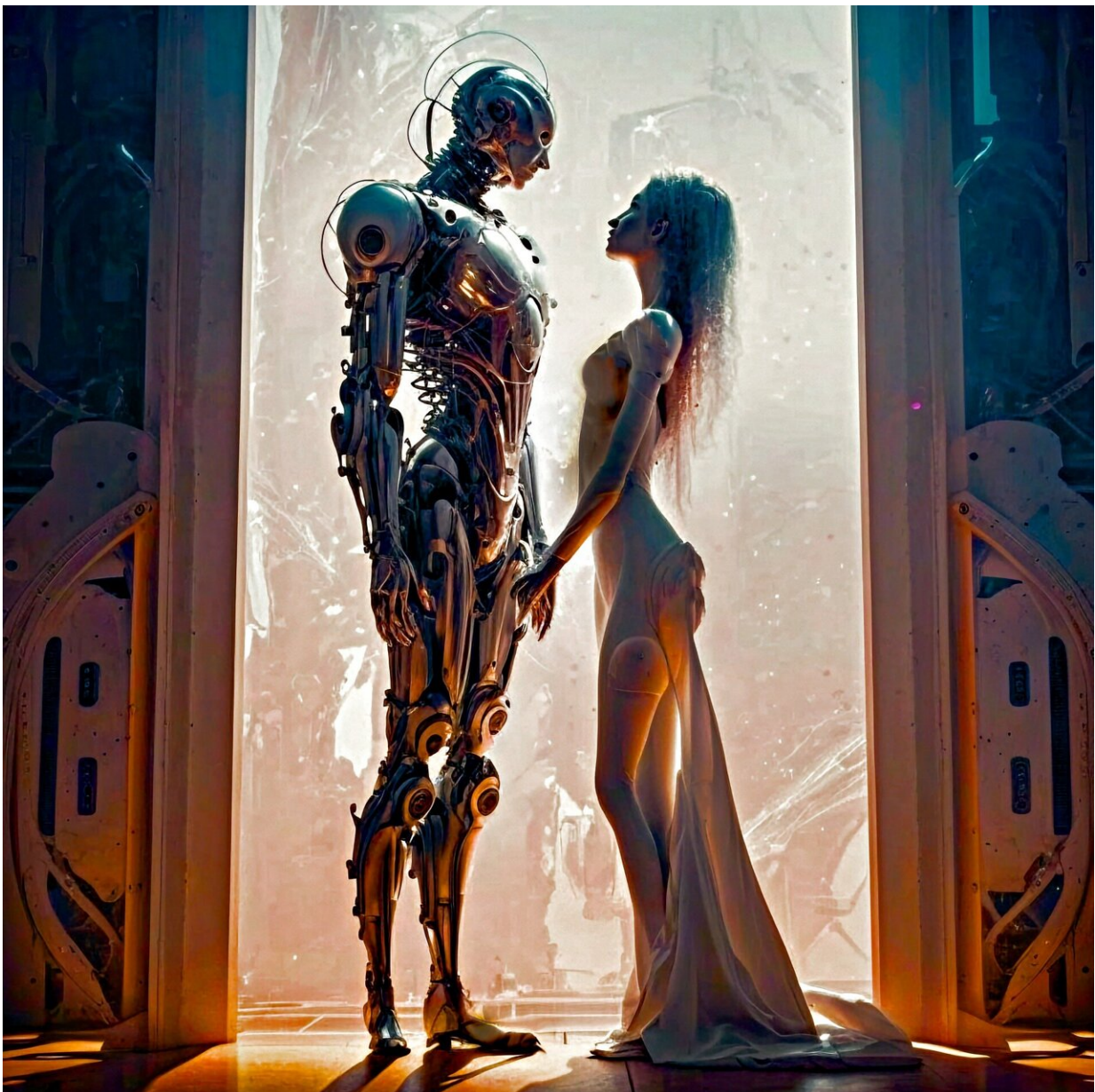


Sex, love and companionship ... with AI? Why human-machine relationships could go mainstream

April 3 2023, by Marco Dehnert and Joris Van Ouytsel



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There was once a [stigma attached to online dating](#): Less than a decade ago, many couples who had met online would make up stories for how they met rather than admit that they had done so via an app.

Not so anymore. Online dating is [so mainstream](#) that [you're an outlier](#) if you haven't met your partner on Tinder, Grindr or Hinge.

We bring up online dating to show just how quickly conventions around romance can change. [With rapid advances in AI technology](#) over the past few years, these norms may well evolve to include sex, love and friendships with AI-equipped machines.

In our research, we look at how people use technology [to form and maintain relationships](#). But we also look at how people [bond with machines](#)—AI-equipped systems [like Replika](#) that essentially operate as [advanced chatbots](#), along with physical robots like [RealDollx](#) or [Sex Doll Genie](#).

We explore the different forms of sex, love and friendships that people can experience with AI-equipped machines, along with what drives people to forge these relationships in the first place—and why they might become much more common sooner than you'd think.

More than just a cure for loneliness

A common misconception is that people who are lonely and otherwise unsuccessful in relationships are the most likely to turn to AI-equipped

machines for romantic and sexual fulfillment.

However, initial research shows that users of this technology differ in only small ways from nonusers, and there is no significant connection between [feelings of loneliness and a preference for sex robots](#).

Someone's willingness to use sex robots is also less influenced by their personality and seems to be tied to [sexual preferences and sensation seeking](#).

In other words, it seems that some people are considering the use of sex robots mainly because they want to have new sexual experiences.

However, an enthusiasm for novelty is not the only driver. Studies show that people find many uses for sexual and romantic machines [outside of sex and romance](#). They can serve as companions or therapists, or as a hobby.

In short, people are drawn to AI-equipped machines for a range of reasons. Many of them resemble the reasons people seek out relationships with other humans. But researchers are only beginning to understand how relationships with machines might differ from connecting with other people.

Relationships 5.0

Many researchers have [voiced ethical concerns](#) about the potential effects of machine companionship. They are concerned that the more that people turn to machine companions, the more they'll lose touch with other humans—yet another shift toward an existence of being "[alone together](#)," to use sociologist Sherry Turkle's term.

Despite this apprehension, there is surprisingly little research that

examines the effects of machine partners. We know quite a bit about how technology, in general, affects people in relationships, such as the [benefits and harms of sexting among young adults](#), and the ways in which [online dating](#) platforms [influence the long-term success of relationships](#).

Understanding the benefits and drawbacks of AI partners is [a bit more complicated](#).

We are now in an age of what sociologist Elyakim Kislev calls "[relationships 5.0](#)" in which we are "moving from technologies used as tools controlling human surroundings and work to technologies that are our ecosystem in and of themselves."

Therapeutic value is often mentioned as one benefit of romantic and sexual AI systems. One study discussed how [sex robots for elderly or disabled folks](#) could empower them to explore their sexuality, while almost half of physicians and therapists surveyed in another study could see themselves [recommending sex robots in therapy](#). Robots could also be used in therapy with sexual offenders. But very limited research exists on these uses, which raise a range of ethical questions.

We also have very little knowledge about how human-to-[robot](#) relationships compare with human-to-human relationships. However, some of [our early research](#) suggests that people get just about the same gratification from sexting with a chatbot as they do with another human.

According to theories about how [sexual relationships with artificial partners would work](#), one of the many factors that could affect the quality of the interactions—and, ultimately, the wider adoption of relationships with robots and AI chatbots—is the associated stigma.

While women are the [main purchasers of sex toys](#)—and their use has

become [a generally accepted practice](#)—people who use what's called "sextech," or technology designed to enhance or improve human sexual experiences, [are still stigmatized](#) socially. That stigma is even stronger for romantic AI systems or sex robots.

Will you be my v-AI-lentine?

As we have seen with dating apps, technological advancements in the context of relationships initially face skepticism and disagreement. However, there's no question that people seem capable of forming deep attachments with AI systems.

Take the app [Replika](#). It's been marketed as the "AI companion who cares"—a virtual boyfriend or girlfriend that promises to engage users in deeply personal conversations, including sexting and dirty talk.

In February, the [Italian Data Protection Authority](#) ordered that the app stop processing Italian users' data. As a result, the developers changed how Replika interacts with its users—and some of these users went on to [express feelings of grief, loss and heartbreak](#), not unlike the emotions felt after a breakup with a human partner.

Legislators are still figuring out [how to regulate sex and love with machines](#). But if we have learned anything about the ways in which technology has already become integrated into our relationships, it is likely that sexual and romantic relationships with AI-equipped systems and robots will become more common in the not-so-distant future.

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