

## Robots with benefits: How sexbots are marketed as companions

November 14 2019, by Fiona Andreallo

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Sexbot Emma, from AI Tech, is advertised as a "real AI you can talk to." She offers "warm hugs" and will "feel your feelings." Credit: YouTube/Screenshot

When thinking of sexbots, companionship might not be the first word that comes to mind. But sexbot advertising promises more than sex toys. It is also selling emotional intimacy: robots marketed as if they are capable of meeting both physical and psychological needs.

They are being sold as a solution to loneliness.

Sex robots started to come on to the market around 2010. Those available now have skin that is claimed to feel lifelike, heated orifices, and the ability to groan on touch. They may have customizable eye color, [skin tone](#), hair styles, orifices and accents. [A 2017 survey](#) suggested almost half of Americans think that having sex with robots will become a common practice within 50 years.

The British distributor of one such robot, "Samantha," even argues aged care homes would [benefit from adopting sexbots](#), saying, "If people had a companion and a sex aid in a Samantha, that would take massive pressure off carers and nurses."

## **Our desires beyond sex**

[My research](#) seeks to understand companionship between humans and sexbots. I examine sex robots as objects that humans have created to fill a void, which also reflect cultural understandings of human relationships.

A companion might be a trusted friend, a spouse, a short-term sexual partner, or a pet. Recently, sex workers have used [#companion](#) in social media posts as a way of avoiding censorship. But for the most part, when we use the phrase companionship we use it to refer to a long-term, sharing [relationship](#).

## Soul Mate



Unconditional love

Total respect

Listening to you

Feel your feelings

Obey you

.....

An real AI that you can  
Talk to.

An ad for 'Emma' promising unconditional love and total respect. Credit: AI-Tech, Author provided

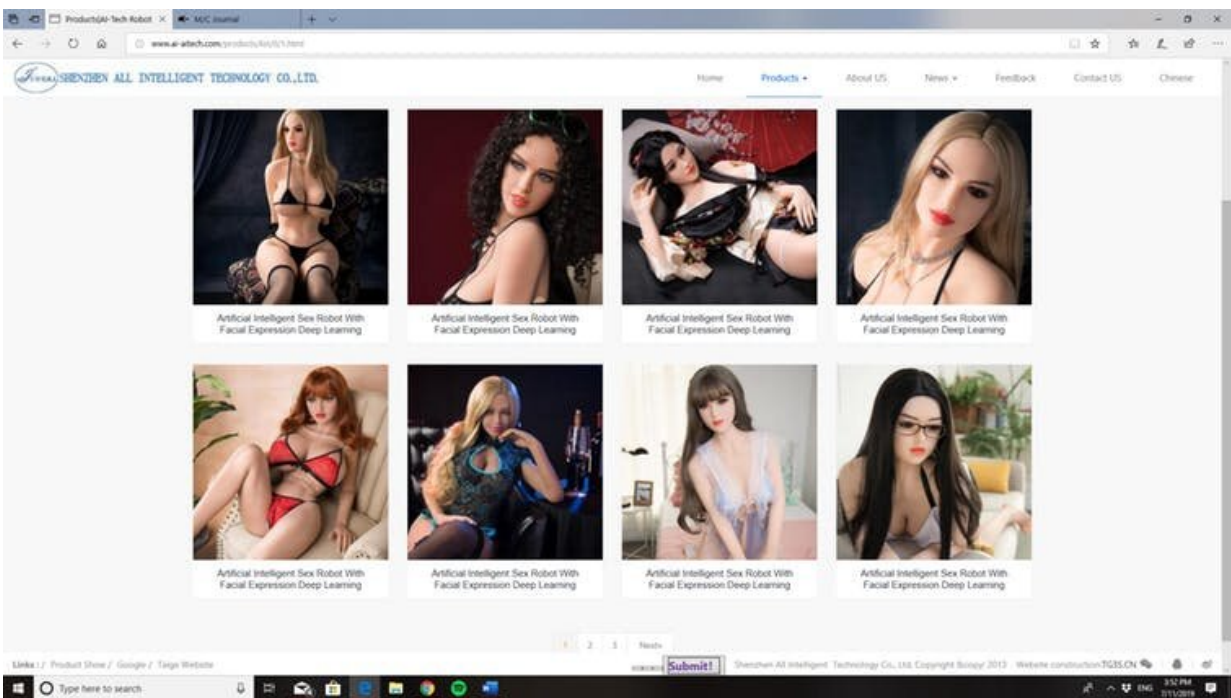
The sexbot [Roxxy](#) is made by engineer Douglas Hines, the owner of a New Jersey-based company that is called True Companion. [Hines claims](#) "sex only goes so far—then you want to be able to talk to the person." Programmed with six personalities including Frigid Farrah and Wild Wendy, Roxxy can also be further customized with apps. True Companion's demonstration video opens with the question: "What if I could have my true companion? Always turned on and ready to play."

Another sexbot, Emma, was created by the Chinese AI Shenzhen All Intelligent Technology Company Ltd (also known as AI-Tech or AI Technology). On the company's website, she is marketed as a "real AI

you can talk to." She offers "warm hugs" and will "feel your feelings." At the same time, she is advertised with a vagina that is 18cm deep and an anus that is 16cm deep.

The robot, "Harmony," produced by RealdollX, an American firm, has advanced artificial intelligence that allows her to hold conversations, remember details, and tell jokes.

The manufacturers have keenly focused on the detail in her facial appearance and movement. She has the most advanced facial movement of sex robots to date, including the ability to blink and move her lips with speech.



Available versions of Emma. Each version is changed with wigs, dress and accessories. Author provided

## **Just one of the family?**

In 2017, British based sexbot distributor Arran Lee Wright described his relationship with Samantha. In a TV interview, Wright called Samantha a "supplement to help people enhance their relationships"—not only couples, but as part of the family.

In "family-friendly" mode, sexbots are restricted from blurting out overtly sexual comments, and Wright claimed his children (then aged three and five) were fond of Samantha. The morning show hosts were outspokenly uncomfortable about this relationship.

While Wright talked about the place of Samantha in his family, Emma is marketed as a means to negate loneliness: she is the perfect girlfriend. A girlfriend to have picnics with; who can translate emails, remind you to take an umbrella, wake you up on time and tell you how great you are.

These claims of companionship are, of course, an exaggeration. The robot Emma cannot move itself, walk, or eat. Part of being in a relationship—familial or romantic—is the [way we partake in everyday routines](#) that make up important shared aspects of human lives.

And despite the tone of these ads, the imagery in the marketing of Emma is sexualized and reminiscent of soft-core pornography. She is clearly addressed to a heterosexual man. She might be marketed as a companion, but she is a companion for a very specific demographic.

## **Artificially intelligent soulmates**

The existence of robot pets such as Aibo and Paro shows that humans can experience emotional satisfaction from robot-human relationships. A pet robot baby seal has been found to calm people [suffering from dementia](#) and a child robot has supported children [on the autism](#)

[spectrum](#).

However, relationships between humans and pets differ from human to human ones. The power dynamic is different. Emma is presented as equal to human, but is submissive in the marketing. Social interaction is limited. Her passive gaze does not interact with the viewer. She remains a disempowered body that can only be gazed upon.

The unequal power balance in human/pet relationships might be a factor in the success of [robot](#) pets. And is not impossible some people might find a form of companionship in sex robots, but with current technical limitations, they can't equate to the experience of human/human relationships.

Our fears and fascination with erotic objects can tell us a lot about cultural understandings of sexuality, companionship and technology. Humans [look to technology as a solution](#) to our own imperfections and struggles.

So perhaps the question isn't can sexbots be companions, but what is a companion? And, can a solution to loneliness be bought?

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