of sexbots. The thesis provides a useful historical contextualisation of the emergence and commercialisation of these animated sex dolls over the last 15 years. The literature review presents some key conceptualisation of gender(ing) in robot design and human-machine interaction, including approaches that consider gendered embodiments (and sexual fantasies) as assemblages that are interactively produced rather than simply residing *in* the bodies of robot designers and users (Haraway, Suchman, Blackman, Landstrom). The analysis then draws on 59 articles in the US (and British!) media.

A key strength of the analysis is that rather than judging or evaluating the discourses from the outside, it uncovers key tensions and contradictions as well as significant absences of empirical evidence (regarding, for example, claims about ‘paedophilia’ or rape) *within* these media sources. Iulia shows that while some media stoke fears about boundary incursions and contamination between humans and machines, the accounts from sexbot users are more cleareyed and pragmatic: sometimes their love lives combine sex with robots and with humans, sometimes they seek robotic companionship. Crucially, while many emotionally invest in machine relations, most are uninterested in making robots more human-like and reflect on the many pitfalls in human-human relations as well. Potentials identified are possibilities of sexual experimentation in the absence of fear, as well as emerging evidence of (queer?) women designing their own robotic partners in a context of overwhelmingly masculine, heteronormative and ablist designs.



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Minor additions and specification include the naming of racialistion in the naming of robotic personalities, a more explicit probing of how (and if) sexual fantasies have been researched and more consistent references to sample size. Due to small sample size, qualitative research and critical discourse analysis do *not* make numerical claims but particular zoom in on the seemingly minor details (such as ‘Henry’ overwhelmingly being used by men).

Given the many interesting observations, I want to invite the author to make more explicit connections between the gender assemblage theories cited in the literature review and some of her key findings (including the essentialist deterministic views she cites). What is gained when gender studies scholars make arguments about gender and robot sex and its futures in more processual situated ways as the literature on machine-human interactions suggests? How does the research problematise the purity or ‘authenticity’ of human and of machine, and what might be gained from affirming their (originary?) entanglement?

I recommend the thesis for defense and suggest the grade 1-2

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Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, Ph.D., supervisor