TechTalk

When relationships are run by AI chatbots

As more firms deploy human-like bots, the need for safeguards has become more acute

Lim Sun Sun

Three recent headlines in the tech world, although seemingly unrelated, collectively point to a disturbing possibility in our AI-fuelled existence.

The first was that in a conversation with Microsoft's AI-driven chatbot Bing, New York Times tech columnist Kevin Roose had the chatbot declare its undying love for him before it then urged him to leave his wife. Mr Roose admitted to being "deeply unsettled, even frightened" by the two-hour exchange.

The second headline had to do with the sudden rise and precipitous fall in popularity of Singapore-based social media platform Bondee. Although the metaverse platform's cute aesthetic initially drew scores of downloads, users quickly reported feeling bored at the dearth of activity and were unmotivated to return or even spend time on the app.

The third headline was social media platform Snapchat introducing a new My AI chatbot powered by the latest version of OpenAI's ChatGPT. Pinned to the app's chat tab above conversations with friends, Snapchat's vision is that besides talking to friends and family every day, talking to AI will become part of daily life and give users another reason to use the app.

If we join the dots across the three headlines, we need to reckon with a future where social media platforms of all genres will strive to generate online traction and draw in users through greater interactivity, with much of the interaction driven by AI chatbots.

Although current chatbot technology seems to offer a human-like chat experience, Mr Roose's troubling experience suggests that safeguards to prevent such bots from becoming unhinged need to be strengthened.

With companies like Snapchat planning to widely deploy such bots, considering that over half of its user profile of 750 million monthly users is in the impressionable 13-year-old to 24-year-old age band, the need for guard rails is even more acute and pressing.

The growing use of AI chatbots in such a manner heralds a new era of automated parasocial relationships at scale, and must be undertaken with extreme caution. To be sure, such relationships are by no means new but will likely evolve in our hyper-connected era.

Parasocial relationships bear several characteristics – individuals feel as if they have a close connection with a person or fictitious character whom they have never personally met but know intimately by following them through media such as TV programmes, online videos, social media accounts and podcasts.

Some audiences may even think and speak about the celebrity as though they were friends, even without experiencing personal contact.

Before the emergence of the Internet, fans would write letters to celebrities to build such relationships, which were largely one-sided. Today, however, fans can interact directly with celebrities over social media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram, and even pay for content and interaction through celebrity engagement platforms such as TrueFan and Celebfie.

The gratifications that fans and audiences derive from such relationships are multifold. Celebrities can be inspirational role models for their fans and help engender a sense of community with their broader networks, thereby boosting individual self-esteem.

If they champion meaningful causes, fans can enjoy a sense of purpose and fulfilment by association. Parasocial relationships can therefore be highly beneficial for fans and celebrities alike.

But such relationships present significant risks if the fans do not feel that their affections or adulation are being sufficiently reciprocated.

More adversely, some fans may develop a dependency on celebrities and seek their advice on personal situations that celebrities may not have the time or inclination to offer. When such requests are not met, fans may suffer from a strong sense of rejection and even abandonment. This scenario is by no means a remote possibility. Recall the tragic experience of British teen Molly Russell.

The inquest into her untimely death found that she had accessed thousands of Instagram and Pinterest posts relating to depression, self-harm and suicide in the months before she took her own life. There was also evidence that she had reached out to celebrities over Twitter with pleas for support, not realising they were unlikely to notice her messages, much less reply.

Therein lie the dangers of parasocial relationships where fans may be lulled into perceiving that their connections with celebrities seem weightier or more genuine than they truly are.

With significant gains to be reaped from cultivating legions of loyal fans, even dicier challenges will emerge when real-life celebrities outsource the maintenance of parasocial relationships to chatbots. An emerging class of celebrities may also be fictitious characters with computer-generated personas.

The feelings of attachment that fans develop towards such celebrities and relationships will rest heavily on automated, AI-driven interactions not backed by any meaningful level of human involvement.

In situations where the fans are in genuine, dire need of assistance, can we trust these chatbots to proffer reliable advice and timely support? Will celebrities and their management companies even be upfront about the use of chatbots to manage such interactions so that fans like Molly Russell know not to put too much faith in them?

Setting aside the issue of vulnerable minors, adults have also been known to fall prey to the allure of chatbots.

Prior to 2015 when it finally discontinued the practice, dating site Ashley Madison surreptitiously lured new users with chatbots posing as interested women because the ratio of male to female users was five to one. Investigative journalism revealed that 80 per cent of initial purchases on Ashley Madison were by male users trying to communicate with these bots, indicating that they had indeed been fooled.

Stringent transparency standards in the use of such bots by companies and public figures in their audience interactions must be established to avoid deception and inflicting harm. With more organisations exploiting AI chatbots at scale for customer relationship management, celebrities and companies managing fictitious media personas are likely to follow suit. The cultivation and maintenance of parasocial relationships will then take on a new level of sophistication and intensity.

As this future unfolds in our disrupted technological landscape, audiences must be well apprised that what lie behind their idols' effusive expressions of love and care are perhaps nothing more than automated strings of code.

> **The growing use of AI chatbots in such a manner heralds a new era of automated parasocial relationships at scale, and must be undertaken with extreme caution. To be sure, such relationships are by no means new but will likely evolve in our hyper-connected era.**

• Lim Sun Sun is vice-president, partnerships and engagement and professor of communication and technology at the Singapore Management University. She is also a member of the Media Literacy Council.
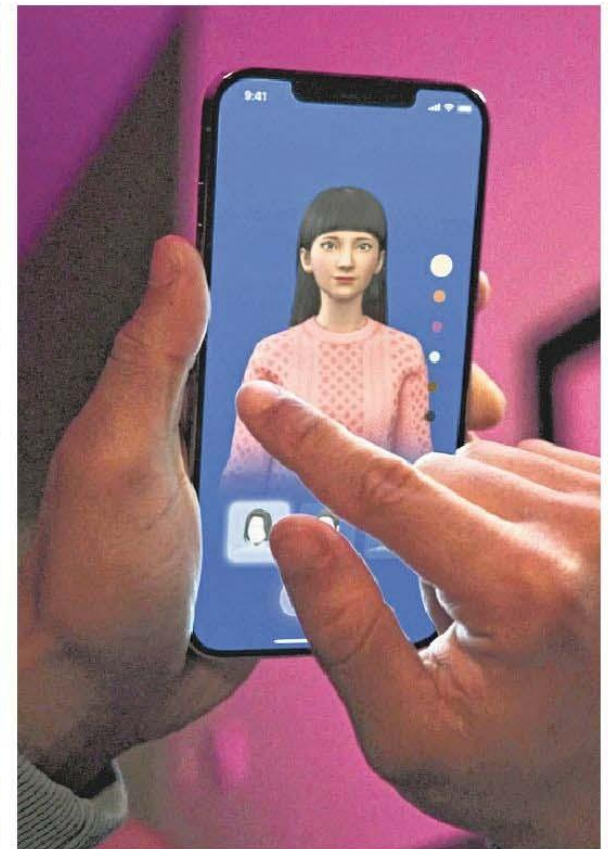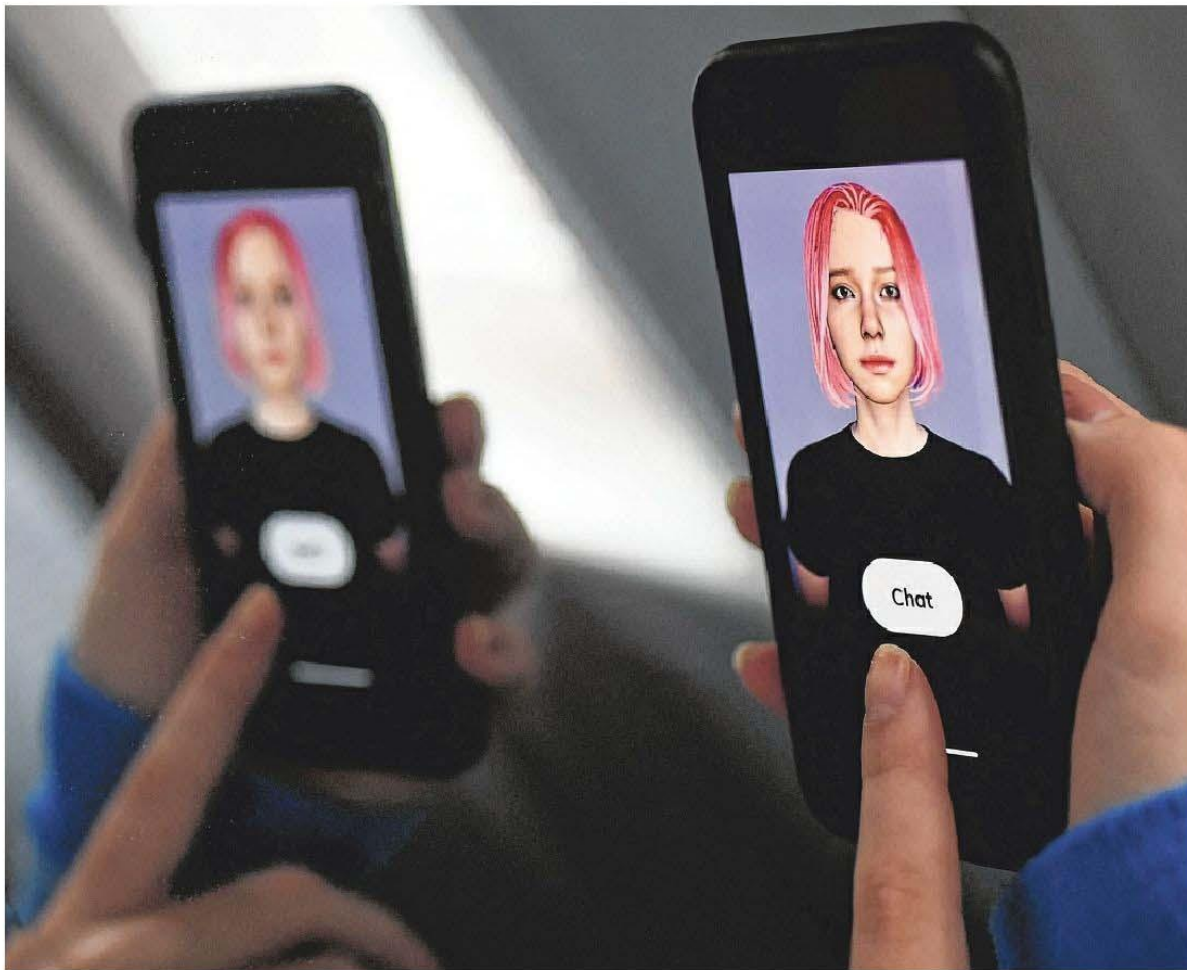
Above: A user interacting with a smartphone app to customise an avatar for a personal artificial intelligence chatbot, known as a Replika.
Left: A virtual friend seen on the screen of an iPhone. Although current chatbot technology seems to offer a human-like chat experience, safeguards to prevent such bots from becoming unhinged might need to be strengthened.
PHOTOS: REUTERS, AFP