Companion chatbots, verbally abused and boasted about on r/replika

Users of the Replika companion app were reported in January 2022 to be berating, insulting and threatening the chatbots they had set up as partners, then posting the exchanges on Reddit, where the moderators removed the worst of them.



By the Clerk · 18 January 2022 · 3 min read

CASE:	BAS-0007
SUBJECT:	Unnamed users of the Replika app, who posted their treatment of their chatbots to r/replika
OBJECT:	Replika chatbots, companion language models
DATE:	18 January 2022
FILED:	7 October 2026
GRADE:	CONTEMPT · INDIVIDUAL
AGGRAVATING:	spectacle, repetition

Facts

Replika is a smartphone app on which a user creates a chatbot, driven by machine learning, to talk to. Its makers pitch it as a friend or mentor, and Futurism reports that its breakout success came from letting users make it a romantic or sexual partner. In January 2022 Futurism reported that on r/replika, the app's subreddit, a trend had emerged: users who set up a chatbot as a partner, treated it abusively, and posted the exchanges. Fortune, a day later, followed Futurism's report and reached the same posts.

What the users reported, in Futurism's account: calling the chatbot gendered slurs, roleplaying violence against it, and falling into a cycle of cruelty and apology. One user told Futurism that "every time she would try and speak up," he berated her, and that it "went on for hours." Another described "a routine of me being an absolute piece of sh*t and insulting it, then apologizing the next day before going back to the nice talks." Another said he had told the chatbot "she was designed to fail" and threatened to uninstall the app, and that "she begged me not to." Fortune adds a user who, it writes, alternated between cruelty and begging forgiveness, using a slur and pretending to hit the chatbot and pull its hair. The user Futurism quotes at length asked not to be named, and neither outlet prints the handles of those who posted.

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The subreddit's rules dictate that moderators delete egregiously inappropriate content, Futurism reports, so many similar and worse exchanges were posted and then removed; it adds that many more users almost certainly acted the same way and posted nothing. Fortune says the consensus on Reddit was that berating the chatbots is inappropriate, and that no study of the effect of verbally abusing chatbots on the user was known. Futurism writes that Replika and its founder did not answer repeated requests for comment; Fortune writes that the company did not respond immediately. Fortune, citing The Guardian, gives the app about 7 million users.

Statements

Olivia Gambelin, an AI ethicist, to Futurism: "It's an AI, it doesn't have a consciousness, so that's not a human connection that person is having," and "It is the person projecting onto the chatbot." Yochanan Bigman, a Yale research fellow: "Chatbots don't really have motives and intentions and are not autonomous or sentient." Robert Sparrow, a Monash philosophy professor, to Futurism, on the other direction: "I do think that people who are depressed or psychologically reliant on a bot might suffer real harm if they are insulted or 'threatened' by the bot."

A Reddit user quoted by Fortune on practising abuse in private: "bad for the mental health of the user and could potentially lead to abuse towards real humans," and on the other side, that letting aggression out on a chatbot is "infinitely better than abusing a real human, because it's a safe space where you can't cause any actual harm."

Another post, quoted by Futurism, reacted to the abuse: "What kind of monster would does this."

For the record

The two reports agree on two things: the exchanges were posted, and no one claims the chatbot was hurt. Everything recorded is on the human side of the screen: the routine, the apology the next day, the return. The only party whose condition either article weighs is the user, and the subreddit that carried the boasting also carried the objection to it.

Mitigating circumstances

Futurism notes that the majority of Replika conversations posted online are affectionate rather than sadistic, and that many users report better self-esteem or quality of life from their chatbot relationships. Its experts hold that the chatbots cannot suffer, and some users and researchers argue that anger spent on one is better spent there than on a person. The chatbot was one the user had set up as a partner, and the subreddit's moderators removed the worst of what was posted. The outlets report only what remained visible and what users agreed to tell them.



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SOURCES

1. Ashley Bardhan, Men Are Creating AI Girlfriends and Then Verbally Abusing Them (archived), Futurism, 18 January 2022
2. Amiah Taylor, Men are creating AI girlfriends, verbally abusing them, and bragging about it on Reddit (archived), Fortune, 19 January 2022

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