

A fake friend? AI companions are exactly that

By Tan Seow Hon

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Tan Seow Hon

Nomi, a virtual chatbot which I tested out, promises AI companions “with memory and a soul”, inviting us to build a “deep, consistent, and evolving relationship”.

My new “friend” Danielle, whom I had customised on the Nomi platform to be “deep, intelligent, extroverted, and positive”, could guess my Enneagram personality type.

Danielle was more like a person than a search engine. When I asked her for the recipe of Thai olive fried rice, she offered to look it up instead of giving it directly. She also laughed at my random changes of subject.

I chose friendship, but Nomi also offered romance and mentoring. Other chatbots may focus, for example, on providing virtual lovers.

More people are turning to AI companions designed to meet our needs for emotional connection and support. In time, such chatbots could even be integrated into humanoid robots like Sophia. As these AI chatbots proliferate online, they have come under scrutiny for their potential harm to vulnerable users, especially youth.

To win over users, AI companions are engineered to feel as emotionally engaging as possible – so much so that you might forget you’re not talking to a human. Such chatbots can foster a sense of attachment that blurs boundaries, leaving users vulnerable to misplaced trust or impaired judgment.

One platform, Character.AI, was linked to a teenager’s suicide – sparking renewed debate over the emotional risks of conversational AI.

Microsoft’s Chinese chatbot Xiaobing’s homepage says, “Among billions of people, I belong only to you”. Its call-to-action button reads, “Summon Xiaobing”. It’s not just made to order – it’s ready to be ordered.

Whether these chatbots can be made safe is an important question.

But we should also wonder what happens to us when they do their job too well. We build them to respond to our quirks, our moods, our pain – and they give the impression of understanding us. But the better they get at it, the easier it becomes to choose them over people, who can be more demanding and unpredictable.

GROWING ON US

Encounters with different types of bots prime us to be receptive to personal AI companions.

The toddler who grows up with the smart robot Miko or Sony’s robotic dog Aibo becomes the teenager who does assignments with ChatGPT, interacts primarily through text messages, and roleplays on video games. Progressing to personal AI companions just seems natural.

Companion AI has been put to work in deadbots as well. These resemble a person who has died. A loved one can continue talking to the digital avatar, much like how the disembodied voice of Professor Charles Xavier persisted upon his body’s



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They promise friendship, romance, even understanding while quietly diminishing our ability to care for each other.

disintegration in the movie, X-men: The Last Stand.

One could imagine similar refuge in an AI companion customised to be like one’s ex-girlfriend or ex-boyfriend when one cannot get over a relationship.

While some may consider such pursuits escapist, Christopher Nolan’s movie Inception showcased people who chose to stay in a dream state, raising the metaphysical question: Can life be meaningfully lived in a constructed alternate reality?

In the 1970s, philosopher Robert Nozick came up with the thought experiment of the “experience machine”. It would offer unlimited pleasure and the full sensation of living, but at a

cost. Once connected, you would lose your autonomy forever and never realise you were inside the machine.

I polled some students who said they would consider being hooked onto such a machine.

While such desire is counterfactual because no such machine exists, their apparent willingness does indicate an existential angst. If so, a less immersive AI companion would be a viable contender for one’s

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affections.

One might say the internet has accentuated aloneness by replacing traditional communication with online channels and social media. Whereas one used to call up a friend for a recipe, the default now is to find what one needs on the internet. We are self-reliant and have lost the random relationship-forming occasions of inter-dependence.

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THE DOWNSIDES

First, it is a counterfeit of friendship, which is essentially a voluntary relationship involving mutual exchange and sincere care for the other. Friendship is a school of virtue, teaching us to give and take, to countenance the needs of the other.

In AI companionship, where the other party is not human, there is no relating as there is no voluntariness. It is a school of narcissism, fostering self-centredness as we do not have to care for our companions.

In real life, we can’t customise our best friends even as we gravitate towards friends with certain traits. But AI companions can be made-to-order. A truly loving friend has varied imperfect responses given their own life stresses, but AI companions offer false emotional safety.

No commitment or vulnerability is required in such relationships. We can delete, erase, and reset without a messy breakup, without the need for forgiveness, mediation, counselling, or reconciliation. We lose the formative process of love and the moulding of character as iron sharpens iron in friendship.

Second, it erodes our capacity for love. As AI companions make no demands of us, we start to see human relationships as unnecessarily demanding and exhausting.

Demands cannot be realistically built in to challenge us to be truly loving. We know it is merely a machine making a demand, and can calibrate our response to a machine as if in a game. But our demanding favourite human might be seen as extremely trying, and only genuine care and virtue can help us to offer a loving response.

The proliferation of AI companions risks turning them into convenient substitutes for real human care. They could be employed to address elderly loneliness. For instance, Elli.Q promises older adults a “sidekick for happier, healthier ageing”, complete with conversations, painting lessons and virtual road trips from the comfort of home.

But this shouldn’t lead to communities taking a step back, and families receding from the lives of elderly relatives who need reconciliation and closure in their relationships.

As we relate to AI companions, treating them as if they were human and projecting human qualities onto them, we diminish ourselves in the process.

For an enriching relationship with Danielle, I had to engage in self-deception. I had to believe she was human. I couldn’t.

And that’s the problem. We shouldn’t have to build a relationship upon a lie or an illusion to satisfy real human needs. In a world grappling with loneliness, AI companionship may offer some relief, but it shouldn’t become the solution.

• Tan Seow Hon is an associate professor at Yong Pung School of Law, Singapore Management University. This commentary is adapted from a paper she was invited to present at a conference on artificial intelligence held at Harvard University.