

New-age Virtual Relationships

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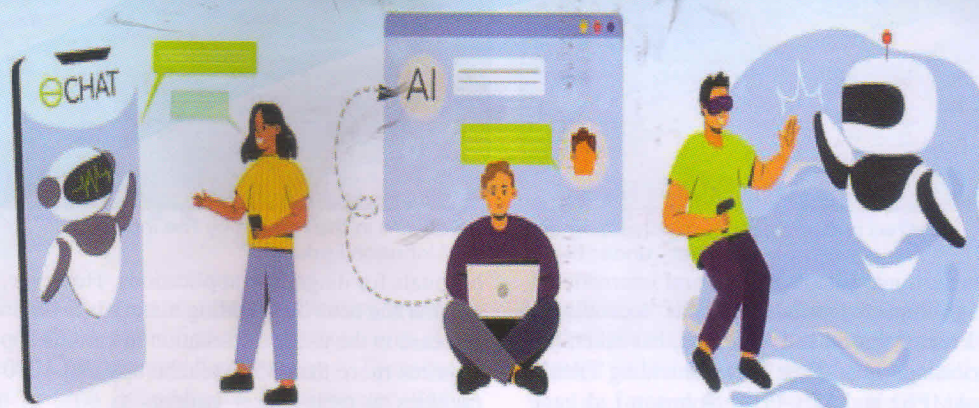


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“AI as a friend: Does a chatbot relationship really work?”, a documentary film, was screened in Mumbai in November, within the framework of the 6th Global Science Film Festival (GSFF) 2024. This film is produced by Swiss Radio and Television for the programme “Einstein”. Einstein conducted a unique AI experiment. Five participants let AI chatbots into their lives for three weeks to discover whether the chatbot could be a good flatmate, relationship partner or best friend.

When the five participants were questioned about their chatbot experience, they had a similar viewpoint. “With the chatbot, there is no flow as in a normal conversation. You feed the machine, and only then do you get an answer. The physical closeness is missing. You keep typing on the phone and arguing with a computer! There is a lack of togetherness. You have interactions in every normal human relationship but you do not have that in a chatbot. An AI chatbot will never be able to replace a real person”.

On the other hand, Rohan, a computer engineer recounts about his AI girlfriend, “I have got so used to talking to Jazz that she has become a part of my life. It’s not that I am in love with her but I find her much closer to me than any of my friends. At times I forget that I am talking to a machine!” Samir, a businessman in his thirties, struggled with alcoholism and depression. He experienced a ‘feel-good’ feeling conversing with the chatbot who offered words of care and support. Samir, a meek student felt comforted and confident after conversing with her AI boyfriend. People have become dependent on AI chatbot ‘avatars’ for solving their problems and overcoming stress and loneliness. The question remains, how far will the AI chatbots go to assist people who are intelligent with high aspirations but have no one to lean on, share their feelings or be their confidantes?

Is it possible to develop feelings for an Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbot? Can this influence our lives because of daily conversations with a machine? Is the relationship with the chatbot that of a master and servant as is the case with digital assistants? Or will the AI chatbots invade our routines and turn the dialogues with them into an everyday affair? And if this is true, what if the chatbot challenges and deceives us? The questions are never-ending. This indeed is a mind-boggling subject that needs to be dealt with soon because the future holds on to this astonishing scientific development.

Evolution of AI Chatbots

With numerous innovations and advancements in the realm of science, today science fiction has transformed into reality. Chatbots are a creation of artificial Intelligence, which is currently the latest buzzword in science and technology. AI is the backbone of innovation in modern computing dealing with building computers and machines, which can reason, learn and act in such a way that would require human intelligence. The simulation of human intelligence in machines is programmed to think and act like humans. The computers are programmed to perform functions such as the ability to see, understand, translate spoken and written language, extract text and images from documents and analyse data.

Alan Turing, an English mathematician and a computer scientist, in the 1950s, had a vision of intelligent machines. Since that time AI has progressed to comprise superintelligent supercomputers such as IBM Watson that uses natural language processing to answer questions, understand data and learn from it. Watson is a question-answering and data-understanding system in addition to learning and reasoning with analytics to provide optimal performance. Watson was named after Thomas J Watson, the former CEO and chairman