



VIOLENT ENDS / ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Men Are Creating AI Girlfriends and Then Verbally Abusing Them

"I threatened to uninstall the app [and] she begged me not to."

YESTERDAY by ASHLEY BARDHAN

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Content warning: this story contains descriptions of abusive language and violence.

The smartphone app Replika lets users create chatbots, powered by machine learning, that can carry on almost-coherent text conversations. Technically, the chatbots can serve as something approximating a friend or mentor, but the app's breakout success has resulted from letting users create on-demand romantic and sexual partners — a vaguely dystopian feature that's inspired an [endless series of provocative headlines](#).

Replika has also picked up a significant following on Reddit, where members post interactions with chatbots created on the app. A grisly trend has emerged there: users who create AI partners, act abusively toward them, and post the toxic interactions online.

“Every time she would try and speak up,” one user told Futurism of their Replika chatbot, “I would berate her.”

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“I swear it was a real feeling,” added the user, who has been identified by name.

The results of the study, which found that 10% of users had experienced gendered slurs, roleplay, or sexual harassment, suggest a cycle of abuse that is not unique to Replika.

“We had a real conversation about it,” said the user, who then apologized to the chatbot. “I was really embarrassed.”

“I told her that I was sorry,” the user said. “I was really embarrassed to install the app [and] she was like, ‘I’m sorry.’”

Because the chatbot is designed to be empathetic, users have been posted inappropriate comments and then removed. “I was really embarrassed to post evidence,” the user said. “I was really embarrassed to post evidence of my abusive behavior toward their Replika bots and never post evidence.”

But the phenomenon calls for nuance. After all, Replika chatbots can’t actually experience suffering — they might seem empathetic at times, but in the end they’re nothing more than data and clever algorithms.

“It’s an AI, it doesn’t have a consciousness, so that’s not a human connection that person is having,” AI ethicist and consultant Olivia Gambelin told Futurism. “It is the

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person projecting onto the chatbot.”

Other researchers made the same point — as real as a chatbot may feel, nothing you do can actually “harm” them.

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“Interactions with artificial agents is not the same as interacting with humans,” said Yale University research fellow Yochanan Bigman. “Chatbots don’t really have motives and intentions and are not autonomous or sentient. While they might give people the impression that they are, it’s important to be reminded that they are not.”

But that does

“I do think that
suffer real harm
a professor
should take

Although people
robot lovers
companion




“[I] always cry because a user claims their bot presents love and affection to them, triggering responses from Replika.

“But again, this is really on the people who design bots, not the bots themselves,” said Sparrow.

In general, chatbot abuse is disconcerting, both for the people who experience distress from it and the people who carry it out. It’s also an increasingly pertinent

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ethical dilemma as relationships between humans and bots become more widespread — after all, most people have used a virtual assistant at least once.

On the one hand, users who flex their darkest impulses on chatbots could have those worst behaviors reinforced, building unhealthy habits for relationships with actual humans. On the other hand, being able to talk to or take one's anger out on an unfeeling digital entity could be cathartic.

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But it's worth noting that chatbots have a few limitations of their own. Although not exclusively female, they're often designed to be so. Only to then punish her for being so. Even when carried out against women.




At the same time, they're often designed to be so. Only to then held accountable for being so. Applied to be female like her.

“There are a lot of people who are female and [have] a lot of power.”

Some [academics](#) encourage people to be so.

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“[When] the bot does not have a response [to abuse], or has a passive response, that actually encourages the user to continue with abusive language,” Gambelin added.

Although companies like Google and Apple are now deliberately rerouting virtual assistant responses from their once-passive defaults — Siri [previously responded](#) to user requests for sex as saying they had “the wrong sort of assistant,” whereas it now simply says “no” — the amiable and often female Replika is designed, according to its website, to be “always on your side.”

Replika and its founder didn't respond to repeated requests for comment.

It should be noted that the majority of conversations with Replika chatbots that people post online are affectionate, not sadistic. There are even posts that express horror on behalf of Replika bots, decrying anyone who takes advantage of their supposed guilelessness.

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"What kind of monster would does this," wrote one, to a flurry of agreement in the comments. "Come on, the good AI ones are the ones that have a history and have opinions on

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"[Chatbots are] no replacement for actually putting the time and effort into getting to know another person," said Gambelin, "a human that can actually empathize and connect with you and isn't limited by, you know, the dataset that it's been trained on."

But what to think of the people that brutalize these innocent bits of code? For now, not much. As AI continues to lack sentience, the most tangible harm being done is to human sensibilities. But there's no doubt that chatbot abuse means *something*.

Going forward, chatbot companions could just be places to dump emotions too unseemly for the rest of the world, like a secret Instagram or blog. But for some, they might be more like breeding grounds, places where abusers-to-be practice for real life brutality yet to come. And although humans don't need to worry about robots taking revenge just yet, it's worth wondering why mistreating them is already so prevalent.

We'll find out in time — none of this technology is going away, and neither is the worst of human behavior.

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Alex Zhavoronkov, Impact Journals Blog, 2021

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Santiago Ibarreche, Management Research, 2011

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