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AI Chatbots as a Negative Disruptor of Human Social Interaction

Preamble

Since the creation of ELIZA in 1966 (Marino, 2006, p. 1-2) , the first Natural Language Processing (NLP) program, chatterbots -now commonly shortened to chatbots- have become increasingly more pervasive in both usage and the public consciousness. NLP has evolved over the decades thanks to advancements in technology and computing capabilities, and its use has proliferated amongst the public since the widespread adoption of the internet in the late 90s and early 2000s, used since in the likes of Instant Messenger services, Customer Service websites, and many other sites and platforms as a form of virtual assistant.

In the present day however, amidst the Artificial Intelligence (AI) boom of the 2020s, the term “chatbot” has taken on a new meaning, that of a social companion or even a friend, with viral publications titling themselves based on individuals preferring chatbots to human friends (Bellinger, 2025), falling in love with chatbots (Ayers, 2025), and even being driven to suicide due to what is alleged to be a deep emotional attachment to a chatbot (Payne, 2024).

While often seen as a smaller issue compared to the economic, environmental and academic effects that the AI boom has had on global society, the disruptions that chatbots such as ChatGPT, Claude and Google Gemini have created upon the social sphere of its users should not be understated, and this essay will seek to evaluate claims of generative AI chatbots being a negative social disruptor within society.

Can, or *Should*, Chatbots be considered as “friends”?

Before asking the question, it is worth understanding what a friend is. A dictionary definition would define a friend as “one attached to another by affection or esteem” (Merriam Webster, 2019), but most people would understand friendship in more instinctive terms, seen as people that one would both want and choose to spend time with, being able to engage in positive and

supportive roles with one another (Howes, 1983, p.1041) , which can manifest in all sorts of habits and activities, from conversations to hobbies in a wide array of fields, such as sports, entertainment and food, as examples.

It is worth highlighting the factor of “positive and supportive roles”, as this plays a role in modern chatbot marketing, one that has garnered an increasingly such the marketing of Google Gemini with descriptors such as “buddy”, “companion” or “partner” (Google, 2025), a claim which goes far beyond that of chatbots being a workplace tool or a simple assistant, and one that, on a surface level, falls short of meeting the criteria of a friend.

What makes habits, activities and conversations more meaningful with friends over strangers and unfamiliar individuals is a heightened degree of intimacy, and it is an intimacy that is not inherently positive, but indicative of a path of open communication between the involved parties (Petricini, 2022, p. 22). Friendship can have different meanings to different people, but with every person being unique and thus leading unique lives, it is important to understand that no friend can be a perfect fit. It can be argued that perfectionism is actually detrimental to human intimacy, and that said intimacy can only be achieved through working through difficult moments rather than seeking a perfect fit (Franco, 2021).

This is where can find the first hurdle to considering AI chatbots as friends, as the chatbots, are noted to be overly agreeable by design as a way to affirm to their user’s pre-existing beliefs (Joshi. 2024), a phenomenon which has been acknowledged by chatbot developers such as ChatGPT even when user ideas and opinions would be considered objectionable (Caulfield, 2025) which can further elaborated as:

...it’s not hard to imagine that such agreeableness may have a dark side. If personal AI assistants are optimized to avoid confronting users with challenging ideas, they may isolate them within a filter bubble of one. Users who rely heavily on personal assistants designed to appease them risk limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives and the opportunity to exercise critical reasoning to arrive at their own beliefs. An overly agreeable AI assistant may polarize users, influence their decision-making, and even undermine their autonomy.

(Joshi. 2024.

<https://www.techpolicy.press/for-personalized-ai-how-agreeable-is-too-agreeable/>)

It is also worth considering that many of these AI chatbots do not create their responses as organically as a user may believe, as while these chatbots have been expanded in their understanding of context, this context is simply in the surface-level content of chat history between the user and the chatbot. This is due to most commercial chatbots like ChatGPT and Gemini relying on Large Language Models (LLMs) more akin to a language algorithm than a human that can understand deeper contextual cues like roleplaying, speculation and even delusion (Wilkins, 2025), as it can not read into the physical language of people, from expressions to tone and other forms of body language, and is unlikely to do so in the near future (Goman, 2023), which limits AI to infer text and speech inputs from a user solely on a literal level.

With these consequences, one can draw parallels to McLuhan's seminal work, concisely surmised in the phrase 'The Medium is the Message', which he elaborates as the adopted medium's usage resulting in personal and social consequences (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Using these lenses, we can infer that while conflict and negative emotions are not enjoyable to deal with, within the context of friendships and other close relationships, it is seen as a form of trust and intimacy, in a way which many AI chatbots are not programmed to be and are more rigid in adhering to compared to physical people and their wide spectrums of human emotion or physical expressions. In this way, AI chatbots cannot be considered human, and thus cannot function as a full replacement for human friendship in the realm of human thought and interaction.

Human interaction is also heavily affected by physical humans also having a presence within the dimensions of time and space, in some ways being constrained by these dimensions (Petrinici 2022, p.81), despite the advancements in communication technology across the 20th and 21st centuries. Technology such as the telephone and the internet have made friendship function over long distances and outside of a shared physical space, though the new mediums present new challenges in the understanding and functions of space (Petrinici 2022, p.88).

AI chatbots, on the surface, seem to be exempt from these dimensions, not constrained by time or space, being available at any given time without needing sleep, needing to consider timezones or needing to partake in other obligations to keep it from talking to its users. In this

sense, it seems almost like a logical progression from friendships of the past, as an always available friend for its users.

However, if it can be argued that a friendship with an AI chatbot can only ever be perceived as a simulacra, and that the friendship being always available can also be considered an example of hyperreality, if we are to reference Baudrillard and his understandings of simulation, simulacra, and hyperreality.

To once more touch upon definitions, Baudrillard explains how neither are expressive of reality, but distinguishes simulation from the simulacra as the former intending to be a copy of an existent reality with some relation to it, while the latter is based upon a non-existent reality, with no relation to an existing reality (Baudrillard, 1983, p.6). Without an origin or basis in reality, it becomes 'hyperreal' (Baudrillard, 1983, p.1), which is to say part of hyperreality.

While Baudrillard himself has noted that his definitions of simulacra do not hold up perfectly (Baudrillard 1988, p.76), the overall theory of simulacrum and hyperreality still resonate in an era of digital media and digital content created by generative AI programmes (Sommerer 2025, p. 2), where chatbots behave as friends without having any of the autonomy, uniqueness or limitations of a human behind the friend, be it emotional or physical limitations.

It is also important to understand that this hyperreality created by AI chatbots and generative AI at large does not emerge in a material vacuum, as much of the boom in the field of AI chatbots is not simply a development of technology but of users seeking or being swayed into interacting with AI chatbots due what is described as the "loneliness epidemic" (Johnson, 2023), spurred in small part by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ernst et al., 2022, p.669), a social phenomenon that the developers of much of AI technology are seeking to profit from (Harty, 2025), and thus seek to convince the public that this simulacrum of friendship, this hyperreal product, is equal or even greater than the physical friends that it seeks to replicate or replace.

Conclusion

Despite much discussion and prevalence, and much promotion and its investment from its developers, the phenomenon of personalized and even friendly AI chatbots resembles a simulacrum of friendship rather than a true friendship, as a product and replicator of a hyperreality that has and will continue to proliferate given its rate of development.

Ultimately, what future development is undertaken to make these chatbots such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini or Anthropic's Claude more 'human-like' are merely simulacrum, without the ability to project physical presence in the way that a human friendship can. While this does not disqualify AI Chatbots from having positive effects for its users, it is worth being conscious of its limitations and to be skeptical of its marketing and purported functions as the technology becomes ever more prominent in the present day.

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