

## SEX ROBOTS AND THE OBJECTIFICATION OF THE HUMAN BODY: A SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

Sex robots, in a broad ethical sense, challenge our traditional social norms, sexual interactions, and how we visualise the human body. As a distinct sex stimulation technology, sex robots are ethically problematic because of the humanlike characteristics that these technologies embody. In this paper, I argue, on the one hand, that the design of sex robots objectifies the human body, from an African perspective, because of their humanoid appearance. This objectification of the human body contradicts the African conception of the human body as possessing inalienable dignity, vitality, and sacredness. On the other hand, I show how the designs of sex robots reinforce adverse stereotypical gender norms and standards of beauty. This paper is significant because it deploys sub-Saharan African values of sex and the human body to make a novel contribution to the ethical discourse of sex robots.

**Keywords:** Humanoid Robots; Sexual Relations; Sub-Saharan African Values; Human Sacredness; Inalienable Dignity.

### Introduction

The development of socially disruptive technologies, like artificial intelligence, has changed how we see the world, relate to one another, our social norms and moral codes, and how we do business

and govern our societies (HOPSTER 2021, 2-3). One of the reasons these technologies are referred to as disruptive is that they are not predictable and continuously challenge our worldviews (HOPSTER 2021, 2-3). Their unpredictability produces “novel moral situations which might strain our traditional moral concepts” (TOLLON 2021, NP). One example of socially disruptive technologies that strain our traditional norms is sex robots.

Technologies such as sex robots challenge what we conceive to be appropriate sexual relations and how we visualise the human body. In this paper, I discuss the sub-Saharan African values of sex and the human body and how the emergence of sex robots can disrupt these values. Introducing sex robots in Africa, specifically sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>1</sup> challenges the traditional African conception of sex since sex is a private affair for Africans, and sexual relations are expected to happen between two consenting human adults<sup>2</sup> (OKYERE-MANU 2021, 113-4; MOYO 2021). But most significantly, the designs of sex robots objectify the human body, given their human appearance. This objectification of the human body strains the African conception of the human body as that which is a bearer of inalienable dignity, vitality, and sacredness on the one

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<sup>1</sup> My use of Africa here is strictly restricted to sub-Saharan Africa, however, in some cases, I use the words interchangeably. A critic might object here with the argument that sex robots are not a problem to sub-Saharan Africans because the region is poor and cannot afford to purchase the robots. While this objection focuses on the socio-economic situation of sub-Saharan Africa as a poor region, the objection fails to take into consideration that we live in a globalised community which allows the free flow of values, norms, and technologies across political borders. Even if indigenous sub-Saharan Africans currently living here cannot afford to purchase these technologies, those in the diaspora and a “few” affluent indigenes can afford to purchase them. Thus, either way, sex robots may find their way to sub-Saharan Africa through the return of the diasporans and the few who can afford them (see MOYO, 2021 for a case on this issue).

<sup>2</sup> First, the idea that sex is a private affair is somewhat embedded in different cultures like dominant Euro-American and Asian cultures. However, this paper focuses on the African locale and how they prize the idea of the privacy of sexual affairs. For example, sexual relationship is expected to happen at a certain age, and sexual body parts, such as the penis, vagina, and breasts, are not publicly mentioned. Furthermore, sex is not talked about publicly; if there is a necessity for the idea of sex to be talked about publicly, the discussants use metaphors to convey their messages (OKYERE-MANU 2021; MOYO 2021).

hand (TEMPLES 1959; MBITI 1969; BUJO 2009; METZ 2011). It also reinforces the stereotypical gender norms and standards of beauty, on the other hand.

Theorists like Beatrice Okyere-Manu (2021) and Habret Moyo (2021) have engaged substantially with this issue within the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Okyere-Manu (2021), for example, argues that the introduction of sex robots in Africa poses a dilemma for Africans. The dilemma is that Africans, like the rest of the world, live in a technologically globalised social milieu and are influenced by the advent of socially disruptive technologies. However, while they intend to engage with some of these technologies, their cultural practices impede them from doing so due to the value impasse between the technologies and their culture. Okyere-Manu (2021) and Moyo (2021) have shown this impasse in the case of sex robots as they contend that sex robots strain African traditional values of sex, which indigenous Africans conceive as a private affair. I agree with their views; however, I engage with the design and usage of sex robots from a different lens.

In all their argument, these theorists did not engage with the notion that sex robots objectify the human body, given their humanoid appearance. These theorists only problematise the idea of sex robots from the disruption the technology poses to the African value of sex. However, I argue that before discussing sex robots' disruption of the African values of sex, we must first problematise how sex robots disrupt the notion of the human person who engages in sexual acts. Sub-Saharan Africans conceive the human person and the human body to be sacred, on the one hand; the human person and the human body also possess dignity, on the other hand. Thus, it is wrong to create objects of sexual fantasies to mimic the total representation of the human person.

I structure this paper as follows: In the first section, I present the meaning of sex robots. I also show that sex robots are a distinct form of sexual stimulation technology. The second section discusses the general philosophical implications of designing sex robots. In the third section, I argue, from an African standpoint, that the idea of sex robots must be rejected because sex robots objectify the human body. Furthermore, it standardises certain types of "beauty". I consider a possible objection and a response in the last section.

## **On The Meaning of Sex Robots**

The development of sexual assistant technology is not a recent innovation. Sexual stimulation artefacts are a part of human history, extending as far back as 28,000 years (DANAHER 2017). For example, what is speculated to be the oldest dildo, made of highly polished stone, 20cm long and 3cm wide, and estimated to be around 28,000 years old, was excavated in 2015 by archaeologists in the Swabian Alps in Germany (DANAHER 2017, 5). This implies that sexual stimulation artefacts are a part of human history. Research has shown that dildos existed in ancient Eastern and Western cultures (DANAHER 2017, 5). However, the first modern-like sex stimulator technology was invented by an American Physician called George Taylor in 1869 (MAINES 2001). This technology was a steam-powered vibrator used to treat women suffering from “hysteria”<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, a company called Hamilton Beach invented the first sex dolls in 1902.<sup>4</sup>

The development of sex technologies, such as artificial vaginas, artificial penises, silicone dolls, and others, has gained more prominence in the early twentieth century (DANAHER 2017, 4). However, I do not aim to discuss all these technologies here. My focus here is on sex robots as a distinct sex stimulation technology, given their humanlike characteristics.

John Danaher (2014 2017, 4) defines sex robots as “any artificial entity that is used for sexual purposes [i.e., for sexual stimulations and release]”. For a sex technology to be considered a sex robot, Danaher (2014; 2017) states that the technology must meet three conditions. First, the technology must be humanoid, intended to have a human representation and appearance (DANAHER 2017, 4). Second, it must be designed to behave and move like humans (DANAHER 2017, 4). Finally, it must have some

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<sup>3</sup> Hysteria is a colloquial term for excessive emotional changes one experiences that are ungovernable.

<sup>4</sup> The invention of dolls has a long history dating back to myth of Pygmalion and the Dutch sailors in the 1700s (DANAHER 2017,4). I do not provide a comprehensive history on this issue as it does not fall within the scope of this paper.

degree of artificial intelligence; that is, it must be capable of processing information in the environment where it is deployed (DANAHER 2017, 4). These are the distinctive characteristics of sex robots that set them apart from other sex technologies.

The condition for sex-robot taking the humanlike form is important in this discourse for two reasons. First, the intention and drive behind developing sex robots is that people are interested in creating a “look-alike” human substitute that can perform similar “human-human sexual interactions” (DANAHER 2017, 5) by using artificial means. Second, many of the ethical discussions on sex robots arise because of the humanoid form they take, which stirs conversation about their “social acceptability” (DANAHER 2017, 5). In light of these two conditions, I show two examples of sex robots that have prompted public debates since their invention.

The first sex robot is the TrueCompanion Roxxy/Rocky sex robot (DANAHER 2017, 6; BROOKS 2021, 6). Roxxy/Rocky, the first sex robot in the world, was first unveiled in 2010 at the Adult Entertainment Trade Show in Las Vegas (DANAHER 2017, 6). The inventor of these robots is Douglas Hines, a former AI engineer at Bell Labs from the TrueCompanion company in New Jersey (BROOKS 2021, 6; DANAHER 2017, 6). Roxxy is the female version of the sex robot, while Rocky is the male version. Roxxy/Rocky comes in different appearances, and “they” cost US\$ 2995 for their silver model and US\$ 9995 for their gold model (DANAHER 2017, 6). Roxxy/Rocky is said to “recognise and generate speech, ‘have an orgasm,’ and, apparently, they have personality” (BROOKS 2021, 6).

The second sex robot is the RealDoll, a product of Abyss Creations Company founded in Las Vegas-US in 1995 by Matt McMullen (MARIA 2016). Cara Santa Maria (2016) reports that the Abyss creation companies sell these RealDolls for more than US\$5000 each, and the prices go higher depending on the kind of customisation needed by a client. The Abyss Creation company creates these sex robots in different sizes, shapes, and colours according to the sexual fantasies of their clients (MARIA 2016, NP). There are still some improvements that are ongoing in the designs of RealDolls. The intention of the designer is to infuse sophisticated AI features into the robots depending on how their clients want the robots to be customised. Furthermore, these sophisticated AI features

are to enable the robots to reciprocate “genuine” love and affection beyond sexual activities (MARIA 2016). In the next section, I will discuss some of the philosophical implications of sex robots.

### **The Philosophical Implications of Designing Sex Robots**

One of the philosophical questions that require elucidation is whether there will ever be a time when sex robots can reciprocate intimate relationships beyond mere sex with humans. There is also scepticism about whether humans can have a meaningful relationship with sex robots. To begin with, I assert that a sex robot does not have an inner life and that this technology is a mere automaton. The prior assertion is likely contestable, given the constant development of technology. Soon, there is a possibility that conscious sex robots might be invented. If we can have conscious sex robots, it follows that we could also have a sex robot with an inner life. This is a broad philosophical discussion that I cannot engage with here as it requires a discussion on personhood and the metaphysical constitution of personhood. Nonetheless, it is a discussion that has been engaged elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

Second, why do we need to care about the development of sex robots? One of the reasons we need to care is because of what sex with robots may do to the users. Sex is considered an important aspect of human life because of the mental and physical pleasures and well-being that correlate with sexual activities (MCARTHUR 2017; DANAHER 2017, 11). The worry here is that users of sex robots may begin to neglect social relationships with the members of their community, leading to “unhealthy” and “abnormal” human-human relationships within that environment. The neglect and withdrawal of sex robot users may be problematic for individuals in societies with recurrent relational communal values. This is because social interactions are a requirement for moral excellence in communal societies.

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<sup>5</sup> The philosophical contention regarding whether robots can be persons by possessing consciousness or other metaphysical and social characteristics required for personhood is an interesting and intriguing philosophical discourse. However, this discussion is a broad one that cannot be developed here because it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in Ugar (2022a), the view of whether robots can be persons is argued to be context-dependent since the criteria for personhood are not the same in every context.

At this point, it is paramount that I point out that sexual companionship and sexual relations are culturally dependent. What is considered good/bad or right/wrong sexual relationship or sexual companionship differs culturally from context to context. Given the recurrent cultural values of individualism in the West<sup>6</sup>, one can argue that sexual relations with a robot would not necessarily be considered to be a bad/wrong activity. Based on Kantian, utilitarian, or hedonistic principles, individuals may argue that they have the right to decide which sexual relationship to prize over another.

For example, one of the influential views in the Western moral tradition accounts that moral status is built in terms of an individual's "capacity for autonomy—that is, the ability to self-govern" (MOLEFE 2020, 72). In this sense, a being's life has moral significance if the being can make independent choices and has the ability to pursue their own life. Moral treatment and consideration of a being are based on whether the being has the capacity for autonomy. If the being does, then "treatment towards a being with autonomy that interferes with its exercise of personal choice and

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<sup>6</sup> Individualism as a cultural value is grounded on some inherent properties in an individual, such as rights, soul, freedom, autonomy, rationality, and welfare (BEHRENS 2013). Societies that are individualist emphasise the importance of human rights, freedom, and autonomy more than societies with a collectivist worldview (HOFSTEDE 2001). However, it is necessary that I clarify that my claim that Western culture is individualistic does not imply that all Western societies are completely individualist. There are some aspects of communitarianism in the West (MACLNTYRE 1984; TAYLOR 1985). However, even though communitarianism can be found in the West, it is not a recurrent and dominant cultural value in the West (METZ 2011; 2015). Sub-Saharan African cultures are more communitarian than individualist, even though elements of individualist qualities are submerged in the sub-Saharan African cultures.

This view should not be mistaken to mean that I am essentialising values to be from this or that place. As Anne Phillips (2010) argues, essentialist thinking is undesirable in philosophy. When I say sub-Saharan African cultures are dominantly communal, I am not claiming that there are no instances of communal values in the West. I contend that communal values could be found more in sub-Saharan Africa than in the West. Metz (2015) has clearly explained this point in his discussion on geographical labelling. Metz (2015) states that geographical labelling refers to picking salient features or properties recurrent in certain places and not existing in other places (METZ 2015, 1176). Thus, when I say Western cultures are individualist while sub-Saharan African cultures are communal, I mean that individualist cultures are recurrent in the West and communal cultures are recurrent in sub-Saharan Africa (UGAR 2022).

freedom causes it to lead a worse off life...contrary to its moral nature” (MOLEFE 2020, 72; MOLEFE 2017; METZ 2012). For instance, an individual has the right to engage in sexual activities with a sex robot if they think the robot can give them more pleasure/happiness than pain/suffering. This conception of sex and sexual relations allows for the efficient use of sex robots in the West. However, this is not the cultural perception of sex in sub-Saharan Africa on the grounds that autonomy is not what defines morality within the African worldview but communal responsibility and obligations ( MOLEFE 2020; UGAR 2022A).

In sub-Saharan African culture, the community decides what is best for the individual. The individual is expected to adhere to the values prescribed by the community, which includes how sexual affairs ought to be conducted (KELBESSA 2017). Ugar (2020, 26) points out that an African conception of any sexual relations must have procreation as its primary goal. The point here is that even though there is no doubt that Africans consider sex as sexual pleasure, which both men and women should enjoy (KELBESSA 2017, 375), sex is only conceived to happen between two human beings since its primary importance is first and foremost, for procreation purposes.

A critic may argue that the sub-Saharan African contention that sex is primarily for procreation purposes contradicts my earlier claim that “the human body possesses inalienable dignity... and cannot be reduced to a mere object.” Furthermore, the critic may argue that if sub-Saharan Africans can “use” another human being to enjoy sexual intercourse and use the human body for procreation, then it follows that there is a sense of objectification that has occurred in those activities. Thus, they might ask the question: why is this objectification permissible and the use of sex robots impermissible? In addition, they might add that this argument valorises heteronormative ideologies of the human body, where the female body is an “object of procreation,” which is ethically problematic.

The above objections are important and require attention. First, I do not fully prize the *procreationism* idea, even though it is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa that sexual relationships ought to be primarily for procreation purposes, as argued by both Western and African theorists such as Okyere-Manu (2021), Moyo (2021),



Ama Mazama (2009), and Immanuel Kant (1996). This is because such thinking prizes only heteronormative sexual relationships and binary thinking. African thinking should be revised in this regard.

However, we cannot argue that the act of procreating objectifies the human body. Procreation is an important aspect of most living organisms, and in the case of humans and other animals, sex is the most common method of procreating. In addition, procreation, in a legitimate sense, only happens when two individuals come together to agree on having children. So, if two individuals decide to procreate, it does not imply that they are using each other instrumentally or as means *per se* since there is choice and consent. Second, human beings do not see each other as objects but as subjects. However, when it comes to sex robots, they are objects, and their very nature is instrumental in satisfying human sexual desires. It is even more problematic that when a society encourages sex with robots, they may partly be allowing sexual objectification in a general sense. This is because there is a likelihood that people may transfer such objectification to their human partners by beginning to see them as sex objects. The above claim may require empirical evidence, which I currently do not have in this paper; however, it is a philosophically legitimate concern that I engage with from here. The point here is that sub-Saharan Africans do not see each other as objects of procreation but as subjects who have choices, require consent, and are willing to contribute to each other's biological resources for procreation purposes. However, in the case of sex robots, as pointed out, it is different. Thus, my argument is not self-contradicting.

Nonetheless, the argument of how sex is supposed to happen in sub-Saharan African culture, that is, for the primary purpose of fostering future generations and how the design of sex robots distorts the African idea of sex has already been dealt with by theorists such as Okyere-Manu (2021) and Moyo (2021). Although these authors have dealt with the above argument, as pointed out previously, a more moderate view of sex ought to be developed to accommodate everyone. However, my argument here is not to make a continuum of Okyere-Manu's (2021) or Moyo's (2021) arguments but to point out the objectification of the human body that comes with the design of sex robots.

The above authors do not discuss the objectification of the human body that comes with the designs of sex robots. Given how important the human being is, especially from an African perspective, such a being should not be objectified. Furthermore, sex and sexual relations are important because of the importance of the human person. For example, the importance of the human person from an African perspective informs the importance of sex; sex and sexual relations will cease to be sacred if the human person ceases to be conceived as sacred. In what follows, I discuss how sex robots objectify the human body from a sub-Saharan African perspective.

### **The Objectification of the Human Body: A Threat to Inalienable Dignity**

To objectify a human being means reducing the human being, in part or whole, to the status of an object. In Immanuel Kant's (1993) *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues against reducing the human person to the status of an object. Kant claims that persons ought to be treated with the ultimate value, absolute respect, and dignity because of their qualities, such as freedom, rational faculty, and autonomy (KANT 1993, 91). Hence, Kant argues that a person should not be used as a "means except when he (*sic*) is at the same time treated as an end" (KANT 1993, 91). As a result, we must provide persons with all the necessary means to achieve their moral ends and become "self-determinant." Objectifying another person in whichever way possible is interpreted from this perspective as a failure to treat that person as an end, given the person's inalienable dignity.

From an African perspective, philosophers like Metz (2011) argue that Africans conceive human persons as beings with inalienable dignity. The conception of dignity that Metz mean here is "having a superlative non-instrumental value" (2011, 20). For a being "to have a non-instrumental value," the being has "to be good for its own sake" and not good as an instrument to something else (METZ 2011, 20). From an African perspective, human persons have inalienable dignity because they can relate with other members of the community (METZ 2011, 26).

From the above perspective, objectifying a human person will then imply the reduction of a person to a thing which satisfies another person in whichever way possible. By this, the concept of

personhood is diminished; there is no respect for the personhood of the other. There are different ways to objectify a person. These include, but are not limited to, calling a person sexy and seeing a person solely as an object of one's sexual appetite (WIDDOWS 2018; NUSSBAUM 1995). However, a critic might argue that humans find their sexual mate partially through the sexual gaze. In as much as this is admissible, my point here is that it is problematic when we only visualise the other as a sexual object that is meant to satisfy our sexual palates. Nonetheless, I would not further this discussion here.

In this paper, the sense that I aim to discuss the objectification of the human being relates to designing sexual artefacts that mimic the human body. I contend that such an act is a way of promoting the idea that the human body can be reduced to a mere object of sexual desire. This is because it will become possible for humans to transfer the objectified sexual gaze they have of sex robots towards their fellow humans, given the similarities in appearance and behaviours of both entities. The moment that becomes possible, it follows that we may possibly begin to consider our fellow humans as mere objects of our sexual appetites. If the aforementioned happens, all things considered, whatever motive of moral relations we have of human persons may begin to fade away. As an object of another's sexual appetite, humans may become solely things that can be misused at will. This form of objectification may be possible in the way humans may decide to customise their sex robots to resemble their objects of sexual fantasies, which could be people they fantasise about. I engage with this point again later. Next, I discuss the threats of sex robots to the sacredness of the human body.

### **The Objectification of the Human Body: A Strain to the African Values of Vitality and Sacredness of the Human Body**

According to the Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti (1969), African ontology has five leadership categories. At the top of the leadership is God, followed by the spirits, human beings, animals and plants, and then at the bottom are objects without biological life (MBITI 1969, 50). Africans believe that entities in the world are ordered according to this gradation to form a chain of being (CHITANDO, ADOGAME & BATEYE 2012). According to the abovementioned gradation, God is at the top because God is the source of everything,

followed by the ancestors because they are the founders of the clan who have survived the corruption of the body (METZ 2017, 165). Humans are directly below ancestors, followed by animals, plants, and non-biological entities such as rocks. The gradation signifies that the higher the being, the higher its importance; as Placide Tempels (1959, 30) puts it, the higher the being in the gradation chain, the more vital force the being possesses.

However, even though, according to the gradation of beings, God is at the top, which implies that God has a more vital force, the human being is very important because of the role that a human being plays. As Mbiti (1969, 92) argues:

...man (sic) is at the very centre of existence, and African people see everything else in relation to this central position of man. God is the explanation of man's origin and sustenance; it is as if God exist for the sake of man. The spirits are ontologically in the mode of God and man; they describe or explain the destiny of man after physical life.

Mbiti's view is also corroborated by the African philosopher Reginald Oduor's (2012) view of the human being. According to Oduor:

...killing of animals is considered to be morally permissible, while the killing of humans is not... In fact, in indigenous African thought, humans are *not* animals; rather, they are in a class of their own which is much higher than that of animals. (ODUOR 2012, 8)

Given this idea of the importance of human beings espoused by Mbiti and Oduor, it becomes evident that human life is also important. Africans consider human lives as important and sacred because of their vitality (BUJO 2009, 282). Vitality is taken here to mean "the highest moral good" (BUJO 2001, 6) that stems from God. As Tempels argues, "each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation; man...the kind of blessing, is, to the Bantu, to possess the greatest vital force" (1959, 30). In addition,

while some African theorists prize the argument on vital force as that which makes human life important, other African scholars prize the notion of interpersonal relationships between members of the community.

According to one African metaphysical account, human beings have vital force, and in another, they have intrinsic worth due to their ability to commune with members of the community. The commonality between both accounts is that Africans see human beings as special. Furthermore, due to the sacredness, which is associated with human life, a significant number of Africans are rigid when it comes to the treatment of human sexual organs and sexual relations (EMEAKAROHA 2002, 5). One might argue that treating human body parts as sacred by gestures, such as covering them, is a result of Western influence, precisely the “Old Victorian” influence. However, I would not delve into this argument due to space constraints. In this paper, I take it as a given based on *a posteriori* knowledge that Africans see their sex organs as sacred. Africans believe that the human reproduction organs, and the human person, in their entirety, are sanctimonious because of the sanctity of human life; as a result, Africans prize human life above every other thing. Given this African exposition of the human person as special and sanctimonious, creating objects for the purpose of sexual gratification to look like a human person is intuitively problematic. Let me make this clear using the following example.

As previously exposed, let us suppose that sex is considered a private affair in most sub-Saharan African cultures. This means that sexual conversations are not meant to be spoken about publicly. Furthermore, children are not meant to engage in sexual conversations. The very representation of sex robots, *prima facie*, communicates sexual fantasies and thoughts. One cannot explain their very existence and function without using sexual connotations. Now, let us suppose that my twelve-year-old child sees this sex robot that looks exactly like her and wants me to explain to her what this sex robot means, and I am obliged not to lie to her. As a result, I tell my child that a sex robot is used for sexual activity. Intuitively, I have created a possible correlation in this child’s mind that things that look like this robot are meant for sexual gratification. There is a possibility that this child might grow up thinking that everything that

looks like sex robots, including humans, are objects of sexual gratification.

If the above exposition/hypothesis is plausible and convincing, in that case, I can then argue that because of the importance placed on human beings, it follows that the very idea of creating sex robots with humanoid characteristics is problematic because of the possible idea such a creation advances. I contend that designing robots for sexual purposes to represent the human form gives us the impression that humans can be like sex robots. Such a move is a way of objectifying the human body, which is sacred and has intrinsic worth, and it is a “bad” thing to do. As a result, sex robots should be eradicated. However, for my argument not to be too rigid, I allude that they could be other tools that can be created for sexual gratification. Creating a dildo that resembles human sex organs, even though somewhat problematic, is not an “extreme” form of objectification. Finally, I briefly discuss how sex robots reinforce gender norms and beauty.

### **Sex Robots: A Reinforcement of Gender Norms and Beauty**

The serious concern about the designs of sex robots is their humanoid form which objectifies the human body. As Danaher (2017,12) points out, the description of the RealDoll prototype sex robots Roxxy/Rocky repleted a sexist symbolism. Roxxy/Rocky “tended overwhelmingly to represent human females, to adopt stereotypical and gendered norms of beauty and behaviour, and to perpetuate problematic attitude towards women” (DANAHER 2017, 12).

Sex robots are designed in a specific shape and “skin” colour because the designers of these robots come from a particular culture and environment, and their designs are the externalisation of their consciousness. However, the implication may result in users conceptualising a certain body type, shape, and colour as the supposed beauty standard. A critic might argue that humans naturally conceptualise ideal beauty norms and standards. Thus, it is pointless trying to stop such “norms”. In response, the fact that humans “naturally” conceptualise beauty standards does not make it right—idealising standards of beauty results in social vices, such as discrimination, body bias, and body-shamming. Sex robots can further such social ills as the robots are designed in certain ways

with certain features. Such features may then be considered ideals for members of our societies. I will not engage in this argument more than I have done here; Catherine Botha (2021) provides a similar argument on how robots are designed to replicate the bodies of their designers and the stereotypical norms that arise from such designs.

However, I point out here that sex with robots reinforces the idea that a particular gender ought to be passive during sex and the other active. For example, suppose that a user has a sex robot, and they activate the robot based on their preferences. In that case, it follows that the user ought to be considered as the active sexual “partner” while the robot would be passive in the sexual dynamics. Such sexual dynamics are not immediately problematic. However, it is possible that after a long period of engaging in such sexual dynamics, the user might begin to normalise and apply the sexual relationship/dynamics they have with the robot in their human encounters. Although the above hypothetical claim requires empirical studies to support it, one can intuitively argue that such a behaviour might be the case.

Before dealing with possible objections, I first address a minor objection that might arise from my exposition in this section. A critic might argue that there is no link between robots and humans that cause the former to objectify the latter. The critic might further argue that robots are objects produced to maximise human pleasure, and when used, it has nothing to do with the objectification of the human body. This objection is very plausible and deserves considerable thought.

In my exposition of sex robots, I pointed out that buyers of sex robots customise the robots to fit into their desired images and fantasies. Intuitively, one can claim that people have sexual fantasies of specific body types of particular people. Suppose that I approach a sex robot designer to design a sex robot that looks like a person that I sexually fantasise about, which is most likely the case. In that case, I have objectified that person by making them my object of sexual fantasy by designing sexual objects that look like them. To make this argument robust, I draw from Kant’s (1996) exposition of sexual “problematic” behaviours like masturbation. In the *metaphysics of morals*, Kant (1996) argues that sexual behaviours like masturbation violate moral laws because it treats persons as a means to an end. To

treat a person as a means to an end in this sense is reducing them to objects of sexual fantasies through the images of them the person who masturbates creates in their minds during masturbation. Here the link is the images of this person that the masturbator creates in their mind to enable them to masturbate. Even though the person is not having sex directly with this person, the person whose image is being used has been objectified. This link is also similar to the designs of sex robots. When we create sex robots and customise them to appeal to our sexual fantasies, we reduce people whose images we use as blueprints for the designs of these technologies into objects of sexual fantasies. Furthermore, we also use our conceptions of the “ideal” beauty standards when we design and customise sex robots, which is one of my worries in this paper. In the next section, I consider a more substantial objection that could be posed to my entire paper.

#### *Other Possible Objections*

One might argue that my argument completely ignores the primary reason for developing sex robots. Sex robots are designed to offer the possibility of intimacy for individuals who, for various reasons, cannot enjoy intimacy either because of disabilities or because they are considered “unattractive.” (MCARTHUR 2017; NUCCI 2017). Since sex is a human good, according to the World Health Organisation (MCARTHUR 2017), these individuals also have a right to enjoy sexual relations. Furthermore, the critic might say that producing sex robots can also be a means to substitute human trafficking for sex work; as a result, the design of sex robots may remove human subjects from these jobs by replacing them with these “agents” (DANAHER 2014; MCARTHUR 2017, 37-40).

#### *Response to the Objections*

The argument that sex robots may be a way out for those unable to enjoy intimacy for various reasons is necessary but not sufficient to warrant the design of sex robots. First, according to the *reciprocationist* views that I prize, sex can only be accepted morally when the feelings of affection can be reciprocal between the parties involved in the sexual activities (BENATAR 2002). Both parties have to reciprocate the love between each other. Sex robots cannot reciprocate feelings of affection to those who own them. One might



say that sex with sex workers does not also reciprocate affection. However, the difference is that sex workers can reciprocate affection, but sex robots currently cannot. In addition, sex robots are expensive, and most people with disabilities cannot afford them. The inequality gap may be exacerbated between these individuals and others.

Furthermore, why should sex robots be humanoid? I do not think there is any crucial necessity for these objects to look like humans in any way. As the author Tanja Kubes argues, and I agree, “modelling bodies after male (and female, my emphasis) pornographic fantasies is not the only (and certainly not the best) way to design a sex robot” (2019, 10). These robots can be made in different forms and still meet some form of satisfaction by these individuals; we do not need to objectify the human body to meet these satisfactions. In addition, the contention that sex robots might help reduce human trafficking for sex purposes is an empirical claim that cannot be confirmed. However, Danaher (2014) argues that it might not be the case that sex robots will replace sex workers because humans prefer the feeling of having sex with their fellow humans.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that sex robots and sex with robots are not African practices because these robots objectify the human body due to their humanoid characteristics. I contend that the human body is sacred because of its intrinsic worth and the vitality of human life; as a result, it is absurd to create objects that mimic human beings solely for sexual purposes. In addition, researchers and ethicists interested in this issue can use the ideas developed in this paper for future research on the implications of sex robots and sex with robots in other traditions like the Confucian communitarian traditions.

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