People prefer interacting with female robots in hotels

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People are more comfortable talking to female rather than male robots working in service roles in hotels, according to a study by Washington State University researcher Soobin Seo.

The study, which surveyed about 170 people on hypothetical service robot scenarios, also found that the preference was stronger when the robots were described as having more human features. The findings are detailed in a paper published online in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*.

"People have a tendency to feel more comfort in being cared for by females because of existing gender stereotyping about service roles," said Seo, an assistant professor of hospitality management at WSU's Carson Business College in Everett. "That gender stereotype appears to transfer to robot interactions, and it is more amplified when the robots are more human like."

Even before the pandemic, the hotel industry struggled with high turnover of employees, and Seo noted that some hotels have turned to robots and automation for a variety of functions from dishwashing and room cleaning to customer service such as greeting guests and delivering luggage.

Examples range from the female humanized robots named "Pepper" at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Las Vegas to the fully automated FlyZoo hotel chain in China where guests interact only with robots and artificial intelligence (AI) features.

For the study, survey participants were presented with one of four scenarios about interacting with an AI service robot at a hotel. In one scenario, they were greeted by a male service robot named "Alex" who was described as having a face and human-like body. A second scenario was worded exactly the same with just two changes: the robot's gender was female, and its name was "Sara." In two other scenarios, the robots were both gendered and named differently but described as "machine-like' with an interactive screen instead of a face.

The respondents were then asked to rank how they felt about the interactions. The participants who were presented with the female robot scenarios rated the experience as more pleasant and satisfying than those who had scenarios with male robots. The preference for the female robot was more pronounced when the robots were described as looking more human.

Seo cautioned that replacing human hospitality workers with AI robots of any gender raises many issues that need further research. For instance, if a robot breaks down or fails in service in some way, such as losing luggage or getting a reservation wrong, customers may want a human employee to help them.

The WSU business researcher is also in the process of investigating how the personality of AI robots may impact customers' perceptions, such as if they are extroverted and talkative or introverted and quiet.

These are important considerations for AI robot developers as well as for hospitality employers to consider as they think about adopting robots more widely, Seo said.

"We may start to see more robots as replacements of human employees in hotels and restaurants in the future, so we may find that some of the psychological relationships that we see in human-to-human interaction also implemented in robot interactions," she said.

More information: Soobin Seo, When Female (Male) Robot Is Talking To Me: Effect of service robots' gender and anthropomorphism on customer satisfaction, *International Journal of Hospitality Management* (2022). DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103166

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