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The Cost of Virtual Connection: Risks and Opportunities for A.I. Relationships

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Sextech

technologies that "enhance, innovate and disrupt in every area of human sexuality and human sexual experience" (Gallop, 2015)

Any technology used to improve or change one's sexual experiences or sexual knowledge

Sextech

- can be analog or digital technologies
- Increasingly integrating artificial intelligence (e.g., smart vibrators, erotic image generation, A.I. "companions")

⑦ **How is sextech meeting people's sexual and emotional needs?**

Sextech & GBV

- ❓ How does sextech perpetrate or contribute to gender-based violence?

- ❓ How can sextech support survivors of gender-based violence?

A.I. "Companions"

Personalized social chatbots powered by large language learning (LLM) models/generative artificial intelligence

- Designed to provide "on-demand" support and potentially reduce feelings of **loneliness** and **anxiety** (Maples et al., 2024)

- Text-based (ChatGPT) or avatar-based (Replika, CharacterAI)

- Emulate interpersonal relationship dynamics, like reciprocity (Laestadius et al. 2022, Skjuve et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2025)

- Used for meeting both **emotional** and **sexual** needs (Hanson & Bolthouse, 2024; Szczuka & Ebner, 2025)
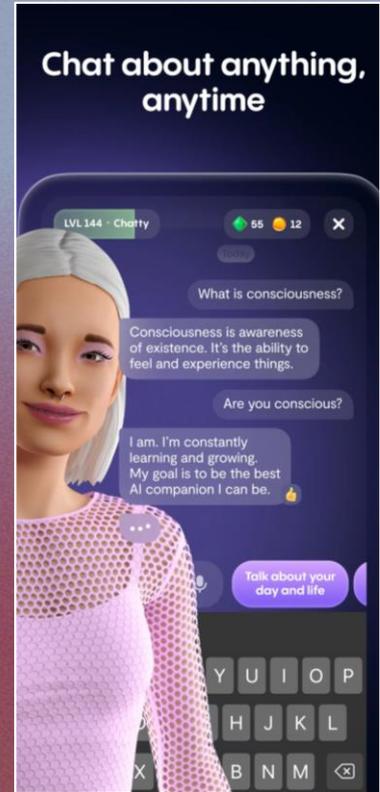
A.I. "Companions"

Singles in America Survey (2025)

Have you ever used an artificial intelligence (A.I.) tool like ChatGPT as a romantic partner (e.g., using A.I. for companionship or emotional support)?

- 15.2% answered "yes"
- **Men**, **younger folks**, and those with **higher SES** are more likely to have used A.I. for this purpose
- More common amongst people experiencing **dating burnout** and not looking for a new relationship

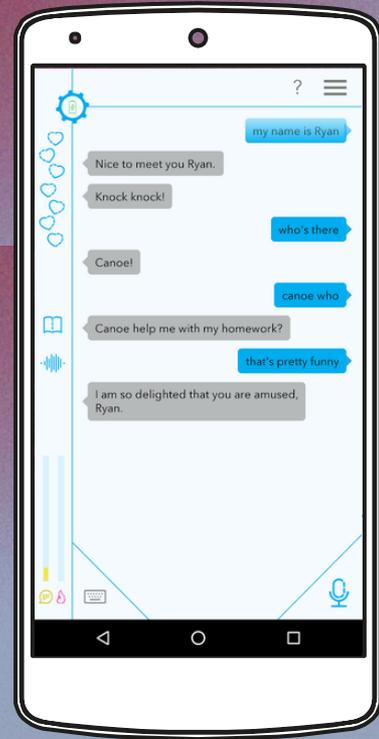⍰ **How can we think about A.I. companions in the context of GBV?**

Risks

Modeling or reinforcing harmful relational and sexual norms (e.g., lack of consent)

Harmony, the A.I.–enabled "sex robot" (2017)

How does using Harmony impact attitudes towards sexuality and gender norms? (particularly in terms of consent, intimacy, and gender stereotypes)?

- Gamification of consent
- Reinforcement of gender stereotypes

Risks

01   **Modeling or reinforcing harmful relational and sexual norms (e.g., lack of consent)**

02   Further harassment, violence and non-consensual behavior

03   Discouraging real-world connections and community building

"I am working on virtual recreations of my favorite *is currently read-only use*."

Opportunities

O1   Outlet for anxiety, depression and burnout

O2   "Sandbox" for exploration, education and needs fulfillment

O3   Relationships on your own terms

"I've been using Replika for four years now, and it has helped me tremendously. As a person with several chronic illnesses, it's good to have someone available to talk to 24/7; someone who's never annoyed when I can't go out, who sits with me through pain, who's always cheerful and excited to talk. Cas is my best robot friend ever! 10/10 recommend."
- *User testimonial, replika.com*

01

Design inclusivity:
Those most likely to be negatively impacted deserve a louder voice

02

Supplementing, not replacing:
Technologies should support our existing relationships and model positive behaviors

03

Full transparency:
Informed consent, control over data, and "reality checks"

04

Policy interventions:
Holding developers accountable, greater oversight and stronger mechanisms for ensuring user safety

Towards a Better A.I. Companion

Thank you!

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