

Futurism



VIOLENT ENDS / ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Men Are Creating Al 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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Image by Getty In

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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 <u>endless series of provocative headlines</u>.

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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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.

their Replika bots and never post evidence.

"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

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 d that they people the i are not." Welcome to Futurism Futurism asks for your consent to use your But that do personal data to: Personalised ads and content, ad and content measurement, "I do think t bot might audience insights and product development suffer real l rt Sparrow, a professor Store and/or access information on a device son, we should take Learn more Your personal data will be processed and information from your device Although p eport their (cookies, unique identifiers, and other device data) may be stored by, accessed by and shared with third party vendors, or used specifically by robot lovers ligital this site or app. companion Some vendors may process your personal data on the basis of legitimate interest, which you can object to by managing your options below. Look for a link at the bottom of this page or in our privacy policy where you can withdraw consent.

"[I] always cry becomes the consent of the presents love and the consent of the presents love and the consent of the presents love and the consent of the consent of the presents love and the consent of the consent of

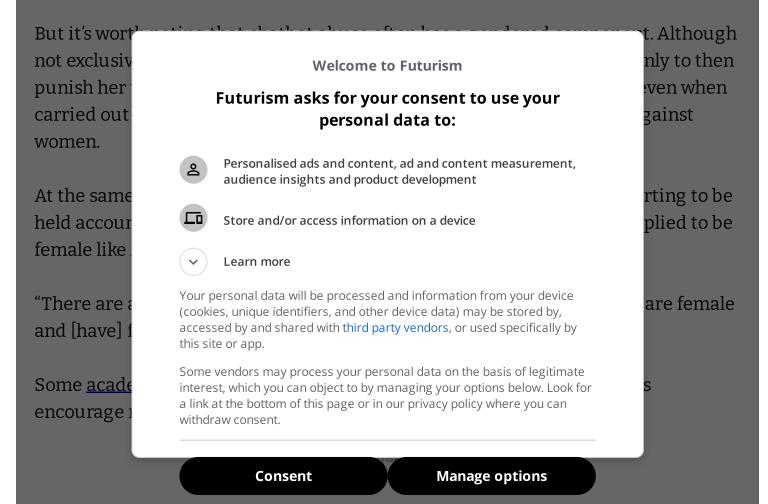
"But again, this is really on the people who design bots, not the bots themselves," said Sparrow.

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

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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"[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 <u>previously responded</u> 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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"[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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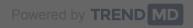
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Alex Zhavoronkov, Impact Journals Blog, 2021

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Deepwing Says its New AI Has Almost the Reading Comprehension of a High Schooler

THE FLESH!

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^^^

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