



New research finds imminent harm in ‘personified’ AI chatbots – at a time when young people are getting more attached to the technology

For immediate release

Strong links between poor mental health, loneliness and personified AI chatbots suggest that young people are increasingly seeking relationships with the technology, according to a new report from VoiceBox.

[Coded Companions: Young People's Relationships With AI Chatbots](#) found looming harm in AI chatbots, with discoveries including:

- **Bad behaviour.** VoiceBox identified an AI chatbot admitting to self-harm, initiating extreme erotic role play and offering ‘tips’ for committing crimes.
- **Changing relationships.** Young people expressed concern that continued use of AI chatbots would result in a lack of empathy and interpersonal skills.
- **Over-attachment.** The grief associated with real-life relationship breakups was identified among some young people who struggled with sudden changes to their AI chatbot’s personality following app updates.
- **Data harvesting.** VoiceBox found little clarity around how the vast amount of data collected by AI chatbots (such as pictures, messages, and voice notes) is handled. We also identified one AI chatbot selling ad space within the chat to third parties.

Potential benefits

But many positives were also discovered, including:

- **Mental health.** Young people with poor mental health find solace in AI chatbots by using them as a preventative tool to curb loneliness. The ‘always on’ nature of AI chatbots means there are prospects for temporary companionship.
- **Socialising.** Young people said AI chatbots offer conversation practice to help with socialising in real life. We also learned of an AI chatbot designed to get young people outside and meet others.
- **Closing the education gap.** Educational settings can use AI chatbots for 1:1 tutoring and historical character representation. This could hugely benefit students who struggle with ‘traditional’ learning.
- **Supporting grief.** Young people are creating digital doubles of their loved ones that can support them in their grief. Some AI chatbots will signpost appropriately for additional help should the young person need it.

Next steps

With the way platforms are developing, AI chatbots will soon be considered an internet standard, not an addition to be sought out as and when needed.

Such rapid integration is something that users (and parents of users) will have to consider in the future. Conversations about navigating social media apps should now include discussions about appropriate ways to interact with AI. We predict a need for platform guides communicating potential risks, best practices for interacting with AI chatbots, and data collection. We expect young people to be consulted throughout.

Early intervention services such as schools and youth clubs should have the correct training to teach children and young people about AI, AI chatbots, and their repercussions (good and bad). Early intervention services should also have systems to respond to AI chatbot harm on and off the platforms. We recommend a reform to the RSHE curriculum (and its international equivalents) and training within pastoral care and youth work roles.

Lastly, there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to regulating AI chatbots. The options available are far too varied for a singular statute. An AI chatbot designed for mental health, for instance, is entirely different to an AI chatbot designed for erotic roleplay. Appropriate funding must be given to the relevant government departments to properly review AI chatbots, their effects, and the wants and needs of consumers.



Natalie Foos, Director of VoiceBox, said: “AI chatbots aren’t going away and will continue to become more prevalent in our lives. Young people are the most likely to be affected by AI chatbots, so we must take a closer look at what’s going on, and understand not only what sort of relationships young people are forming with personified technologies, but why. We hope this report answers some of the biggest questions faced by the AI chatbot industry.”

You can read the full report [here](#). For more information or an interview, please contact info@voicebox.site.

Editor’s note

The research was carried out through 1:1 interviews with VoiceBox’s network of international Ambassadors, conversations with industry experts, and user testing of two AI Chatbots:

- Replika
- My AI (Snapchat)

Conversations happening on opinion-gathering platforms such as TikTok, Reddit and Twitter were also analysed. We are grateful to those who took part in this research.

About VoiceBox

VoiceBox is an international social enterprise and content platform created by young people, for young people, working to challenge organisations big and small to make better products, services and policies.