Appraisal of MA Thesis

*Fears and fantasies in human interactions with sex robots:
USA media discourse analysis 2016-2023*

Iuliia Gavrilova

There cannot be any doubt about the fact that Iuliia Gavrilova has chosen a highly topical issue, and one with immense capacity to disturb the consensus supporting the heteronormative gender and sexuality orders, but also uncover how integral they are to the definition of the human (superiority). Furthermore, set against the current heightened moral anxiety attached to development of other AI and its "intelligence", feminist queer crip analysis is what is necessary in the STS and other fields engaging with technology and AI.

The thesis is well and carefully written. With some exception, the style is clear, polished and sprinkled with humor. The author also takes care of the reader and provides regular sign-posts, and conclusions at the end of every chapter – this is highly appreciated and allows the reader to stay oriented and focused on the argument. Both the theoretical and methodological part of the thesis are of a high quality. The theoretical framework is logically laid out along the lines of feminist critiques of technology and AI development and points out the androcentric and masculinist history of the field. Where I was most excited was the discussion of affect and its transmission across the human/machine boundary and what role it plays in rethinking sexual desire, intimacy and gratification (I will return to this later). Chapter II summarizes author's methodological outlook and methodical process and procedures of the thesis. This methodological section is very precise and comprehensive, and well-beyond the usual standard. The author declares they will work with feminist CDA and provides a discussion of the principles of CDA, feminist discussions of the methods, and also links it to other cultural studies methods of working with textual materials (en/decoding, metaphors). They also give a detailed overview of how they selected the texts for analysis. I appreciated especially that the author put their professional knowledge and overview of IT to use and worked both with algorithmic tools as well as "manual" fine-tuning of the algorithmic search result, they also include an overview of both categories of texts chosen. With all this detail and precision, I felt a bit confused how many and which texts, though, ended in the final choice – was it the 44 plus the additional "manually" chosen 15? (p. 34-6) And, could the author speak to what guided their choice of the additional 15 articles?

I do have some commentary/questions mostly linked to how this robust theoretical and methodological framing of the thesis is put to analytical use:

Firstly, the research question –"This thesis asks how affects, emotions, thoughts, and values expressed by users are interpreted in the media in the light of the discourse on benefits and harm of sex robot use" (p. 24)—foreshadows a tension that I have traced in the analysis and that is the unclarified relationship of the media discourse and the users' experiences. Sometime, the authors make their statements based on the media phrasing, sometimes on the users. Why not say that the thesis reads media discourse on sex robots? Else, I believe the thesis needs to make a much stronger point and provide a clearer interpretation about how the media uses the presumed „user's experience" to legitimize their critique. Or, as in many instances, the author draws on the statements from the users, make clear in the text that this is in fact very mediated focus and framing of the experience.

Secondly – coming back to the transmission of affect – I was a little disappointed not to see this aspect worked out more in the analysis itself. It appeared at few times – for instance where the author talks about how the robot embodiment is given the capacity to react to touch--, but there are other places

where the „transmission" could (and should) be probed, given the fact the reader has been made expectant.

Thirdly, the analytical discussion is divided in two sections/chapters, one focusing on the moral-panic like „fears" while the other on „fantasies" attached to use of the sex robots. I do understand the logic of the bad and positive emotions, but both sections in fact discuss different versions of fantasies and projections, and thus this division does not really carry an analytical worth. Furthermore, the first section is longer than the other, while I actually believe that it is the second chapter where the author manages to get beyond the expectable. I believe the chapter on fears could serve as an introductory background against which to explore and give more space to more ambivalent and perhaps social-transformative visions of human-robot intimacy, and perhaps across broader scope of reproductive labor (e.g. robots in care work)

Fourthly, I would like to ask the author to explain her choice of referencing the analysed text by title of the journal, rather than by the citation norm standard. It would make sense there, where it would be part of the author's argument about the differences across the journals, but I trust the author argues the opposite – focusing on the preferred meanings and shared discourses, the publishing venue should carry less weight, actually. The author talks about the US media, but given the fact that several of the journals/publishing venues (BBC news, Reuters, Mirror, Guardian…) are not specifically oriented towards the US audience, and given the fact that the analysis itself is not contextualised against the US culture and politics, this specification does not seem to fit neatly.

Formalities:

The phrase "transmission of affect" I believe should be attributed to Brennan, and not used as a general turn of phrase, or author's own words. There are some issues with referencing (missing references, few paraphrases of Doering were too close to the original); not consistent use of "" vs. ' ' etc.

In conclusion, this is a well-researched, and informative thesis. I wish the author would elaborate and taken further the chapter 4 – and recommend that they do so in a publication based on this thesis. If they do so, I would also recommend to provide a broader discussion of the cultural and political context. I recommend the thesis for defence and suggest the evaluation of **A/excellent/výborně.**

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