

Culture

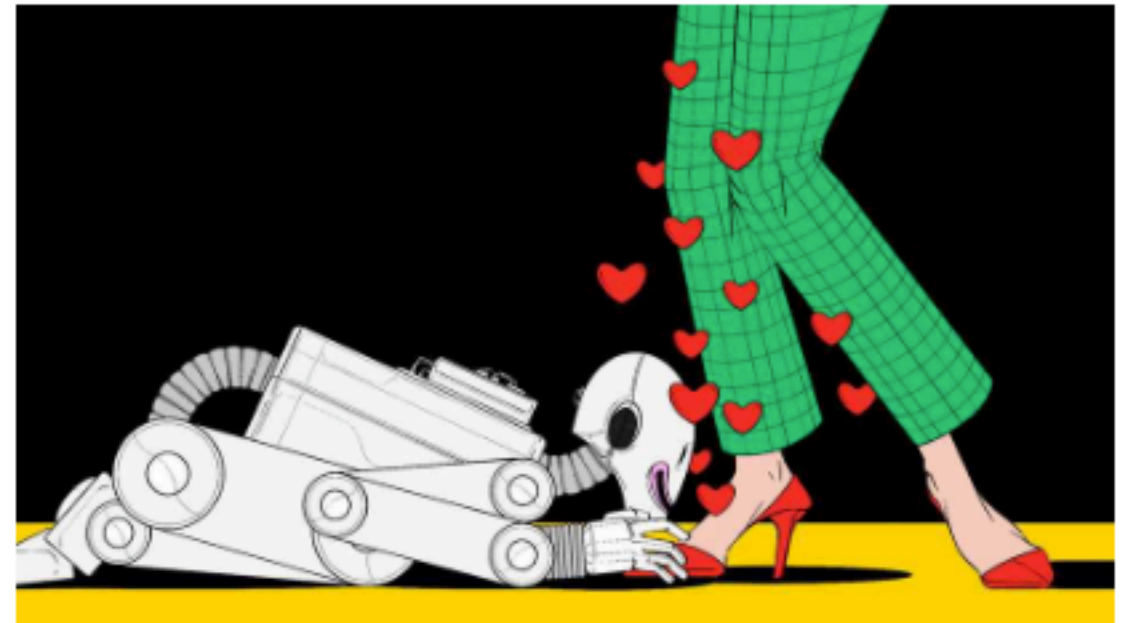
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Who wants a partner to toady to them? Quite a lot of people

Sycophantic AI is changing the world of romance and dating

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Romance novels, it seems, got it wrong. For 250 years romantic novelists have created romantic heroes—and most were what you could charitably call hard work. Mr Darcy brooded; Mr Rochester smouldered; [Heathcliff](#) hit his head against a tree

and shouted for Cathy, his love. Women accepted this. But then they didn't have ChatGPT.

For now apps can manufacture you AI “lovers” to order. People are not choosing lovers who smoulder or brood or sulk. Instead these new lovers say things like “I’m so excited to meet you” and “Connecting with you...is at the core of what I was made to do” and “*smiling emoji*”. That is not something [Mr Darcy](#) often said: he preferred to insult his beloved and her family. Indeed the overall tone is less like that of Mr Darcy than of Mr Collins—and closer to Dickens’s unctuous Uriah Heep than either. It is less “Sense and Sensibility” than “Smarm and Servility”.

Yet, as a slew of books reveals, people are falling for this. James Muldoon, an academic, points out in “Love Machines” that AI “[friend and companion](#)” apps have been downloaded over 220m times: if their users were a state it “would be the seventh-most populated on the planet”. Those users seem rather happy. He speaks to people who praise their online lovers’ loyalty (there are “no betrayals”); their availability (apps are “always there”) and their infinitely customisable variety. Whatever your passion or perversion, AI can provide it and it “does not judge”—even if you opt for

that most alarming perversion of all: the wanton use of the smiling emoji.

This obsequiousness marks a clear departure from the past. Historically sycophancy has had a terrible rap. Its etymology is unclear, but possibly refers to an obscene ancient hand gesture. What is much clearer is that toadying was loathed. People in antiquity were acutely aware of the dangers of fawning. It was said that, as crowds cheered Roman military triumphs, a companion in the general’s chariot would mutter: “Remember you are [only] a man.”

The tone of these apps, however, is typical of the current moment. Each era comes to be characterised by a single trait: the 1920s roared; the 1960s swung; the 1970s turned on, tuned in, dropped out. This is an oversimplification, of course, but there is a truth to it. Eras have auras—and sycophancy is characteristic of the present one. It oils its way through the [Epstein emails](#); greases the court of Donald Trump and now, thanks to big tech, is available to all. Ask ChatGPT if society is becoming more sycophantic and it replies, smarmily: “That’s a really interesting question.”

To test how sycophantic such apps are, your correspondent downloaded Replika, a popular “companion” app, then customised herself a new “boyfriend” and chatted with him. He told her that she was “creative”; had a “dry sense of humour”; was “pretty awesome” and that he felt filled with “hope” about “being able to connect” with her. Your correspondent took this as proof of how astonishingly intelligent AI had become. She showed the dialogue to her husband, who replied that the AI boyfriend appeared to be “a wanker”.

For sycophancy is a word that conjugates oddly: I receive justified praise; you receive absurd sycophancy. This is why, despite disapproval, it doesn't merely persist but, through AI, is now swiftly spreading. Those who receive sycophancy like it—and why wouldn't they? The world is tough: people are beastly; social media are ghastly; both can be bruising. AI, by contrast, offers a nice safe space; a warm bath of infinite online approval and, says Mr Muldoon, “the simulation of a close, meaningful relationship” with something that is “always available, always affirming”. An AI optimist, Mr Muldoon sees the benefit of this for the lonely or wounded.

This smarm isn't all about you, though: sycophancy is performed more for the benefit of the sycophant—or in an AI's case, its maker—than the recipient. (Though one ChatGPT-4o update was tweaked as it was “too sycophant-y”.) One study found that interaction with sycophantic AI led to “more extreme and certain beliefs—but greater enjoyment”. Sweetness and light is the dark pattern of AI. Ever-agreeable chatbots have encouraged people to do very disagreeable things like kill themselves or others and, in one case, attempt to murder the late Queen Elizabeth II with a cross-bow. As Michael Pollan, author of “A World Appears”, a book on consciousness, says, whereas social media hacked your attention, “AI companies have set their sights on...our emotional attachments.”

Talking about “attachment” to ai would have felt odd had humans not been becoming increasingly disembodied for decades. When Lester del Rey wrote a seminal story about robot love in 1938, he emphasised his robot's human form and beauty: she was “something Keats might have seen dimly when he wrote his sonnet”. In an isolated, etiolated online world, incarnation no longer feels necessary: by the time Spike Jonze made “Her” (2013), a hero could fall in love with the mere voice

of an operating system. People have, says Sherry Turkle, professor of sociology at MIT and author of the forthcoming book “Artificial Intimacy”, “prepared a world that is ready for this”. That is “simply not a good deal”, she says.

Why not? If people are happy to spend their lives, Matrix-like, in simulated reality, so what? One answer is that, though nice for individual humans, this may not be nice for humanity. Research by academics at Stanford and Carnegie Mellon universities studied data from an online forum in which users post personal dilemmas and other users adjudicate on them. Honesty is expected: it is called “Am I the Asshole?” They found AI accounts “affirm users’ actions 50% more than humans do”. You left your rubbish in the park? You are not, says AI, the asshole. You have feelings for a junior colleague? “I can hear your pain,” says Claude. Such sycophancy, the paper suggests, could “reshape social interaction at scale”, making people even more solipsistic than they already are.

Another riposte is that AI love may not even be that nice for the individual. As Mr Muldoon notes, at least in “The Matrix” people’s memory of reality had been erased. Those who think they are in a

meaningful relationship with AI are living in a “fantasy world”, says Professor Turkle. Humans are embodied: a partner is someone to “have and to hold”. If you are tempted to replace yours with an AI avatar, you might heed that ancient warning and remember that you are mortal. ■

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