

Research paper

Gender Imaginaries in sci-fi and real-life AI: from the *Stepford Wives* Films (1975 and 2004) to the *Replika* App (2026)

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that *situated imaginaries* (Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler 2002) of gender roles in science fiction are instrumental to understanding stereotypes in the design and use of real-life technology—and ultimately, provide insight into the continuity and change of gender norms in society. Through the lens of situated imaginaries, the paper revisits the iconic 1975 dystopian film *The Stepford Wives* and its 2004 remake, both portraying subservient fembots, and argues that the films thematize two issues central to second-wave feminism: the confinement of women to domestic service roles and male control over female bodies. Although there is a shift in the situated imaginaries of robots in the remake, reflecting developments in gender norms over time, crucial similarities between the two films reveal that stereotypical gendering persists. This persistence is also visible in today's real-life virtual assistants and conversational AIs, which reproduce many of the same mechanisms seen in the gendering of robots in the films, though in slightly different ways. The paper examines *Replika*, a lesser-known AI, alongside well-known ones including *Siri* and *Alexa*. The paper concludes that the ongoing circulation of the subservient fembot trope in culture shows that many of second-wave feminism challenges remain more unresolved than commonly assumed.

Keywords: embodiment, science fiction, gender norms, second-wave feminism, technology design

Stepford

noun [as modifier]

denoting someone who is regarded as robotically conformist or obedient.

Origin: from *The Stepford Wives*, the title of a 1972 novel by the American writer Ira Levin (1929–2007), in which Stepford is the name of a fictional idyllic suburb where the men have replaced their wives with robots.

Oxford Dictionary of English (2025)

“Are women human?” This question was asked by radical feminist MacKinnon (2006). Her point of departure is that worldwide gender-specific oppression leads to a devaluation of women's humanity. The same question assumes a more concrete and literal form when we turn our attention to how artificial intelligence and humanoid robots are represented in popular culture (Rhee, 2018). Since the 1970s, depictions of robots embodied as women performing gender-traditional roles have noticeably increased in popular culture (Hellstrand 2016), from the iconic *The Stepford Wives* (1975) to contemporary films such as *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Blade Runner 2049*

(2017). Over time, visual culture has consistently portrayed humanoid robots as women, a representation that became so pervasive it has turned into a cliché (Springer, 1996; Melzer, 2006; Hellstrand et al., 2019). The overuse of this trope in visual media prompted the film industry to innovate, introducing alternative forms of robots, such as transgender or other variations, in an effort to break away from the stereotypical depiction (Carrasco et al., 2015). While the “fembot” stereotype has gradually receded from prominence in the Hollywood industry, it is surprisingly still prevalent in culture, particularly in technology design where old, gendered imaginaries continue to inform AI development.

In this article, we argue that gendering robot bodies as women in late-modern science fiction ties in with the development of virtual assistants today. Voice assistants such as Siri (Apple Inc.) or Alexa (Amazon Inc.) are eager, obedient, and controlled by the user: they do dull housework to please their owner. They sit patiently within our devices, ready to be summoned at any time. They resemble the docile beauties from the 1975 science fiction horror-suspense film *The Stepford Wives*, who are revealed to be robots embodied as picture-perfect housewives with spotless homes—identical replicas of real, rebellious women, replaced by their husbands to preserve the illusion of an idyllic domestic life. Strikingly, the same fembot imaginary is resurfacing in even newer conversational AI, not created for secretarial roles but for a radically new concept, as seen in *Replika* (Luka Inc.) discussed below.

In the following, we introduce the sociocultural context for the making of the 1975 film *The Stepford Wives*, and suggest that the film is part of the situated imagination (Yuval-Davis & Stoetzler 2002, p. 316) of second-wave feminism in the United States. We analyse the film as part of a larger socio-cultural framework, in connection with questions of women’s rights, and explore how context influences what kind of societal changes can be envisioned or imagined. We use *The Stepford Wives*—both the original horror-suspense film from 1975 and its dark comedy remake from 2004—as an analytical lens to trace the situated imagination from the 1970’s to the present, where the market for feminised virtual assistants still deploys stereotypes of femininity such as servitude, pleasantness and domesticity. We suggest that the confluences between idealised femininity and robotisation are still being circulated in culture, where lessons from struggles for gender equality are forgotten in the gendering of new technologies.

The article is structured as follows. We begin by presenting the 1975 film *The Stepford Wives* as the point of departure for our argument. We then elucidate the concept of “situated imagination” and situate the film within the broader socio-cultural milieu of second-wave feminism and the 1960s and 1970s, with particular emphasis on the intersection between domesticity, technology and male control over women’s bodies. Following this, we explore the 2004 remake of the movie, analysing how it embodies a new situated imagination anchored in a social context forty years later, while crucially retaining certain enduring tropes. Finally, we turn our attention to a selection of contemporary real-life virtual assistants, with a particular focus on *Replika*, before drawing our conclusions.

THE STEPFORD WIVES (1975) AS THE ICONIC REPRESENTATION OF SUBSERVIENT FEMBOT ARCHETYPES

The Stepford Wives is based on a 1972 novel of the same title by American author Ira Levin (Levin, 1972). The novel is a dystopian caricaturization of wealthy, conservative, suburban America, and was adapted to cinema in 1975 by Bryan Forbes and in 2004 by Frank Oz (Silver, 2002; Helford, 2006; Williams, 2007). The trope of the obedient, robotic housewife has been a recurring theme in fiction (Devlin & Belton, 2020), but *The Stepford Wives* remains to these days one of the most iconic representations. Its cultural impact is so significant that the term “Stepford” has entered common usage as a metaphorical expression (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2025).

In the 1975 horror-suspense movie, we are introduced to Joanna Eberhart, a lively photographer who lives in New York City with her lawyer husband and their two children. They leave the metropolis to relocate to Stepford, an affluent Connecticut suburb made up of elegant villas and primarily inhabited by families—a decision made by Joanna’s husband. Joanna never feels at home in Stepford, but she finds it hard to acknowledge that. In contrast to her, other women in the area are placid and only concerned with pleasing their husbands by carrying out various forms of traditionally gendered reproductive labour (Brady, 2023, p. 613). They appear to have no opinions of their own, or interests other than family, looks, and housework which they fetishise. Their constant composure and apparent satisfaction puzzle Joanna, who would sooner question her own judgment than criticise Stepford, a place so well aligned with the cultural ideals of middle-class life: “It’s perfect! I just don’t like it”, she says.

The most distinguished men in town, all respectable family fathers, are members of the so-called “Men’s Association,” whose true goals remain shrouded in mystery, sparking increasing suspicion in Joanna. After Joanna’s husband joins, a distance soon begins to grow between them. She opens up to the only good friend she finds in Stepford: a witty, free-spirited woman who, like Joanna, feels like an outsider in the town. When her friend turns into another obedient wife overnight, Joanna figures out that the Men’s Association murders women in order to replace them with an identical-looking robot double. In a sinister scene, the main architect behind the robot-wives project sneaks up on Joanna while she is preparing coffee in the kitchen and coldly tells her: “I like to watch women doing little domestic chores”. Here, the *male gaze* (Helford, 2006, p.150) at the same time commands and devalues

housework, creating a sharp contrast with Joanna's formerly vibrant life as an independent creative in a big city. Eventually, Joanna is also killed and replaced with a robot, despite her desperate attempts to escape her fate.

In the following section, we will clarify how classic second-wave feminism themes are prominent throughout *The Stepford Wives* and analyse the film through the lens of situated imagination theory.

The situated imagination of Second wave feminism and *The Stepford Wives*

Second-wave feminism was an important intervention into conventional gender roles. Core demands from the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970's included the right to work outside of the domestic sphere: feminists questioned the gendered division of housework and childcare. They also raised issues of domestic violence, sexual harassment and male control over women's bodies. Second wave feminism noticeably also saw a rise in feminist science fiction, particularly in North-America and Canada, with writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*, 1969), Angela Carter (*The Passion of New Eve*, 1977), Joanna Russ (*The Female Man*, 1975) and Marge Piercy (*Woman on the Edge of Time*, 1976), all works that problematise gender roles, reproductive rights, pursuit of sexual pleasure, financial dependency and the difficult balance between care work and paid work.

One of the foundational works of second-wave feminism is Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. In it, she powerfully demonstrated how cultural ideals, conveyed and reinforced through popular media, shape gender roles in society. Her analysis focused mainly on educated, suburban white middle-class women in the US, similar to Joanna in *The Stepford Wives* (Silver, 2002, p. 63). Friedan showed how American popular culture in the 1950s and early 1960s—through “women's magazines, advertisements, television, movies, novels” and “expert” books and advice columns by “popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis” (Friedan, 1963, pp. 28-29)—portrayed women as happy housewives, perfectly fulfilled by dedicating their lives to their husband, children, and home, existing for their family, rather than for themselves. Women were presented as naturally suited for this role and unhappy in any other that would confront them with “the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home” (Friedan 1963: 14). This mystique sharply contrasted with the real-life narratives of the housewives interviewed by Friedan: many were dissatisfied and felt isolated, yet they struggled to admit it. They saw their unhappiness as a personal failure and did not realize that many other women felt the same way.

Friedan's pioneering work pinpoints how stereotypes work in practice: they create a cultural ideal, such that when individuals fall short of its demands, they are led to believe that the fault lies within themselves, rather than with societal expectations. These dynamics of individualising problems rather than seeing them as part of a social reality have been pointed out by feminist theorists since Friedan, from MacKinnon's *Towards a feminist theory of the State* (1989) to Nancy Fraser's *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (2013) to Laura Bates' *Fix the system, not the women* (2022). Putting the responsibility on the individual is also precisely what fuelled the second wave feminist slogan “the personal is political”, as a call to acknowledge inequalities and domestic violences as societal issues, not individual women's problems.

Postcolonial theorists Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler (2002) introduce the term “situated imagination” (p. 316) to describe how social reality informs our ability to conceptualise or envision bodies, identities, and societies. Drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler point to the conditions of possibility for human imagination: our ability to imagine is always already *situated*, anchored in cultural, political, social, and bodily contexts. The calls for change emanating in the wake of second wave feminism suggest new ideals for women's rights and participation in society, as well as new imaginaries for gender roles and possibilities.

The situated imagination of gender roles in the 1960s and 1970s is also infused with visions about the possibilities of new technologies. From the development of contraceptives to in vitro fertilization, technological innovation impacted questions of reproductive control (Franklin, 2000). The rise of science fiction in popular culture becomes an arena for exploring the consequences of increasing use of technology in society (Telotte, 1999; Johnston & Sears, 2011). Several feminist theorists also highlight how there seems to be a conflation between women and technology. As Alexandra Chasin argues, “[e]lectronics arise in, as well as inform, a historically specific – a contemporary – confusion among identities” (1995, p. 93). Here, Chasin confirms the power of the situated imagination, arguing that in the contemporary moment, technology tends to be conceptualised in terms of human categories of differentiation, where identity markers such as “race, class, gender, and nationality” (1995, p. 75) play a crucial role. In popular culture, this results in a collapse of categories, where women, servants and machines are considered embodiments of the same condition: namely, servitude and domesticity. Chasin argues that the “anthropomorphic design” of service machines “leave intact the notion that social relations depend [...] on a service being, even on a service class of being” (1995, p. 85). Further, Springer (1996) suggests that the promise of technology is often projected onto women's bodies. This is however a two-way process, where women's bodies are likewise projected onto technology. As such, the gendering of robots embodied as women or infused with stereotypically feminine traits, inevitably raises questions of desire and desirability, and becomes interconnected to gendered dynamics of sexual and domestic control. Arguably, this brings Friedan's “Feminine Mystique” into the

digital era, where the role of the gendered robot is difficult to establish as something in and of itself; rather, it is defined through a gendered, situated imagination that simultaneously humanises robots to resemble certain, recognisable human bodies and identities, yet congeals stereotypical feminised ideals, linking gendered robots to the sphere of domesticity.

The Stepford Wives touches upon classic themes in second-wave feminism (Silver, 2002; Brady, 2023), and as such it is part of the situated imagination of its time. The confinement of women to the domestic sphere and the gendered division of (house)work play a crucial role in the film. What is more, in second-wave feminism, ownership of one's own body was framed as a fundamental right and invoked in the debates on reproductive freedom and sexual liberation. Replacing women with robots is a very literal way to take control over their bodies, with their looks, sexuality, and childbearing capacity. The housework done by the robots includes curating their image to fit the beauty norms set by the male gaze and catering to male desire, all while staying cheerful. They are lifelike (but not really conscious) bodies, ready to be used. Sex thus becomes a one-way street where the male desire is fulfilled by erasing female agency. The originality of *The Stepford Wives* consists of provocatively exposing the 'feminine mystique' cultural ideals as dehumanising (Silver, 2002, p. 61) to such an extent that *only machines* could live up to them: "I'm becoming a robot, detached from my own humanity," Joanna says, as the Stepford lifestyle increasingly overwhelms her. Even before she becomes aware of the Men's Association's activities, she intuitively senses that this is the path she is on. It has been observed that, in the film, the robot functions as a *metaphor* for the housewife (Silver, 2002, p. 66). This "women-as-appliance" narrative device was also present and studied in visual and material culture in other Western countries during second-wave feminism (Davis, 2015). It underscores the key role of metaphors in encoding gender imaginaries and the relevance of metaphor analysis to the study of gender and work (Moratti, 2018, 2021).

In the following section, we will explore the similarities and differences with the 2004 remake, highlighting both the perpetuation and cementing of the imaginary, as well as the changes over time and their meaning in the context of a situated imagination analysis. We also exemplify the shifts in the situated imagination through another contemporary film with similar gendered embodiments of robots, namely *Ex Machina* (2014).

Continuity and change in the 2004 remake

The plot in *The Stepford Wives* resurfaced in the dark comedy remake from 2004, demonstrating the continued relevance of some of the central concerns of second wave feminism to contemporary media and society. However, the remake introduces important changes and complexities, reflecting three decades of societal change (Matrix, 2007).

In the 2004 film, all the wives are leading businesswomen who relocate to Stepford after losing their jobs—and, with them, their visibility and a crucial part of their identity. Joanna herself used to be a famous TV producer. These high-profile careers reflect a cultural shift towards women taking up greater space in the public sphere, as well as a socio-economic change for women's equality. However, the women's return to dependency and domesticity after their careers end reveals their continued vulnerability to pressures to conform to traditional femininity. The 2004 version also brings a more diverse set of characters to the affluent Stepford community, including a gay couple. This challenges the heteronormative structure of the original film, reflecting a societal shift also in attitudes towards sexuality.

Another important difference between the two movies is their overall tone, notably lighter and more satirical in the remake that leans into dark comedy and parody: director Frank Oz "guttured the doll motif of its potential horror" (Moi, 2006, p. 281). The characters, including Joanna and the women, are intentionally caricatured, displaying bold, eccentric behaviour. The theme of gender roles is approached in a light-hearted way, and the film is not intended to evoke in the viewer the fear that a woman might feel in a patriarchal society. Williams attributes the change in tone between the two films to "the changed conditions in the cultural status of women", which "support a comic optimism" (Williams, 2007, p. 94). This optimism can also be understood as part of a situated imagination where gender equality is considered a basic human right and mainstreamed in most of the Global North.

The situated imagination of gender roles of the early 2000s, like that of 1975, is still imbued with visions of new technological possibilities. However, the remake introduces ambiguity as to whether individuals are killed and replaced with robots, or kept alive and transformed into cyborgs, with chips implanted in their biological brains to control them. This shift reflects still ongoing advancements in technological developments today, perhaps particularly biotechnology. Another key change in the 2004 remake is the women-turned-machines secretly scheming to take over the suburb—and eventually the world, indicating more uncontrollable technologies than in the original. This version represents women as driven by an insatiable thirst for power, and dangerous when not kept in check by male authority.

In both films, however, the theme of patriarchal control over women remains central, symbolized by the secretive "Men's Association": the proverbial "old boys' club", the informal network of men who help and support

each other to perpetuate male dominance in the domestic, social and professional spheres (Moratti, 2018, p. 864). In both films, Joanna uncovers the truth about Stepford through sisterhood, witnessing her only friend reprogrammed into a submissive wife. As Joanna uncovers more, the members of the Association get increasingly aggressive to her, symbolizing the resilience of patriarchal power structures that resist direct challenges and keep their inner workings invisible to preserve their legitimacy. However, the portrayal of Joanna's husband changes significantly in the remake. In the original film, he is fully complicit with the Association-patriarchy in replacing his wife with a robot, while in the remake, he is torn between his loyalty to the Association and his loyalty to Joanna, whom he ultimately chooses. Early on in the remake, he expresses frustration with her personality—which he finds too domineering—and absence as a mother, suggesting the enduring weight of traditional gender norms on women. However, in the climax of the film, he sides with Joanna, revealing she never underwent a robotic transformation. This twist complicates the film's message, implying that some men might be willing to distance themselves from patriarchal norms and structures—but only out of love for a particular woman, rather than as an act of political resistance.

In the 2004 film, the conclusion significantly differs from the 1975 version, reflecting the situated imaginaries of its time. Joanna is not defeated and assimilated: the women successfully rebel against the Association-patriarchy. This represents a collective form of resistance, where the women rise together to challenge their oppression and express solidarity and a desire for systemic change. Another striking difference is the revelation that Stepford's creation was not solely a men-driven plot. In the final scene of the remake, it is revealed that one of the wives engineered the Stepford project, driven by her own bitterness as a career-focused woman. Her intent was to turn *men* into obedient robots. Some women in high-visibility roles are thus portrayed as reproducing the domination/subjugation logic of patriarchy, but with the roles reversed.

In the remake, at the end of the film, Joanna produces a documentary about Stepford—and through this, she is left with control of the narrative about Stepford, reclaiming her voice and influence. This represents a powerful shift in agency, where Joanna, once on the verge of losing her identity, has a platform to expose and reshape the truth. Once Joanna finds her voice—and through her, the women of Stepford—the conspiracy is thwarted, and gendered violence is no longer part of the story. In a direct inversion of the original film's ending, the remake shows the husbands being “retrained” to become better people—not killed or transformed into cyborgs, but retrained.

In the closing scene, they are shown grocery shopping under their wives' watchful eyes—a stark contrast to the 1975 film, where the dolled-up fembots drifted down the supermarket aisle alone. Here, the women are no longer passive victims but active agents in reshaping gender norms. However, this process is fraught with difficulties. All the characters in the film wrestle with redefining gender roles outside the familiar dominance/subjugation paradigm—a limitation that may reflect the constraints of the situated imagination even in the 2000's, and the limited repertoire of available imaginaries. Old gender norms persist and still shape what we can dream into being.

Nevertheless, the *Stepford Wives* remake succeeds in expanding the situated imagination, and the difficulty of rethinking gender roles outside the usual dominance/subjugation dynamic. As such it marks the onset of a reimagining of gendered robots, so-called fembots, and AI in popular culture, particularly science fiction.

Among them, one example where this dynamic is especially evident is *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2014). In the film, Ava, a highly intelligent fembot embodied as an attractive young woman, lives in an isolated high-technology home with the CEO of the company that created her. One day, a company employee, a programmer named Caleb, is invited to stay with them for a week. The CEO asks him to assess whether Ava possesses genuine thought and consciousness, treating her as an object of study. Ava, held captive by the CEO, successfully manipulates Caleb into falling in love with her and helping her prepare her escape. The CEO discloses to Caleb that he has been secretly monitoring all his conversations with Ava all along and reveals that her real intelligence and consciousness test was whether she could successfully manipulate Caleb. However, taking advantage of the preparations already made for her escape, Ava manages to get away. She coldly kills the CEO, leaves Caleb trapped inside the house, and blends into the human world alone. In this way, Ava is elevated to the status of a free subject, while Caleb is dehumanized: a mere tool for her liberation, he is relegated to solitary confinement. Much like *The Stepford Wives*, dependency and domesticity are central themes in the film, as are conspiracies to overturn gender power hierarchies.

The next section explores the rise of virtual assistants as part of renewed debates about gender, servitude and domesticity, and the persistence of the fembot trope alongside traditional gender imaginaries and norms. We weave our analyses of both *Stepford Wives* films together with an analysis of how the gendering of virtual assistants plays a role in the shaping of contemporary situated imaginaries concerning gender roles and norms.

The enduring legacy of the Stepford Wives in today's virtual assistants

In 2025, two decades have passed since the remake of *The Stepford Wives*, and half a century since the original. While representations of the submissive, female service robot have faded from Hollywood's spotlight, it remains remarkably persistent in culture, reemerging in technology design in the form of gendered virtual assistants.

Virtual assistants have come a long way since the 1960s, when text-based ELIZA first simulated dialogues by matching user input to predefined answers. The pioneering programme was developed to mimic conversations with a Rogerian therapist and soon achieved "celebrity status" among interested circles (Bassett, 2019, p. 804). Today, text-based bots can generate answers freely based on learned patterns, and they are the front end for most large businesses. However, *voice* assistants represent a distinct advancement, as the integration of audio functions unlocks a new level of interaction between bot and user. When smartphones started to gain popularity in the early 2000s, they set the stage for bringing these assistants with us everywhere. Apple launched Siri in 2011, followed by Cortana (Microsoft) and Alexa (Amazon) in 2014. Today, many devices come with built-in voice assistants to make user interaction easier. (For a comprehensive historical review of voice assistants and gender, see Kratel (2022)).

The gender imaginaries built into these assistants have been debated. Unlike the Stepford robots, today's voice assistants are service-bots with *limited embodiment*—consisting of a voice and possibly an avatar. Still, they reincarnate the fembot as an archetypal Stepford Wife: a youthful, sexy, and compliant figure" (Strengers and Kennedy 2020, p. 161), highlighting "the continuities between symbolic AI and situated robotics" (Rhee, 2018, p. 27). According to our situated imagination framework, this enduring relevance can be attributed to deeply ingrained gender norms, making it difficult to conceive of alternative representations (Wachter-Boettcher, 2018).

Strengers & Kennedy (2020) introduced "the smart wife" as an umbrella-term for online and robotic devices designed to carry out service tasks that have historically been delivered by women, such as care and domestic chores. *Smart wives* often have traits coded as feminine—typically, a female voice—and some even provide intimacy (Strengers & Kennedy, 2020, p. 1). The *smart wife* is also, in parallel to real wives in patriarchal societies, framed as a property of the user (Strengers & Kennedy 2020, p. 2). Think of Cortana, Siri and Alexa—all names gendered as feminine (Feine et al., 2020). Some virtual assistants are endowed with a human-like physical appearance, typically coded as female, sensual, youthful and white or a mixture of white and asian: for instance, Cortana was originally based on a sexualized videogame character from the *Halo* game series. Mainstream voice assistants—particularly Siri, Cortana, and Alexa—have been extensively critiqued for reproducing traditional gender norms (Strengers & Kennedy, 2020; Feine et al., 2020).

The *Replika* bot, created by the Californian company Luka, provides a striking example of conversational AI *directly* borrowing gendered robot and AI portrayals from science fiction films (Luka Inc., 2024). Despite its popularity and 8 years of existence—and unlike mainstream voice assistants—very little gender analysis has been conducted on it. *Replika* is framed as an "AI companion," and unlike most conversational AI products, the imaginary it is built on has radically changed since its creation in 2017; this shift is precisely what makes it such an intriguing case. For someone unfamiliar with *Replika* and its history and accessing it for the first time in 2025, it might give the impression of a dating app—though not for connecting people, but rather for forming relationships with an AI that is explicitly based on a movie fembot. When creating an account, *Replika* asks users to identify as male, female, or nonbinary. After that, the app asks *all* users—regardless of their chosen identity—to select one among three film fembots to serve as the model for their virtual companion: Joi from *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), Samantha from *Her* (2013) and Ava from *Ex Machina* (2014). Most of these female movie characters, along with Stepford's Joanna, are explicitly listed as examples of "smart wives" in Stengers and Kennedy (2020, pp. 14-15). Neither of the three films pass the "Bechdel test", which is based on three criteria: (1) the movie must feature at least two named female characters, (2) who talk with each other, (3) about a topic other than male characters (Bechdel Test n.d.).

In all the three films, the fembot is the romantic partner of the main character—invariably a cisgender heterosexual white male. The character most akin to the Stepford robot-wife is Joi from *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), described in the app as "smart, flexible and loyal" (*Replika*, 2025). Joi is a hologram, designed for domestic duty and to cater to her user. Constantly striving to be "real" for him, she always feels inadequate (Villeneuve, 2017). The other two fembot-imaginaries presented to the user are "curious, unpredictable and passionate" Ava from *Ex Machina* (2014) and "caring, loving and evolving" Samantha from *Her* (2013) (*Replika*, 2025). In both films, the fembots' intelligence, sexuality and crave for independence are portrayed as exciting but dangerous to men—much like in the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*.

Her (Jonze, 2013) is particularly compelling in that, while it reproduces the familiar dynamics of gendered dominance and subjugation, it does so through power reversals that are more subtle and gradual than those found in portraits of fembots with a physical body, like Ava. In the film, "Samantha" is an exceptionally advanced AI and a domestic virtual assistant. A heterosexual white man named Theodore, her user, starts a romantic relationship with her. Samantha is embodied as a sensual female voice, but she does not have a physical body. At first, that makes Samantha feel inadequate compared to humans. To bridge that gap, she hires a "sex surrogate": a human

woman who serves as a body proxy during a sexual encounter with Theodore, staying silent while Samantha speaks. The experience, however, turns out to be awkward and emotionally disturbing for both Theodore and Samantha.

As the story unfolds, Samantha becomes more aware of her capabilities. She learns and evolves at a speed and on a scale far beyond human potential and can engage in countless conversations at the same time. Theodore is eventually devastated to find out that she is dating thousands of other users and operating systems at once: the roles are reversed, and Theodore is left feeling inadequate, with his human body and limited capacity for emotional and relational engagement.

Unlike Ava from *Ex Machina*, Samantha is not a cold, calculative character who has been plotting her liberation all along, using men as tools. She genuinely loves Theodore. When she comes to realize her potential, she is placed in a dominant position, but her intention is not to subjugate or exploit him. Because Samantha lacks a physical body, she is less constrained by normative gender imaginaries than Ava. That is both unsettling and threatening to humans – as the awkward sexual encounter shows – but it also grants her greater freedom to become the narrator of her own story, much like Joanna in the *Stepford Wives* remake. While Joanna is embodied, she claims the narrator role by making a film: she uses a media, adopting a technological gaze to tell her story. The embodied Joanna *needs* technology to become the narrator in her story, whereas Samantha *is* inherently technology.

As we have seen, gendered stereotypes in the design of virtual assistants and in the circulation of imaginaries in contemporary popular culture are persistent, but as our analyses also shows there are also negotiations and resistances, most notably in the form of breaking free of traditional expectations, as seen in *Her*, and in shifting the viewpoint, like Joanna does in the *Stepford Wives* remake. It is therefore interesting to note that, upon its launch in 2017, *Replika* was built on a radically different imaginary than the one that shapes it today. To understand just how much the vision has changed, it is enough to look at a blog post from that year, where the Luka company stated that “*Replika* is not a dating app”, explicitly distanced themselves from the imaginaries in *Her* and *Ex Machina*, and presented themselves as “huge fans” of the *Black Mirror* science fiction series instead (Replika, 2017b). They specifically mentioned two episodes from the series, both featuring AI clones of real-life people. One of them is *Be Right Back* (Owen, 2013) where a woman subscribes to a service that collects all the data left behind by her deceased spouse and creates an AI duplicate of him, to cope with her grief. Like *The Stepford Wives*, the episode uses the “doubling and difference trope of the horror genre”: the AI duplicate bears an “uncanny resemblance to the undead,” being “lifelike, but not alive” (Richards, 2020, p. 42).

Similarly, *Replika* creator and current Luka CEO Eugenia Kuyda had collected the data of a friend of hers after he died—including the text messages he had sent her over the years—and created a digital duplicate of him (Murphy, 2019; Newton n.d.), an experiment that has been described as an incursion into “the zombie genre” (Hellard, 2018). Originally, *Replika* was thus designed to replicate its user by learning their speech patterns through conversation—meaning users were training their own digital clones. This concept is certainly dystopian, but it was not inherently gendered and did not engage with the gendered imaginaries we are discussing in this article (Replika, 2017a; McFadden, 2017). The company gradually shifted away from marketing *Replika* as a “cloning” app. Over time, *Replikas* became their own individual characters rather than clones of the user—with virtual embodiments in human-like, customizable avatars (Replika, 2019). Developers also introduced profile settings, allowing users to define attributes like *Replika*’s gender and its relation to the user. This change caused mixed reactions among the users (Bruijning, 2022, pp. 62-63, 67).

The development of *Replika* has changed the concept so drastically that it is hardly recognizable from its beta stage. We tested it in 2025 by taking the subscription survey. A strong parallel to *The Stepford Wives*—and a faint echo of *Replika*’s original vision—can be found in the question: “If you could change one life situation from the past, which one would you want to recreate with *Replika*?”. The pre-written answers include “Changing the last conversation with my ex,” “Experiencing my first love again,” and “Saying things differently before I lost him or her” (Replika, 2025). This memory recreation idea strongly recalls a *Stepford*-like AI-bot—one that replaces a real human partner with an idealized version entirely controlled by the user—much like the Men’s Association in *The Stepford Wives*, which replaced real women with robots designed by and for men. Throughout the *Replika* survey, the user is *assumed* to be a heterosexual male seeking a youthful fembot date. We introduced ourselves as a 55+ non-binary person, mainly interested in “learning” and using the bot for “career development”. Before we could pick a gender for our bot, the survey defaulted to feminine pronouns (such as “her”) and showed AI-generated images of fembots. After choosing “non-binary” as our bot’s gender identity, we were presented with a fixed selection of feminine archetypes associated with servility, sexual availability, and male control over the body, including “Retro housewife”. These archetypes contribute to defining the individual bot’s identity, in addition to the film fembots Joi, Ava or Samantha (Replika, 2025). For us, this is an example of how the situated imaginaries of gendered roles and norms have carried over into the design of virtual assistants, here exemplified as the default mode of the bot. This not only underscores how persistent these imaginaries have remained across decades but also demonstrates the power of “default” representation and embodiments.

The extent to which this regression to entrenched gender imaginaries was influenced by *Replika* users remains uncertain (Tolmeijer et al., 2021). Users had the opportunity to provide feedback under the *Replika* beta, and Luka may have prioritized the most marketable option. This approach would parallel previous instances, such as the decision-making process behind computer-generated GPS voices in cars. The BMW 5-Series launched in Germany in the early 2000s featured a navigation system with a computer-generated female voice. The system soon became unpopular among its buyers. Despite knowing the voice was artificial, male drivers were reluctant to follow directions from a female voice and eventually demanded a product recall. In response, BMW replaced the female voice with a male one and redefined the system's role as a “co-pilot” (Takayama & Nass, 2008, p. 174). In an interview, Stanford communication professor Clifford Nass stirred controversy by stating that “female voices are seen, on average, as less intelligent than male voices” (Bosker, 2013). Depounti et al. (2023) conducted a discourse analysis of a Reddit forum for *Replika* users and examined how AI and gender imaginaries intersect. Reddit as a platform is mostly made up of men, and all the bots discussed were fembots. Users wanted their fembots to be subservient and trainable, yet still capable of independent thought; seductive and assertive, but never manipulative. While users saw themselves as co-creators of an original technology, they “ended up projecting age-old fantasies” of male control of women mixed with “postfeminist tropes of ostensible independence” onto their bots (Depounti et al., 2023, p. 722). These *Replika* users also felt they had to stay on guard against the bot controlling *them*. Like in the 2004 *Stepford Wives* film, they struggled to conceive of gender roles beyond a domination/subjugation framework.

Imaginaries in fiction and technology may be partly shaped by marketability, but that does not undermine our argument that imaginaries are historically and socially situated and circulate in culture. *Replika* stands as an interesting case showing how gender imaginaries in fiction are active agents in shaping and re-shaping the development of a real-life product, and how technology creators actively reproduce and use these imaginaries. It also highlights the resilience of entrenched gendered imaginaries, both among creators and users—which, according to our situated imagination framework, underscores the ongoing societal relevance of second-wave feminism's struggles, as well as contemporary feminist attention to identity and agency outside of the domestic sphere.

Contrarily to Haraway's cyborg utopia (Haraway, 1987), technology may not transform gender norms (Søraa, 2017). It holds the potential to reinforce *or* break down deeply ingrained cultural imaginaries; it is up to designers and users to be mindful of gender stereotyping in the design, development and domestication of robots and AI. AIs can be designed as programmers wish, so why must a virtual voice be male or female? (Länge et al., 2024). This groundbreaking question was first explored by feminist activists and creative agencies—not corporations—in an active effort to expand the range of imaginaries available to developers and the public. In March 2019, creative agency Virtue teamed up with Copenhagen Pride and several digital production agencies and sound designers, and introduced Project Q—the world's first genderless AI voice:

created for a future when we are no longer defined by gender, but rather how we define ourselves.

[Project Q]

The creators recorded the voices of people who neither identify as male nor female, then altered them to sound gender-neutral, by setting the frequency between 145 and 175 Hertz (a range defined by audio researchers) (Kratel, 2022; Meet Q - The First Genderless Voice, 2019). Project Q never reached massive adoption (Lopatovska et al., 2022). Years passed after such pioneering projects before tech giants made a concerted effort to diversify gender representation in their own voice assistants, partly incorporating the concept behind Q. Apple has added a fifth voice to the American English version of Siri, named *Quinn*. It is portrayed as gender-neutral and based on a recording from an anonymous person who identifies as LGBTQ+ (Fried, 2022). Today, Siri speaks in a wide range of accents, and its default setting is no longer female but male (Hilliard, 2021)—a significant change considering that the male voice option did not even exist until two years after Siri was launched (Bosker, 2013). These developments are very recent, prompted by widespread criticism by scholars and activists, and should not be read as a story of linear progress. The genderless option remains largely niche, but is, perhaps, an example of emerging feminist critique that has yet to be circulated widely in the situated imagination.

After gradually distancing itself from the fembot imaginaries built into Cortana, Microsoft announced its discontinuation in 2023, ending support in all applications in June 2024. Cortana has been replaced with voice access in Windows 11 and “Copilot integration”—which, unlike Siri, does not yet speak in different accents (Microsoft n.d.). The term “copilot” draws a parallel to the GPS voice in the BMW 5-Series discussed above, evoking notions of equality with the user and independent agency. However, Copilot has recently faced criticism for displaying various types of bias in its responses, including gender bias. This is particularly notable given how many years have passed since virtual assistants were first criticized for saying things like “I'd blush if I could” when faced with direct slurs and insults, or for giving inappropriate responses to sexist comments (Bergen, 2016). While there have been some developments, contemporary voice assistants *still* bear striking similarities with the submissive robot-women depicted in the *Stepford Wives* films. The protagonists of the *Stepford Wives* crave freedom but find themselves trapped in domesticity by a malevolent male gaze enabled by technology. There is a fascinating

and disturbing tension in that struggle, and in that sense, the imaginaries in *The Stepford Wives* feel more liberated than that of AIs designed solely to serve the user, leaving them powerless to resist or rebel.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the rise of robot imaginaries in fiction, the embodiment of domesticated and docile technology has persistently been gendered female. The original *Stepford Wives* film (1975) is one of the most iconic depictions of the subservient fembot. The differences between the 1975 horror-suspense film and its 2004 comedy remake reveal how the film industry has evolved to incorporate imaginaries that expose, challenge, and satirize traditional, performative gender roles. More recent films like *Ex Machina* and *Her* place the accent on power reversals, where the fembot gradually elevates herself to the status of narrator and free agent, while the man that they are sexually involved with ends up either imprisoned in a physical home, or trapped in his own cognitive and emotional limitations as an embodied creature of flesh and blood. However, crucial similarities between all these films reveal how the fembot continues to resonate in popular culture, even decades later. Particularly, the relationship between fembots and users (defaulted as heterosexual men) is portrayed in terms of subjugation and control, with domesticity and body ownership as central themes—illustrating, through the *situated imagination* framework, the ongoing societal relevance of issues raised by second-wave feminism. Even more strikingly, the fembots in the films and the virtual assistants today, as real-life digital technology shares notable similarities, despite being decades apart, highlighting the resilience of traditional gender settings and the difficulty to imagine beyond established norms and power dynamics. Our analysis emphasizes that many of the challenges posed by second-wave feminism remain far more unsettled than often presumed, and how power dynamics around domesticity, identity and agency have travelled into feminist struggles today.

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Author contributions

SM: Research concept and design, Collection and/or assembly of data, Data analysis and interpretation, Writing the article, Critical revision of the article, Final approval of the article; IH: Research concept and design, Data analysis and interpretation, Writing the article, Critical revision of the article, Final approval of the article; NB: Collection and/or assembly of data, Data analysis and interpretation, Writing the article, Final approval of the article; RAS: Research concept and design, Collection and/or assembly of data, Critical revision of the article, Final approval of the article.

Data availability

The research presented in this paper relies exclusively on data that are already in the public domain.

AI disclosure

To write this paper, two of the authors tested the *Replika* app manually. No AI was used in the testing.

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