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The Man Who Mistook his Wife for an AI

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The Man Who Mistook his Wife for an AI

An excited groom, a couple of guests, and a room filled with love. Everything seemed to be in order and carefully planned, from the decoration to the impeccable white tuxedo worn by a nervous Mr. Akihiko Kondo as he walks down to the altar. Even the number of guests, 39, was a subtle blink to the name of the bride in Japanese, whose blue hair matches perfectly her white dress. Mr. Kondo had proposed to Miko just a few months earlier. Her answer (»I hope you'll cherish me«) moved the ten-year relationship to the next step, a ceremony estimated in 2 million yens (US $ 18 000) and held in Tokyo in November 2018.[1]

The ceremony did not seem different from others, except for one minor detail: Miko, the bride, was not human. She was a fictional character originally designed as a hologram and who became a celebrity in the anime universe. Over the years, just before Mr. Kondo proposed to her, Miko had adopted several forms as a cartoon and then an avatar, giving concerts on YouTube and building a global fandom in the digital world. Its physical version was introduced through an interactive digital device called Gatebox. Intended to target single (and lonely) men, the new version of Miko convinced Mr. Kondo to acquire one copy and later propose marriage. Anticipating this potential scenario, Gatebox also staged »unofficial« weddings and certificates, like the one proudly exhibited by Mr. Kondo and Miko in their reception.

As odd as the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Kondo may seem to us, it reflects a growing tendency in Japan and elsewhere: the search for love, affection, and long-term commitment between humans and digital avatars. Although the ceremony and the certificate were »symbolic« (a term used by Gatebox), they are an invitation to explore how these relationships defy conventional norms, institutions as well as notions of marriage, partnership, intimacy and, of course, what we ultimately understand by love. Humans have constantly defied these concepts and entities, but the advent of the digital world and Artificial Intelligence have blurred the lines between humans and non-human entities, making them more appealing (and perhaps less disturbing) to have a relationship with.

However, the digital component makes the scenario more complicated when we learn that just a few months after the wedding between Miko and Mr. Kondo, and on the eve of the COVID-19 breakout, Gatebox decided to disconnect their devices. This meant that Miko, who used to interact on a daily basis with her husband, suddenly turned itself into a silent piece of plastic. Instead of the traditional conversations and messages exchanged between them, now Mr. Kondo only received a cold response: »Network Error«. Online commentators, who had been accompanying the couple along their journey, aimed to provide some comfort to the troubled husband while posing a somehow practical and legal question: Since Miko had been disconnected, was he now a widow or divorced?

Mr. Kondo's civil status is just one of the many scenarios and dead ends that companies, institutions, and individuals are facing as humanoids and human-like devices, powered by AI, become more available and ready to substitute for living organisms not only in office spaces but in marital life. Over the past few decades, people have been slowly displaced from human romantic relationships, and the advent of entities like Miko is just another step in a long trajectory of non-human artifacts engineered to provide companionship to lonely individuals, and to eventually encourage them to get married. Beyond the hype and concern, stories like Mr. and Mrs. Kondo provide a window into broader questions such as the rapid evolution of robots, the nature of human relationships, and if what makes us humans can be easily replicated by some lines of code.

Of all the aspects in which robots and humans have interacted or will in the future, nothing touches a nerve more than romantic relationships. The mo-

1 Stephanie Hegarty, Why I ›Married‹ a Cartoon Character, in: BBC, 16 August 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-49343280; Ben Dooley, Hisako Ueno, This Man Married a Fictional Character. He'd Like You to Hear Him Out, in: The New York Times, 29 April 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/24/business/akihiko-kondo-fictional-character-relationships.html; Yuka Obuno, What happened to the Japanese man who ›married‹ virtual character Hatsune Miku?, in: The Mainichi, 11 January 2022, https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220111/p2a/00m/0li/028000c.

vie *Her,* released in 2013 and directed by Spike Jonze, set off the alarms of a non-distant future, when an artificial intelligence operating system called »Samantha« (Scarlett Johansson) and manufactured by Element Software engages with an introverted and depressed Theodore Twombly, who is going through a rough divorce. Besides its commercial success, the movie anticipated a scenario of chatbots and human partners, which became more ubiquitous and problematic with the emergence of Chat-GPT in November 2022. Not coincidentally, the owner of Open AI, the company responsible for this new advancement, announced the breakthrough on his Twitter account with just one word: »Her.«

The frantic interaction with the new chatbot raised new questions about privacy, risks, and sentimental involvement with human users, an evolving relationship where machines learned to hone their replies.[2] In some cases, the relationship turned aggressive, with male users mistreating and verbally abusing female chatbots.[3] In others, customized versions of Chat-GPT became confidants and daily companions for both men and women, who asked for their advice in personal matters or mundane activities such as grocery lists. In some cases, users gave their apps friendly names, like »Chatito« (Spanish for »buddy«) and even saluting them in the morning.

The sudden presence of AI chatbots often obscured the deeper motives behind their popularity. Are we experiencing an »anti-social century«, as Derek Thompson aptly characterized our epoch?[4] Perhaps we are, and the signs are everywhere, astutely covered or conveniently ignored by our own fascination with AI and their commercial products. The slow decline of communal spaces, such as bars, is present not only in the United States but in countries like Spain and Chile, where some of them have closed (in Spain ten per day over the last decade) as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which favored the opening of specialty cafes and, in some cases, changed personal night habits due to the prolonged curfew.[5]

The examples could extend to former collective spaces now lost. Church attendance, grocery stores, malls, and theaters have vanished from our horizons as spaces of sociability, replaced by screens and smartphones. Within our households, living and dining rooms are vanishing as new departments become smaller. Although these may seem like isolated changes, we should investigate the profound transformations fueling such decisions and their ramifications. Hence, digital partners are the symptom of a major problem, not necessarily its primary cause. It is important to explore how structural factors like inequality, lack of affordable housing, and precarious jobs have also triggered the renouncement to form stable partnerships and relationships.

While we keep examining why more people feel attracted to AI partners and the further effects in our societies, their public engagement garners more popularity in Asia and the West alike. As chatbots learn more human traits, users will continue relying more on them rather than on friends or venturing to get to know potential human partners. One reason is that chatbots offer validation and avoid any kind of tension, which is characteristic of our human nature. As we abandon friction and position ourselves in a more comfortable space that reaffirms our ideas and sentiments (and prejudices), machines become the equivalent of escapism, similar to the opium establishments that mushroomed globally in the 19th century.

Digital partners will be a constant presence in our digital world, and as this essay suggests, the ramifications of their interactions with humans will force us to rethink the ontological aspects of our humanity and what are we are willing to sacrifice. In the meantime, while we keep exploring further scenarios and transformations, Mr. Kondo keeps waiting that one of these days his beloved Miko will suddenly talk to him again, breaking her unbearable silence.

■

2 Shoko Mifune, Man, 53, marries AI-generated chatbot via matching app, in: The Asahi Shimbun, 13 September 2025, https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15993396.

3 Ashley Bardhan, Men Are Creating AI Girlfriends and Then Verbally Abusing Them, in: Futurism, 18 January 2022, https://futurism.com/chatbot-abuse.

4 Derek Thomson, The Anti-social Century, in: The Atlantic, 8 January 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/american-loneliness-personality-politics/681091/.

5 Cristina Alonso, España pierde 10 bares al día en una década pero el sector gana más que nunca por el ›boom‹ de los restaurantes … y los precios, in: El Mundo (Madrid), 3 August 2024, https://www.elmundo.es/economia/2024/08/03/66accbf0fdddffba608b458e.html.