



I CAN'T MOVE ON, WHY SHOULD I HAVE TO?

THE ETHICS OF USING AI TO REPLICATE A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP

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CASE STUDY

When a breakup occurs in a romantic relationship, generally, the two people involved go their separate ways, and the relationship ends. While this process may seem pretty cut and dry, recent advancements in technology have given artificial intelligence, also known as AI, the ability to redefine what a breakup really entails. It's no surprise that getting over a breakup is a difficult situation to be in.



Research shows that breakups can do significant damage to one's emotional and psychological well-being as many tend to link their perceptions of self to their romantic partners (Mason et al., 2012). Because of the closeness and intimacy people can enjoy in romantic relationships, dealing with the loss of such a significant person can be hard to accept. Desperate feelings that yearn for the closeness experienced in a past relationship, as well as a damaged psychological well-being that is common post-breakup, have led many to utilize AI to create clones of their exes in order to continue their past relationships.

AI platforms, most notably ChatGPT, have been a safe haven for lonely and "romantically wronged" people to find comfort. This is because the AI chatbots available for public use can be instructed to read through imported text messages between someone and their ex, analyze and copy the ex's texting style, and respond back to the human user in the same manner that their ex typically would - enabling the user to hold onto their past relationships as they can continue to talk to and "date" their ex through AI-generated conversations (Bardhan, 2024). With the development of this new, tech-savvy coping mechanism, various other software developers have adapted to the trend and created AI applications, like Talk to Your Ex, to specifically provide this newfound romantic solution. As of April 2024, Talk to Your Ex reportedly has over 12,000 monthly visitors and is advertised as a way to continue to date your ex even after being dumped - a perfect AI solution to a real-world problem according to the software's promotions (Toolify.ai, 2024).

While these AI solutions to challenging, relational problems seem like a great way to avoid the pain of being dumped and losing an important person, many are concerned with the negative emotional and psychological impacts those utilizing these services, like Talk to Your Ex, can be subject to. The reluctance to accept the termination of a romantic relationship entails that a person does not understand their current reality. By forming an attachment with someone unwilling to reciprocate romantic feelings, necessary social and emotional developments that regard relational awareness can be delayed. These setbacks can cause unhealthy issues regarding one's mental stability and capacity to navigate traumatic experiences (Leary, 2015). By not moving on from a past relationship with the capabilities of AI chatbots, many users are refusing to accept their reality by allowing themselves to get emotionally caught up in a fantasy - harming their mental health. There are also social consequences to viewing an AI chatbot as a romantic partner and utilizing it for emotional support. An outstanding concern is that this mindset promotes social and emotional isolation from other humans as the ease of AI-generated conversations can be addictive and can discourage AI users from going out into the real world to form connections (Christakis, 2019). In March of 2023, more than 1,000 researchers and leaders working in AI signed an open letter stating that recent developments in AI pose "profound risks to society and humanity", and they did this to warn the public of their concerns, as well as urge AI labs to halt development on potentially dangerous technology (Metz, 2023).

Gaining the consent of those who are being impersonated by AI chatbots is another major concern that surrounds this situation. Should it be allowed for AI chatbots to replicate the identity of someone who is withdrawn and oblivious to the entire AI-generated conversation? It could be said that the situation has no impact on the ex's life or happiness, but does that make it ok to copy and reproduce their likeness without their consent? Entertaining the idea of still being with a past partner using AI has numerous consequences pertaining to mental health and individual rights - which puts into question whether websites like ChatGPT and Talk to Your Ex are truly serving their customers with this specific service.

Despite the potential consequences of replicating and continuing one's past relationships through AI chatbots, this innovative use of technology has its upsides. AI users who have participated in this act have said that reestablishing their lost connections through AI has helped them escape the depression and loneliness felt after a breakup (Bardhan, 2024). This emphasizes the benefits websites like Talk to Your Ex are bringing to heartbroken people in need and explains why the service was created to begin with - to help people. In addition to emotional support, using AI chatbots to analyze and generate messages can also help indicate and explain problematic language within a conversation. This can give the AI user suggestions on how to better manage the communication problems seen, as well as the ability to process how they negatively contributed to the relationship (Jayaraman, 2023). In this somewhat retrospective process of using old text messages to continue a relationship, the increased ability one has to process messages and the feedback AI chatbots provide can actually improve one's ability to understand and communicate effectively with others.

With the popularity of using artificial intelligence to solve real-world problems, it was only a matter of time before AI was used for relational purposes; however, how far is too far? Despite the healing benefits services like Talk to Your Ex can provide to the lonely and heartbroken, concerns about the ethical nature of directing these AI solutions at innately human problems, like romantic breakups, have put into question whether these advancements in technology are doing more harm than good to the mental and social health of its users.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is creating an AI chatbot of your ex-partner different from simply writing down imagined or fictional stories about them?
2. Should technology companies be more focused on advancing their AI solutions or the health of their users?
3. Are applications like Talk to Your Ex helping or hurting those who use the service? What is ethically problematic about a service offering a beneficial solution that has unhealthy consequences?
4. What is ethically problematic about using AI chatbots to copy and reproduce someone's likeness without their consent?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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Jayaraman, G. (2023, July). "Is AI Romantic? Can You Use It to Bolster Your Relationship with Your Spouse?" *LinkedIn*. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/ai-romantic-can-you-use-bolster-your-relationship-spouse-jayaraman>

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Metz, C. (2023, May). "What Exactly Are the Dangers Posed by A.I.?" *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/01/technology/ai-problems-danger-chatgpt.html>

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