

A SOCIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ON RELIGION, THE SACREDNESS OF SEX AND DIGITAL INTIMACY IN AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-DRIVEN AGE

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Abstract

In the digital era, the interplay between sexual intercourse as a sacred phenomenon and intimate connections with robots (sexbots) or in the virtual space has sparked intense sociological debate. As artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly mediates human interactions, traditional notions of intimacy, sex, and other kinds of emotional connections are being reconfigured. In principle, religious institutions, which have historically regulated sexual norms and values, are faced with the challenge of adapting to the changing landscape. The rise of digital intimacy raises questions about the sacredness of sex, the role of AI in facilitating connections, and the blurring of boundaries between the physical and virtual. This emerging trend also has consequences in the society. Hence, with insights drawn from Thomas Tweed's Crossing and Dwelling theory of religion and Emile Durkheim's functionalism, this discourse qualitatively examines the complex sociological dynamics between religious beliefs about the sacredness of sex, and digital intimacy in an AI-driven world. Data is gathered through literal readings as well as interviews and focus group discussions. This sociological exploration delves into the tensions and perhaps, synergies between religious standards, alien sexual cultures occasioned by technological advancements, and human experiences of intimacy. It considers how religious institutions and the society navigate the opportunities and challenges presented by AI-driven digital intimacy, including online dating, virtual relationships, and sex technology. Ultimately, this study bares the implications of these interactions and makes recommendations to guide the understanding of human connection, intimacy, and the sacred in a world where technology is increasingly intertwined with the most personal experiences of humans.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, digital intimacy, sex technology, sacredness of sex, sociological.

Introduction

Society and its norms and values continue to evolve. Cultures and practices are constantly tweaked, modified or outrightly changed as society progresses. Such is the lot of human sexual intimacy which has been conspicuously disrupted by technology in the modern age. In the past, sexual activities between partners were largely considered sacred, private and confined to certain practices. Specifically, sexual intercourse was defined around foreplay and actual penetration between heterogeneous partners. With technology, sexual intercourse broadened its horizons to include 'sexting' with humans and romantic chat with bots, virtual intercourse, use of sex toys, robots, virtual reality, pornography, and so on.

Religion, which claims authority in matters of sex and sexuality has also embraced technology in the digital era and is grappling with its realities in human lives and in their relationships. Therefore, the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are increasingly blurred. Artificial intelligence (AI) which defines the ability of machines to carry out tasks that would ordinarily require human intelligence, drive digital intimacy (intimacy in the digital space or enhanced by digital technology). It has transformed the way relationships, pleasure and religious norms and values are navigated. Apparently, AI which remains a major culture disruptor, affecting extant

societal values, has come to stay and the society needs to find ways to safely navigate around it.

This study therefore, embarks on this uncharted territory, interrogating age-old questions about the nature and state of sex and intimacy. How do religious traditions, which have long shaped understanding of sex and intimacy, adapt to the emergence of AI-powered sexbots, virtual reality technologies and so on? How do these technologies, in turn, contest or strengthen traditional religious and cultural norms surrounding sex and intimacy? How do individuals and communities negotiate the intersection of religion, sex, and sex technologies? What is the sociological impacts of AI-powered sex culture? These and more questions are addressed in this paper.

By taking a qualitative approach, this inductive paper presents a sociological discourse on the intersection of 'sacred' sex and AI which leads to digital intimacy. Theoretically, the paper draws from Thomas Tweed's Crossing and Dwelling theory of religion and Emile Durkheim's sacred and profane distinction of religion. Data is sourced from literal and evaluative readings of extant literature, semi-structured interviews and observation, and analyzed using the qualitative content analysis tool. By way of delimiting the paper, general inferences are drawn from the Nigerian experience with the three major religions practiced in the country – Christianity, Traditional religion and Islam in focus. The next section explores the theoretical basis of this study.

Theoretical framework

Crossing and Dwelling theory of religion

Thomas Tweed presented the 'Crossing and Dwelling' theory in his 2006 book entitled: *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. This theory offers a dynamic and all-embracing understanding of religion. Tweed argues that religion involves two related processes – crossing boundaries and dwelling in new geographies or locations. For him, religion goes across boundaries, embraces new contexts and transforms in response to changing conditions. In essence, Tweed notes that crossing boundaries involves mobility, exchange and interaction with other cultures, civilizations, identities and realities.

On the other hand, according to Tweed (2006), when religion traverses boundaries, it inhabits the new location, making sense of, establishing connections and forming identities with new cultures and frameworks in the new location. Tweed therefore contends that religion is not necessarily rigid, but rather fluid and presents multifaceted ways individuals and societies navigate their worlds.

Scholars eulogize Tweed's crossing and dwelling theory for its inclusivity and dynamic understanding. As regards inclusivity, Hall (2007, p. 543) notes that Tweed "stretches the category of religion to include a wide range of practices and experiences." In other words, religion simply embraces new practices in new cultures as they meet in the course of its movement. In the same vein, Pike (2008) appreciates that Tweed presents religion as itinerant and flexible. Be that as it may, defining religion as flexible and open to novel contexts is a position that religious fundamentalists would outrightly debunk.

On the flip side, Tweed's theory has been criticized over its focus on individual experience. McCutcheon (2007) opines that Tweed's focus on individual crossing and dwelling experience undermines the structural and institutional aspects of religion. More so, Tweed's broad definition of religion risks concealing the difference between religious and non-religious practices or the sacred and the profane. (Asad, 2008).

The sacred and profane in Emile Durkheim's sociological theory of religion

Durkheim presents his theory of religion in his seminal work: *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* published in 1912. He defines religion as: "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1912, pp. 47-48). A key point in his definition and theory of religion is the distinction between the realms of the sacred and the profane in religious thought. For him, the sacred represents those things that are set apart and revered like religious rituals, while the profane represents everyday mundane activities like eating, walking, cooking, etc. This includes everything that is not sacred to a religion and even those things/practices that actively oppose the sacred. Durkheim notes that it is society that creates and maintains the division between the sacred and the profane. In his treatise on Durkheim's sociological theory of religion, Kumar (2022, para. 2) states that "sacred elements are often surrounded by prohibitions and taboos. They demand respect and are associated with feelings of awe and wonder." One of the major pitfalls of Durkheim's theory in contemporary times, is its applicability in "increasingly secular and diverse modern societies, where the lines between sacred and profane may be more blurred." (Kumar 2022, para. 10).

In summary, Tweed's crossing and dwelling theory and Durkheim's sacred and profane perspective in his sociological theory of religion represents the two theoretical approaches that drive this discourse. While Tweed provides valuable insights into religion's flexible characteristics which explains religion's hobnob with technology in modern times, Durkheim provides a critical lens through which to analyze the dichotomy of realities in religious thoughts, highlighting a demarcation between religion and technology, what is considered sacred and what is seen as profane. By combining these somewhat contrasting theoretical views, this study strikes a balance on the subject of discourse.

Religion and the sacredness of sex

The notion of sex as sacred remains a subject of heated debate among scholars in contemporary times. Many religious traditions, however, consider sex as a sacred phenomenon which should be practiced only within certain sacred boundaries between human beings who are in a covenant of marriage and should be practiced with every sense of privacy and not in the public space.

On the contrary, sacred intimacy, which is a new concept in scholarship describes the ability to see the body as sacred and erotic energy as spiritual. The emphasis rests on the acknowledgement that the intense pleasure of coitus is a mystery which is deific and soul nourishing. Cooper-White (2017, p.156) claims that sacred intimacy "involves a deep sense of connection, vulnerability, and transcendence." Be that as it may, sacred intimacy describes an experience totally outside established religions. It simply describes the most intense pleasure, connection and soulful experience

between partners (Zurkin, 2017). There is also this practice referred to as ‘sacred sex.’ This is the practice of engaging in ‘sacred sexual encounters/rites’ as a religious ritual in pre-Christian times and in some religious traditions. Sacred intimacy resacralizes sex by emphasizing the emotional and spiritual significance of sex in the digital age. However, the sacredness of sex in this paper is not used in any of the above senses. Sacred intimacy and sacred sex lie outside the scope of this paper’s definition of the sacredness of sex.

The sacredness of sex here is used to refer to traditional beliefs and traditions that consider sex between couples as sanctioned by the Sacred and should be engaged in with some sense of awe, chastity (without animate or inanimate third parties) and reverence. In religion, sexual intimacy is also permissible only in marriage. The foregoing describes the position of Christianity, Islam and African Indigenous religions.

In Christianity for instance, T. Onyemaka (telephone communication, November 30, 2024) notes that sex between married people is sacred. He cites Hebrew 13:4 which states that marital sex is holy (sacred) and should not be contaminated. Therefore, it is wrong to have sex with someone or something else. Something in this case, includes technologies that enhance the practice, bots that substitute one’s partner, use of sexual videos of each other by married partners who work or are apart as a result of other engagements, and so on. According to him, these enhancers or substitutes are against scriptural dictates and has the capacity to subtly sever the bond between couples emotionally and sexually. Adultery, which is a sin in Christianity, can be committed by mere thoughts of it. “Everyone that keeps on looking at a woman so as to have a passion for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5: 28) Therefore, the use of inanimate objects or visuals to stimulate the thought is anti-Christianity. Wild sexual imaginations are considered idolatry in Christianity. “Deaden, therefore, your body members that are upon the earth as respects fornication, uncleanness, sexual appetite.” (Colossians 3:5) Onyemaka (telephone communication, November 30, 2024) further notes that Songs of Solomon models ideal Christian intimacy in marriage. This is without interferences or disruptions.

Nonetheless, In Islam, S. Ibrahim (personal communication, October 30, 2024) states that the institution of marriage – *mithaqan ghalidha* (مِيثَاقًا غَلِيظًا), translates to a “strong covenant” or “solemn pledge.” This emphasizes the sacredness of marriage before Allah. *Mithaqan ghalidha* signifies that marriage is not merely a social contract but a sacred bond blessed by Allah, requiring both partners to fulfill their roles and responsibilities with honesty, respect, and love. It underscores the importance of mutual rights and duties, with both partners accountable to Allah for honoring this covenant.

Furthermore, in keeping with Quran 24:30-31 where Allah addresses modesty and chastity as guiding principles for both men and women in a marriage covenant, S. Ibrahim (personal communication, October 30, 2024), notes that these instructions further reinforce that sexual relations are a sacred and exclusive bond, reserved for the marital relationship and protected by the values of modesty and purity. He avers that any act outside the physical intimacy between married people is unlawful. Citing Surah Al-Isra (17:32), which says: “And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is an immorality and evil as a way,” Ibrahim claims that apart from the connotation of keeping sexual activities within the boundaries of marriage, sex

technologies of varying sorts represent unlawful sexual intercourse which are evil. Be that as it may, African indigenous religions also hold sexual relations in marriage as sacred and outside marriage as abominable (Akintunde & Ayantayo, 2005).

Digital revolution of sex

As stated in the introductory part of this essay, the digital era has transformed the landscape of human intimacy, redefining traditional notions of sex. Beyond traditional foreplay and penetration, modern sexuality encompasses a vast array of technologies and practices. These include: sexting, use of sex toys, sexbots, sexual virtual reality, and other technological innovations. Today, society is agog with varying manifestations of intimacy powered by technology. Digital intimacy leverages artificial intelligence and other forms of technology in fostering intimacy.

In contemporary times, married and unmarried partners leverage availability of mobile phones, other electronic devices and the internet to exchange sexually explicit messages or images (Walker, et al., 2017). This is referred to as sexting or cybersex. Doring (2009) claims that 40% of internet users engage virtual sexual activities.

More so, the use of teledildonics (electronic sex toys that mimic actual human sexual interaction) is on the rise. According to Rosenberg (2017), teledildonics are technology-enabled devices that allow for remote stimulation. They are controlled by an app and prods long-distance intimacy. This is similar to AI-powered sexbots which are humanoid robots designed for sex.

That-notwithstanding, virtual reality and augmented reality have been embraced for sexual interactions too. Virtual reality, according to Lowood (2024, para.1) entails;

the use of computer modeling and simulation that enables a person to interact with an artificial three-dimensional (3-D) visual or other sensory environment. VR applications immerse the user in a computer-generated environment that simulates reality through the use of interactive devices, which send and receive information and are worn as goggles, headsets, gloves, or body suits.

Augmented reality is similar to virtual reality, but for the fact that augmented reality uses both physical and virtual environments, while virtual reality thrives only virtually. These realities are streamed to enhance sexual arousal and pleasure and have revolutionized sexual experiences.

The foregoing is a testament that sex has been redefined in the digital era. Married couples, as well as unmarried people are not exonerated. AI and other forms of technology introduced new forms of intimacy, connection, and pleasure. Today, people, old and young alike, easily access aggressive sex scenes (pornography). No thanks to a dearth of global media censorship. Even married people sometimes resort to it for sexual release. While some scholars highlight the benefits of this evolution of sex, there are concerns about the ethics of these novel realities as well as their impact on the society. This paper therefore explores sociological perspectives of the intersection between evolving digital intimacy and sex as sacred in religion.

The sacredness of sex, vis-à-vis AI powered intimacy

It has been established in this paper, that religion, particularly the main religions practiced in Nigeria, consider sex as a sacred act that God ordained and commissioned within the bounds of marriage. However, the rise of digital technologies have disrupted traditional religious and cultural norms surrounding sex and intimacy (Turkle, 2015). Religious leaders and scholars are grappling with these issues, seeking to reconcile traditional teachings with the realities of digital intimacy (Campbell, 2017). Durkheim's sacred and profane thesis best describes sex as sacred, in relation to digital intimacy. While traditional notion of sex dwells in the sacred domain, digital intimacy remains in the profane space.

The impact of the current digital revolution of sex cuts across both single people who engage in sex and married people. T. Oyelola (personal communication, November 2, 2024) espouses the view that AI powered intimacy or the use of technology by married people are permissible in many occasions. It helps partners contain their sexual urge in long distance marriages, enhances foreplay and/or ability to finish well and guards against promiscuity, adultery or emotional investment on someone else other than one's partner. It enhances pleasure and sometimes, it presents an opportunity to fulfill fantasies that cannot be met by one's partner.

Much as the benefits of AI powered intimacy appears valid, it contradicts religion's notion of the sacredness of sex. Among other things, it goes against religious traditions and scriptural principles of marital sex. In Herzfeld's (2017, p.91) words, "while sex robots might make interesting, even desirable sexual partners, in the end it is God and each other with whom we must be in a relationship." Religiously speaking, sex is not all about pleasure. It is inordinate affection, which religion frowns at, that predisposes one to a relationship with machines. Continuing, Herzfeld (2017, p. 91) states: "replacing relationship with one another with relationship to a machine is ultimately a form of idolatry, a substitution for the living with something made, and thus controlled, by our own hands." Sex is both religious/theological and social. As such, apart from religious issues, there exists myriad of other social and ethical issues with the deployment of sex technologies, especially when they are not therapeutic. Issues such as depersonalization and objectification of one's partner, addiction and over attachment to technology for sex to the detriment of human interaction, loss of emotional intelligence, as machines lack emotion, the problem of data compromise and privacy issues.

While exploring the psychological and social implications of humans' increasing reliance on technology, particularly robots, artificial intelligence and social media, Turkle sadly notes that humans expects too much from technology and less from each other or one another. They rather have superficial connections with humans and expect technology to provide emotional support, companionship and validation. Turkle (2011) however, argues that technology only guarantees connection without true intimacy. This represents an illusion of companionship which masks loneliness and leads to erosion of empathy and a sense of isolation.

As AI continues to evolve, it is essential to consider its religious implications in certain areas that are somewhat sacrosanct, such as human sexuality, and ensure that human spiritual and physical well-being, emotional intelligence, and healthy relationships are prioritized.

A sociological evaluation

No doubt, technology has greatly helped humans to navigate the society with ease. Technology, and more recently, AI is deployed in almost all facets of the society – healthcare, education, cooperate world, religion, and so on. The claim that the world today is driven by AI is not an overstatement. Digital evolution has swept across all areas of human society. Hence, the erstwhile assumption of a rift between religion and science has been debunked so long as each knows and maintains its boundaries. In the contemporary, religion has embraced technology to the point that scholars now study digital religion, worship and piety (Wariboko, Isichei & Nwanyanwu, 2022). To make sense of the intermingling of religion and technology in recent times, scholars apply digital methodologies in the study of religion.

Religion has meaning, functions and consequences in society. Religion has largely been the sole dispenser of attitudes towards sex and sexuality in the society, especially marital sex. Hence, sex is ‘christened’ sacred. Having delved into this so-called sacred phenomenon, AI and technology has taken it by storm. This has consequences for religion in the society. What follows, is a discussion on the effects of sex technology on religion in the society in the light of Tweed’s crossing and dwelling theory and Durkheim’s sacred and profane theory of religion.

Supplementing the most private of human connections with technology as a way to support human intimacy when humans are unavailable or inaccessible is in keeping with Tweed’s crossing and dwelling theory of religion. Sex, which is considered sacred has crossed boundaries into the technological side of the divide and is adapting to realities of the digital world. This is true of religion in many other areas where religion crossed geographical boundaries, digital space, cultural sensibilities and dwelt with little or no contentions. In line with Tweed’s thesis, religion is not rigid and therefore responds to change gracefully. As a matter of fact, religion should be itinerant or it gets stale and left behind. However, in Tweed’s presentation, the demarcation between religious and non-religious practices is equivocal. Also, he did not clearly state whether it is in all cases that religion crosses boundaries and adapts in the new environments without a significant disruption in society. Caution is therefore required, so as to avoid negative social outcomes that could arise from this mingling.

For instance, E. Nzekwe (personal communication, November, 3, 2024) decries the fact that AI powered intimacy have the capacity to replace human intimacy. According to her, partners may begin to prioritize technology over human connection. With such depersonalization in society, individuals will begin to rely more on technology for intimacy making it challenging to connect meaningfully with one’s spouse. This results in social isolation which entails the absence of social interaction with one’s spouse in this particular instance and with friends, family and the society. Isolation from one’s spouse as a result if dependence on technology for intimacy disrupts human intimacy. Automation in many sectors in the society has seen to the replacement of humans with machines and AI. This is not all together negative. However, in a situation as strong as sexual intimacy which involves a great deal of emotions, technology, which lacks emotions, cannot substitute the original in the deepest sense of the word.

Nevertheless, Durkheim holds a diametrically opposed view from Tweed. He sees a clear difference between the sacred and the non-sacred. For him, if it is religion, then it has to be sacred - set apart, forbidden and revered. Every other thing outside this is profane – ordinary, common, not sacred. Digital intimacy challenges traditional notions of sacred sex. Therefore, intimacy through digital technologies is profane. It

follows therefore that sex can either be sacred or profane, depending on the context. The commodification of intimacy by digital intimacy technologies further strengthens the argument that digital intimacy is profane. It reduces sex to consumer product that can be purchased with currency since sexbots, virtual reality gadgets, sex toys, computers and other devices for cybersex and sexting are all purchased. C. Wariboko (personal communication, November 3, 2024) opines that availability of sex gadgets heighten human objectification in the society. The gadgets are objects and this leads to the erroneous objectification of humans too, treating and handling human partners as mere objects for one's pleasure. In the real sense, intimacy in religious perspective, is not just for a utilitarian or hedonistic experience. It is the line between the sacred and the profane that distinguish religion in the society. Once that line is blurred or erased, especially religion may become invisible. Intimacy is a relational experience that fosters meaningful relationships and connections between couples in the society. McGuire (2018) emphasizes the import of embodied experience in sexual intimacy. Trivializing sex by outsourcing it to technologies that lack emotions is tantamount to trivializing religion and its unique functions in the society. This validates the position of critiques of Tweed's crossing and dwelling theory of religion who consider it broad and capable of concealing the difference between religious and non-religious practices.

Recommendations

Individuals and communities should make efforts to reclaim the sacredness of sex and intimacy by emphasizing their emotional, spiritual and relational aspects which digital intimacy lacks. The responsibility for proper and intentional sexuality education lies squarely on the family, religious bodies, schools and the government.

It is essential to prioritize responsible innovation that promote human flourishing and social cohesion. It is therefore, imperative for religion to reclaim the sacredness of sex and intimacy in the digital age. Science reclaimed its domains from religious influence as soon as it came on board. Religion should similarly, reclaim its authority on intimacy and sacred sex. This is to be championed by religious leaders.

To continue to push the boundaries of knowledge forward, nothing is foreclosed in research. As such, scholars of religion, sociology, culture, and so on are encouraged to explore knowledge frontiers for possible windows for 'safe' religious adaptation of digital intimacy without negative consequences on social relationships. Psychologists and researchers in the medical field are also nudged to explore possible areas digital intimacy can be employed therapeutically with adequate impact assessment for the society.

As AI and other technologies continue to invade religion, its beliefs and practices, as well as its study, to continue to make sense of religion in the digital era, it is high time scholars of religion developed methodologies or templates for safe deployment of same in the praxis and study of religion. This will reposition religion to be a step ahead and preempt socially disruptive technological innovations under its auspices. Particularly, scholars should attempt to develop guidelines for healthy, sacred digital intimacy practices.

Conclusion

The intersection of religion, sex, and technology presents a complex and evolving landscape. As AI reshapes and creates new space for intimacy, religion's influence on sexuality and traditional notions of sacred sex are challenged. This discourse explored this interplay from the perspectives of Thomas Tweed's crossing and dwelling theory of religion, navigated the tensions between the sacred and profane, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding.

The digital era's emphasis on convenience, accessibility, and anonymity has commodified intimacy, reducing it to a consumer product. Without much recourse to religious cum ethical considerations. This reductionism overlooks the emotional, spiritual and relational aspects of human intimacy and is unhealthy for social flourishing. Social isolation potentially has negative effect on humans' mental and emotional wellbeing as members of the society. Intimacy, as endorsed and reimagined by various religious traditions, emphasizes connection, vulnerability, and transcendence. It recognizes sex as a profound expression of human experience.

Therefore, to reclaim the sacredness of sex in an AI driven age and foster deeper human connections for smooth running of the society, the emotional and spiritual significance of sex must be prioritized by individuals and communities over utilitarian approaches. More so, religion must reclaim its authority on sex which is sacred, fostering inclusive, embodied understanding of intimacy and addressing the lacuna between traditional teachings and modern realities.

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