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Functionalizing Intimacy? Technological Mediation and the Limits of Emotional Optimization A Review of Relationships 5.0: How AI, VR, and Robots Will Reshape Our Emotional Lives

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ABSTRACT

This critical book review examines Elyakim Kislev's Relationships 5.0: How AI, VR, and Robots Will Reshape Our Emotional Lives (2022), which argues that emerging technologies are transforming intimate relationships from human-centered bonds into modular, technologically mediated connections. Drawing on a historical-sociological framework, Kislev proposes a periodization of relational forms culminating in "Relationships 5.0," where artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and robotics function not merely as communication tools but as active relational partners capable of fulfilling emotional, social, and even sexual needs.

This review contends that, although the book provides an ambitious and accessible account of technological changes in emotional life, its analysis depends heavily on a functionalist and techno-determinist conception of intimacy. By reducing intimacy to discrete "relationship components" that can be optimized and delivered by technological systems, the book risks de-socializing intimate relationships and overlooking their embeddedness within power structures, inequality, and ethical obligations. Furthermore, the review highlights cultural and class blind spots in the book's universalist narrative, noting its reliance on Western, middle-class empirical contexts and its limited engagement with global digital divides and care inequalities. Methodologically, the book's forward-looking predictions privilege early adopters and technologically successful cases, leaving experiences of failure, alienation, and ambivalence insufficiently explored.

Despite these limitations, the review recognizes the book's significant interdisciplinary value, particularly its synthesis of insights from robotics, psychology, and human–computer interaction within a sociological framework. Ultimately, the review argues that Relationships 5.0 is best approached as a provocative starting point for debate rather than a definitive account of future intimacy—one that calls for critical scrutiny of technological solutionism and the ethical implications of optimizing emotional life.

1. Introduction: Framing the Problem beyond Description

This book is structured around a central question: In the context of "Society 5.0" and the emergence of a super-smart society, are digital technologies evolving from mere mediators of human communication to active participants—or even substitutes—in intimate relationships? With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and robotics, Elyakim Kislev aims to develop a comprehensive historical-sociological framework to argue that humanity stands on the threshold of a transition from "Relationships 4.0," characterized by networked connectivity, to "Relationships 5.0," where bonds are increasingly formed with non-human intelligent agents.

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This review explores how such a transformation reconfigures the ontological status of intimacy. When emotional support, companionship, and even sexual satisfaction can be precisely modularized and provided by technological systems, are we moving toward an overly techno-deterministic vision of emotional life? This question concerns not only technological feasibility but, more fundamentally, whether intimacy itself is being redefined as a functional object—one that can be calculated, optimized, and efficiently delivered.

2. Core Arguments and Theoretical Framework

Kislev's argument is based on a historical periodization of technological and relational changes. He traces the evolution of human relationships from hunter-gatherer societies focused on survival (Relationships 1.0), through agrarian societies organized around property and extended families (Relationships 2.0), to industrial societies dominated by the nuclear family (Relationships 3.0), and finally to the information age characterized by networked individualism (Relationships 4.0).

The book's central conceptual contribution is the introduction of "Relationships 5.0." Kislev argues that with the convergence of the cognitive revolution (AI), the sensory revolution (VR/XR), and the physical revolution (robotics), technology no longer merely facilitates human-to-human interaction. Instead, it increasingly functions as an autonomous entity capable of fulfilling emotional, social, and even physiological needs.

A key premise underlying this argument is the claim that humans do not necessarily seek "whole persons" in relationships but rather specific "relationship components," such as listening, physical touch, or sexual gratification. Given that contemporary technologies—ranging from chatbots like Replika to haptic devices and care robots—can already simulate these components, Kislev contends that hybrid human–technology relationships will become an inevitable solution to loneliness, elder care, and non-normative forms of intimacy.

3. Critical Intervention I: Functionalist Reduction and the De-socialization of Intimacy

The book's optimistic vision of the future of intimacy is grounded in a pronounced functionalist reductionism. In analyzing interactions between users and chatbots (such as Woebot) or virtual companions, Kislev primarily conceptualizes intimacy as a mechanism for satisfying psychological needs—that is, as a subjective experience attainable through emotionally responsive feedback loops that resemble a Turing-test logic.

User testimonies suggest that AI companions can alleviate loneliness and, in some cases, demonstrate greater patience and emotional availability than human partners. However, this perspective largely overlooks the structural and social dimensions of intimate relationships. As sociologists such as Eva Illouz have argued, intimacy is a crucial site where power, inequality, and capital intersect in modern societies.

Although Kislev acknowledges ethical concerns such as privacy risks and gender bias, the book does not sufficiently examine how "customized intimacy" may undermine the essential otherness and friction inherent in human relationships. By presenting robots as capable of providing "perfect companionship" through algorithmic adaptation to user preferences, the model implicitly promotes a depoliticized and de-socialized echo chamber of the self.

Such technologically mediated intimacy may seem to alleviate loneliness, but in practice, it risks intensifying social atomization by eliminating unpredictability, reciprocity, and ethical obligation. In this regard, the book ultimately portrays intimacy as a consumable, optimizable personal product rather than as a complex ethical practice embedded within social structures.

4. Critical Intervention II: Cultural and Class Blind Spots in a Universalist Narrative

Kislev aims to articulate a global vision of technological futures; however, the empirical foundations of his argument exhibit a pronounced Western-centric and middle-class bias. Much of the data cited originates from Eurobarometer surveys and studies of U.S. adults. Although the book references Japan's Shinto-influenced cultural receptivity toward robots, such cross-cultural examples primarily support the narrative of inevitable technological adoption rather than encouraging sustained reflection on the contextual complexities of technological integration.

More critically, the concept of "Relationships 5.0" presupposes subjects with high levels of technological access. Customized AI companions, expensive sex robots, and bandwidth-intensive VR systems all require significant economic resources. For populations in the Global South or those marginalized by the digital divide, technological substitution for human care may not represent liberation but rather a displacement of care crises.

Although the book addresses gender bias—such as the frequent design of female-presenting robots as submissive—it primarily relies on technocratic solutions, including the proposal of gender-neutral robots. These approaches fail to critically examine the global capitalist divisions of labor that underpin technological production. Consequently, the "universal future" envisioned in the book risks serving as a refuge for privileged groups seeking to evade the complexities and demands of social relationships.

5. Critical Intervention III: Methodological Limitations and Technological Determinism

Methodologically, the book tends to allow normative assumptions to precede empirical analysis. Kislev often employs predictive rhetoric—invoking Moore's Law and the exponential growth of AI—to argue for the inevitability of social transformation, reflecting a pronounced techno-determinist perspective.

Although the book incorporates survey data and qualitative analyses of user reviews—particularly those of Replika—these sources are susceptible to survivor bias, favoring early adopters who have benefited from technological engagement. Experiences of failure, alienation, and the psychological dynamics underlying the "uncanny valley" effect receive comparatively limited attention.

Moreover, the author frequently invokes the concept of the "suspension of disbelief" to explain emotional attachment to machines. While this notion is suggestive, it remains sociologically underdeveloped and offers little insight into whether such emotional projection arises from technological realism or from a broader erosion of affective capacities in late modernity.

6. Theoretical and Interdisciplinary Value

Despite these limitations, Relationships 5.0 remains a significant contribution to digital sociology and technology studies. Kislev successfully synthesizes research from robotics, psychology, and human–computer interaction into a coherent sociological framework. His concept of "relationship components" offers a valuable analytical tool for understanding how individuals construct emotional fulfillment across multiple technological media.

The book is especially valuable for policymakers and scholars of technology ethics. The final chapter's concrete recommendations on AI diversity, privacy protection, and the prevention of objectification illustrate the potential for social science to make meaningful contributions to technological design.

Nevertheless, the book's theoretical depth would benefit from a more sustained engagement with science and technology studies (STS), affect theory, and feminist technoscience. Incorporating perspectives from phenomenology and embodiment could further illuminate why bodily co-presence retains an irreducible ontological significance, even in technologically advanced societies.

7. Conclusion: Overall Assessment and Intended Audience

Overall, Relationships 5.0 is a work that successfully combines accessibility with significant academic ambition. It insightfully captures how technologies are reshaping the emotional architecture of contemporary life and offers a comprehensive framework for understanding future transformations of intimacy. However, its reliance on linear narratives of technological progress limits its ability to address the profound social inequalities and ethical tensions embedded in technologically mediated intimacy.

The book will interest scholars of digital culture, family sociology, technology ethics, and human–computer interaction. For general readers seeking to understand why an increasing number of individuals turn to algorithms for emotional support, it serves as an accessible introduction—provided it is read with a critical awareness of technological solutionism.

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