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## CONSTRUCTING AND MARKETING SEXUAL FANTASY: ANALYZING THE SOCIAL MEDIA OF SEX ROBOTS

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### Abstract

Since the release of sex robots in 2017 by RealDoll, they have been marketed as companions and sexual fantasies. Social media platforms provide RealDoll and its affiliates the opportunity to justify and celebrate the creation of a responsive sex robot directly to the public and potential consumers. To expand the fourth level of abstraction of mass media within the social construction of technology theory, this paper investigates the Instagram and Twitter pages of the technological segment of RealDoll, Realbotix, and the most prevalent RealDoll affiliate, Brickdollbanger. Framed by Fairclough's (2012) perspective of critical discourse analysis, I reviewed a combined 1,016 Tweets and Instagram posts to analyze the process of enrollment by key actors in relation to the design of sex robots and the sex robot industry. Results indicate humor and explicit images are utilized to market the sexual capabilities of the sex robots versus ideas of love and companionship. This paper adds to human-machine communication literature on the design of sex robots by exploring the sex-forward messaging not fully present in other marketing materials of Realbotix.

### Introduction

Marketing of sex technology used to be private and controversial; however, shifts in social attitudes in the United States have brought about a new form of openness (Comella, 2017). Though social media platforms restrict certain sexual content, sex companies' posts can operate at the borderline of acceptability, avoiding bans or deletion. This paper addresses one such case of sex marketing and technological innovation emerging within the sex technology industry: sex robots. The first public demonstration of a sex robot occurred in 2017, with RealDoll CEO Matt McMullen illustrating the Harmony model and her capabilities, encompassed in the robotic segment, Realbotix. This led to a media frenzy; however, with mass media interviews, McMullen (and Harmony) are restricted to certain community standards even if only

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published on newspapers' online platforms, so her sexual functions cannot be fully marketed.

This paper addresses two angles of social media marketing for the RealDoll sex robot: the Realbotix Twitter page and RealDoll affiliate Brickdollbanger's Instagram page. Though the Realbotix website focuses on the technological components and the robot in other social arenas, such as customer service, the Realbotix social media pages openly focus on the sexual and companionship functions. Brickdollbanger (Brick) operates uniquely within the company as an official "affiliate" and influencer with close access to RealDoll management and facilities, often teasing new releases and sales. Especially given that McMullen does not use or test the dolls himself (McMullen, 2018), he reached out to Brick for product testing and, essentially, marketing (Morris, 2018). By combining the official page of Realbotix and a corporate influencer, the paper expands recent scholarship on RealDoll messaging (Cheok & Zhang, 2019) and discourse around sex robots (Masterson, 2022) while empirically analyzing Karaian's (2022) conceptualization of the sexual fantasy of sex robots. Framed by Klein & Kleinman's (2002) expansion of social construction of technology theory (SCOT), this paper recognizes the impact and influence of mass-mediated discourse on the cyclical process of technological shaping (Johnson, 2015). Drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2012), social construction, and sexual fantasy, I ask: how is sexuality incorporated into Realbotix's social media marketing, and what micropolitical strategies are enforced between the social actors and the audience? From the social media pages, technological expansions of sex robots and the fantasy of an interactive but artificial lover are reinforced.

### **Sex robot representations**

Humanoid robots and their representations provide a unique frame onto which we can analyze future perceptions of human-machine relations and how the technology (and its design) reflects current power structures (Fortunati et al., 2021; Leach & Dehnert, 2021). Sex robots elucidate an additional layer of complexities, given their intimate and companionship nature (Dehnert, 2022). Within the concept of erotbots (Dubé & Anctil, 2021), sex robots can be defined as "any artificial entity" used for sexual pleasure with a "Humanoid form . . . Human-like movement/behavior . . . Some degree of artificial intelligence" (Danaher, 2017, pp. 4–5). Though confined, this definition emphasizes the embodied nature of sex robots within a still-evolving technology.

Nevertheless, media and public discourse have approached sex robots with fear, fascination, and projected imaginaries. Though similar to objectification and female representation in film, sex robots or gynoids represent anxieties surrounding feminism and technology (Devlin & Belton, 2020) and "sexual essentialism," the tendency to focus on the non-humanness of robots leading social groups to envision the future technological functions (Björkas and Larsson, 2021, p. 5). Fictional media often represents a cataclysmic ending, specifically for human users (Hawkes & Lacey, 2019; Döring & Pöschl, 2019), perhaps as a way to subliminally condemn the use of sex robots. Non-fiction, such as news broadcasts, centers on the incomplete or deficient user who would be interested in a robotic companion (Döring & Pöschl, 2019). Whether this messaging affects the public perception of robots is unclear; however, initial

research indicates women rate a sex robot as a threat and find their sexual functions discomfoting (Brandon et al., 2021; Szczuka & Krämer, 2018). When directly asked, men are more likely to rank a human woman's attractiveness over a robot; however, if evaluated implicitly, greater interest is implied (Szczuka & Krämer, 2017). The media, public, and users encompass social groups likely to shape the design of the technology and, ultimately, its possible social acceptance.

## **Social construction of technology**

SCOT analyzes the development of technology as a frame to understand the "*mutual construction or mutual shaping*" in society (Pinch, 2009, p. 45). Through a combination of social, cultural, economic, and political influences (Johnson, 2015), social groups build meaning-making by addressing the technology's controversy, problems, and intentions (Bijker et al., 2012). The process of negotiation can take years until the controversy is rectified and design stabilization occurs (Bijker, 1995). During this negotiation, specific designs and features may be encouraged (Klein & Kleinman, 2002). Through a review of social media, I approach the fourth aspect of SCOT: the sociocultural level (Klein & Kleinman, 2002). From this arena, powerful social actors spread their message encouraging the use of the product and its design, a process called enrollment (Bijker, 1995). I address the social media posts as "discursively regulated by symbolic media" for the intent of gaining power (Bijker, 1993, p. 128). Through the sociocultural level, McMullen and Brick have a direct connection with many viewers to shape impressions.

## **Method**

I utilize critical discourse analysis (CDA) framed from Fairclough (2012), which incorporates "social structures, practices and events" and the interplay of power and beliefs (p. 11). Focused on language choices and symbolic meanings (Erdogan, 2017), I reviewed the Twitter page of Realbotix from 2017-2023 and the Instagram page of Brickdollbanger from 2019-2023, when the pages were established. Posts on sex robots were thematically coded to determine design and marketing intentions. A final collection of 350 tweets and 666 Instagram posts, a total of 1,016 posts, were reviewed.

## **Initial results**

Realbotix has 2,277 followers; the parent company Abyss Creations also operates Instagram and YouTube pages, though less active. Brickdollbanger's Instagram page has 1,730 followers and also operates an OnlyFan page, signaling more sexually focused content. Twitter and Instagram both ban sexually explicit content and nudity (Twitter, 2022; Instagram, 2022); however, both Realbotix and Brick's pages illustrate a tendency to teeter between explicit and covered photos of the dolls' nipples, buttocks, and vaginas, though sometimes those covers are well-placed emojis. Unlike other messaging from RealDoll and McMullen, which focused on technological affordances and the robots' companionship benefits (Author, 2022), the Twitter page's overarching tone can be best described as emboldened. Realbotix builds a self-aware brand and humorously engages with the sexual functions of the robots. In a reply to a user, Realbotix (2017a) tweeted, "They are built for longevity, don't worry." Realbotix

acknowledges tropes of robots taking over the world but only addresses it through humor without context, asking the audience to laugh at its ridiculousness: “Definitely not taking over the world, yet” (Realbotix, 2018), and “We need good robots to kill bad robots” (Realbotix, 2017b). Brick similarly utilizes humor when photographing the dolls and robots in sexual positions or situations, attempting to create a sexual fantasy for followers that enhances the desire for RealDoll products. These findings illuminate the androcentric positionality of the profiles with less focus on companionship and more emphasis on sexual pleasure functions.

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