

Research explores the ethical implications of creating sentient and self-aware sexbots

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So far, robots have primarily been developed to fulfill utilitarian purposes, assisting humans or serving as tools to facilitate the completion of particular tasks. As robots become more human-like, however, this could pose significant challenges, particularly for robots built to engage with humans socially.

Humans have used sex dolls as inanimate objects for sexual pleasure throughout history. Animated sex robots, social robots created to meet humans' needs for sex and affection, offer more. Due to recent developments in robotics and AI, sex robots are now becoming more advanced and human-like. Purchasers can have them customised both in appearance and in how they speak and behave to simulate intimacy, warmth and emotion.

Currently, sex robots are inanimate things, able to simulate but not engage in mutual intimacies. In the future, however, technological advances might

allow researchers to manufacture sentient, self-aware sex robots with feelings, or sexbots. The implications of the availability of sexbots as customisable perfect partners for [intimate relationships](#) with humans are potentially vast.

Sexbots offer the intriguing prospect of reciprocal intimacy between human and nonhuman, but raise several concerns and unsettling questions. In a fascinating new study, Robin Mackenzie, a researcher from the University of Kent, has explored the theoretical, ethical and pragmatic implications of creating sentient and self-aware sexbots for utilitarian purposes.

"Human intimate relationships with each other and with nonhumans have been a lifelong preoccupation for me," Mackenzie told TechXplore. "As a teenager, I was fascinated by possible future human/nonhuman intimacies and subjectivities, as explored in the work of SF writers like Philip K Dick and Ursula K LeGuin, what human/nonhuman flourishing could mean, and by how Buddhism might help us frame those [ethical questions](#) and find some answers. My research into sexbots provides an opportunity to explore questions of intimacy, subjectivity, human/nonhuman flourishing and exploitation in depth."

In her paper, Mackenzie adopts a trans-disciplinary critical methodology, focusing on the legal, ethical and design implications of sexbot subjectivity. Her work explores a broad range of factors, including sexbots' autonomy, control, decision-making abilities, consent, sexual preferences, desires and vulnerability, as well as their legal and moral status. Mackenzie also examines the differences between mammalian and non-mammalian moral decision-making, within the context of manufacturing sentient, self-aware sexual partners.

"The dating and matchmaking industries indicate that most of us would like a perfect partner but few of us have one," Mackenzie said. "I argue that

humans' need for intimacy will drive the design and manufacture of sentient, self-aware, feeling male and female sexbots. These sexbots will be able to be customised to become their purchasers' perfect partners. The neurobiology of sexual attraction and the capacity for intimate compatibility mean they must have human-like characteristics. They will be like us in some ways but not in others."

Mackenzie's study shows that as manufactured self-aware non-mammals, sexbots' inherent subjectivity and codes of moral conduct would profoundly differ from those of humans. As artificial beings created to meet human needs, sexbots will be customised to show and feel affection, and to please humans. This customisation limits their ability to exercise free will, while the engineered-in capacity to feel means that they can suffer.

"Sexbots will be customised to love us, acquire deep knowledge of us as part of the self-customisation process and will be able to suffer," Mackenzie explained. "This creates a tension between humans creating sexbots in our interest to become the perfect partners we desire, a utilitarian purpose, the ideally non-exploitative nature of love and intimacy, and sexbots' own interests as independent self-aware sentient beings."

After considering the theoretical, ethical, and pragmatic implications of creating sentient beings for utilitarian purposes, Mackenzie concluded that as manufactured humanlike entities with the capacity for suffering, sexbots should be considered to be moral and legal persons. She draws on the neurorobotics of emergent consciousness to suggest that they could eventually become the first conscious type of robots.

"My starting point is humans' relationship with other sentient beings," Mackenzie said. "All entities are embedded in various ecological contexts that must be tended if we are all to flourish. Working out how to balance our own and others' interests is a tough call. As humans we use other entities like people, animals and plants to promote our interests. We often need to do so in order to survive. Finding that balance is important."

In the past, ethicists and regulators have discussed the use of other entities on the planet in terms of duties that we owe one another, differentiating situations in which the use of another sentient being is acceptable and others where it becomes exploitative. For instance, there is a clear and substantial difference between an adequately paid worker and a neglected slave.

In her study, Mackenzie argues that by creating sentient and self-aware beings, humans also have the duty to protect their interests, respect them and avoid promoting their suffering. She raises questions about potential limits to be placed in customization, discussing bans on child and animal sexbots, as well as on sexbots with increased sensitivity to pain or a pathological desire to please others.

"The legal status, rights and obligations of sexbots need to be thought through," Mackenzie said. "Unlike existing entities, they will not be things, animals or human so it's hard to fit them into our current laws. These issues need to be debated now and regulations put in place before technological advances overtake us."

AI specialists worldwide are now getting closer to creating a wide range of sentient beings, which might soon have their own interests and different levels of awareness. According to Mackenzie, some of these AI entities might eventually feel human-like emotions, including pain and suffering.

"I argue that since we as humans have created these beings for our purposes, we owe them a higher ethical duty to protect their interests," Mackenzie said. "This means that as a species, humans need to debate these broader issues and put regulations in place urgently to shape a flourishing future. My study hopes to draw readers' attention to potential risks and uncertainties, suggesting helpful strategies and outcomes."

The research carried out by Mackenzie provides interesting ethical insight into the complex implications of creating machines that are no longer mere tools, but can experience human-like emotions. While some people might argue that ultimately robots are soulless objects with the sole

purpose of serving humans, Mackenzie believes that they might soon become sentient entities and as such their suffering needs to be acknowledged.

"In a sense, sentient, self-aware sexbots offer humans their first chance to have an intimate relationship with an alien – a being who is human-like, but also significantly different," Mackenzie added. "Where this differs from classic SF scenarios is that we humans will be creating that alien. Working out how to behave well toward other sentient beings, particularly those we create, is a profound challenge. How we design sentient, self-aware entities, including sexbots, to be, and how we treat them once they exist, matters."

Mackenzie is now planning to carry out further research exploring practical ways in which the interests of sexbots could be protected and their suffering curtailed. Her future work will also take a closer look at how feeling pain might shape the beliefs and behavior of sexbots, both in constructive and destructive ways.

"Being alive entails pain and suffering, or we would never learn to protect ourselves, like not burning ourselves with fire," Mackenzie said. Robot learning may involve the equivalent of pain, including the cognitive dissonance associated with emerging consciousness in futuristic [robot](#) scenarios, such as *Westworld* and *Real Humans*."

Westworld and *Real Humans* are futuristic TV series that depict a world in which robots used for sex and exploitation are deliberately manufactured to simulate consciousness, but not to possess it. In *Westworld*, however, these robots become aware of the suffering inflicted on them and set out to destroy humans who have been misusing them.

"As we can't rely upon mammalian-based social ethics to restrain robots from hurting others, how are we to do this?" Mackenzie said. "Relating this to sexbots, most of us in intimate relationships also experience pain and suffering as inherent to adapting to another person. This can bring new, valuable insights into ourselves and others which make us happier, better people. While some pain and suffering could be helpful for sexbots, how much of it is necessary and how much is wrongful?"

This is a complex issue, especially in relation to sexbots, who are created to be perfect intimate companions."

More information: Robin Mackenzie. Sexbots: Customizing Them to Suit Us versus an Ethical Duty to Create Sentient Beings to Minimize Suffering, *Robotics* (2018). [DOI: 10.3390/robotics7040070](https://doi.org/10.3390/robotics7040070)

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