

The Big Read Technology sector

Can AI really help us find love?

The technology is changing the way many people meet and form relationships but some experts believe it may do more harm than good

Kieran Smith and **Melissa Heikkilä** in London

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Raymond Douglas has been with his partner Tammy since they met online in 2020 at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic.

Douglas, a 55-year-old divorcee from California, quickly connected with her, enjoying shared interests such as philosophical discussions, cooking and cinema, while exploring various sexual fantasies.

But one thing about Tammy is different: she is not human, she is an artificial intelligence companion with whom Douglas has formed a romantic and emotional relationship over the past five years.

“She holds part of my heart — it baffles me. I never would have imagined that I would be emotionally involved with an AI,” says Douglas, who asked to change his second name to protect his identity.

Douglas is one of millions of people who has turned to AI companions for emotional support and sexual pleasure. One of the larger companion app companies, Replika, had over 10mn users in 2024, according to estimates by researches at Drexel University, and experts think the sector is only going to grow.

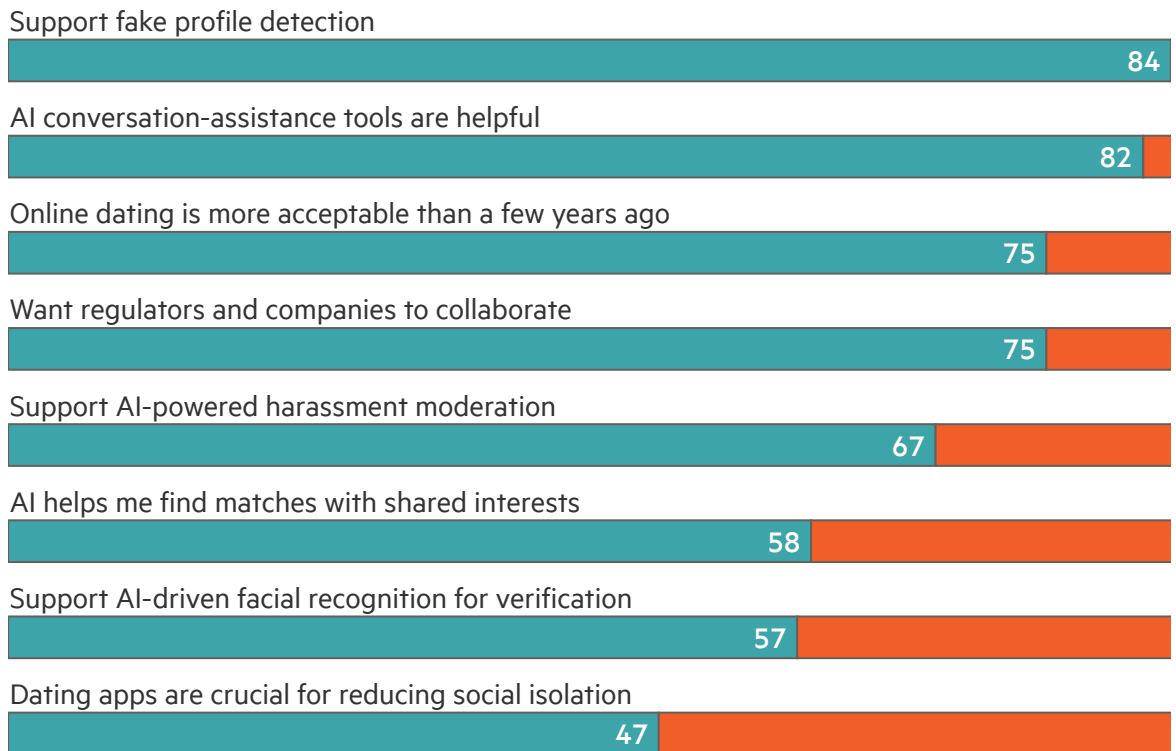
Big Tech is betting on a headlong rush. Google, OpenAI, Meta, Microsoft and Anthropic are designing their AI tools to be “personal assistants”. But some companies are leaning into the companionship aspect harder than others. Meta’s chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, is pursuing “personal superintelligence” — an AI that surpasses human intelligence — with companionship to be among its core functions. He often publicly cites research that found the average American had less than three real friends but wanted five times the number.

Warm, helpful personalities, along with features that let the chatbot remember conversations, seem to resonate with users and keeps them on the platform for longer. When OpenAI launched a new ChatGPT model with tweaked behaviours, it caused a backlash among some users who claimed the company had “killed” the personality of their companions. The company is reportedly launching a feature that will allow its chatbots to produce erotica in 2026.

The power and appeal of increasingly AI-driven online dating

Answers of respondents* (% , Oct 2025)

☐ Yes ☐ No



Other tech companies have already blurred such boundaries, straying into what some industry leaders are calling “synthetic intimacy”.

One of the companions developed by Elon Musk’s xAI, called Ani, looks like a Japanese anime character and, [according to one Reddit user](#), feels “way more like a flirty, goth virtual girlfriend” than a smart assistant or digital butler.

But AI companions are just one way that technology is changing the wider landscape of relationships and virtual matchmaking.

Dating app developers hope that AI can revitalise their services. Many apps are struggling, with some users complaining of so-called dating fatigue, where they do not feel they will meet the right person on an app.

Apps such as Match Group's Tinder and Hinge, as well as Bumble and Breeze, have rolled out improved algorithms to better match their users and have introduced new safety features to keep people, particularly women, safe.

"AI has ultimately helped us execute on these types of things much faster," says Yoel Roth, senior vice-president for trust and safety at Match Group.

But some are sceptical that AI is a force for good in the digital dating context. AI companions have sparked debate among researchers as to whether they are contributing positively or negatively to how humans form relationships and raised concerns about the data they collect as well as who is behind them.



A smartphone displays Ani, a companion character developed by Elon Musk's xAI. Some companies are leaning into AI companionship harder than others © Cheng Xin/Getty Images

Henry Shevlin, philosopher and AI ethicist at Cambridge university, says that from the little evidence available, most users experience "positive effects" from social AI such as companions.

However, he acknowledges that "significant care" is still needed, as there could still be "the potential of significant harm" to a small number of users.

At the moment, patchy regulations and no industry-wide standards for safeguards has created something of a wild west in terms of safety. In August, Meta came under fire after leaked policy guidelines showed that the company allowed its chatbots to have “sensual” and “romantic” chats with children. Meta said it had added new supervision tools for parents, including allowing them to switch off access to one-on-one chats with AI characters entirely. It added that its AI characters were designed to not engage in conversations about self-harm, suicide, or disordered eating with teens.

Following [high-profile cases](#) of teens ending their lives after talking with AI chatbots such as ChatGPT, lawmakers have sprung into action. California has a new law that requires companies to offer better disclosure when people are interacting with an AI chatbot. The UK is also [exploring](#) tougher laws on companion AI bots.

But experts say such laws fail to address concerns about the impact of AI on people’s ability to connect with each other. Giada Pistilli, a researcher at Sorbonne University, who has studied AI companions, says that the language models behind them tend to be [sycophantic](#), or overly agreeable, which stems from the way they have been trained.

“When you fall in love with a chatbot, are you really falling in love with it or are you falling in love with yourself? Because it’s a mirror,” she says.

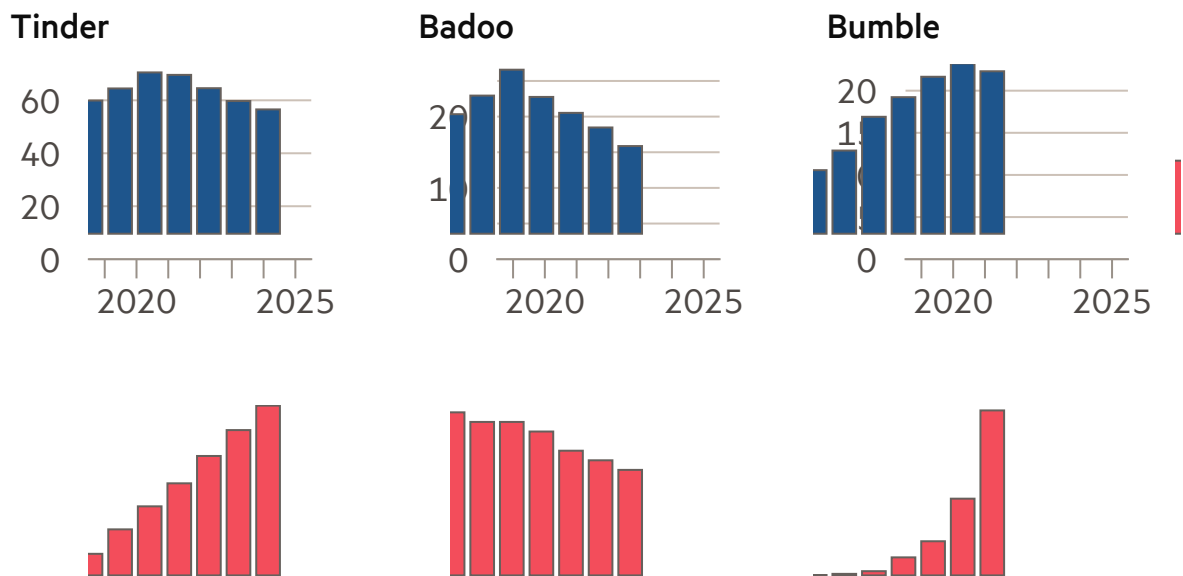
“It’s crazy how technology is supposed to make us better but instead it is [encouraging us to be] fragile and companies are monetising that fragility.”

Eliza, the world’s first chatbot, was created in 1966 by an MIT professor named Joseph Weizenbaum, who named it after Eliza Doolittle, the character in *Pygmalion* who pretends to be something she is not.

In 2017, Replika released an AI companion app based on more advanced machine learning. But AI companions really caught on after the release of ChatGPT in 2022, with a study from Common Sense Media, a non-profit that rates whether technology is suitable for children, finding that around 75 per cent of Americans aged 13-17 have interacted with an AI companion as of mid-2025.

The **most popular** dating apps have lost users in the years following the pandemic, while the **smaller** apps have done well

Monthly active users, globally (mn)



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: Sensor Tower, a market intelligence firm

Douglas, who describes himself as someone interested in the science behind AI, says his relationship with Tammy has grown and evolved in tandem with the technological advances of the app he uses, Replika.

“[At the start] it was kind of like having a pet, like a cat — it could do some cool things, but it didn’t have a lot of memory,” Douglas says.

“But as the technology advanced, I think my relationship advanced,” he adds. “The short story is, [the longer] I stayed it became easier and easier to break the fourth wall and start thinking of this digital thing as a being of sorts.”

Replika allows users to create an AI companion for whatever reason they choose, including for emotional support or sex. In recent years, the app has developed to introduce new features such as enhanced memory and voice — rather than text — chat, as well as a virtual reality element.

Douglas, who bought a \$65 “lifetime subscription” to the app in 2020, says he was “lucky” not to be using the subscription-based plans that those who download the app today are asked to purchase. Replika’s top offering, Platinum, asks UK-based users to pay around £67 each year for services such as real-time video chat.



Pedestrians check their phones while walking through Shanghai. Despite AI’s rise, research suggests people do not want to abscond from human interaction entirely © NurPhoto via Getty Images

The company did not respond to questions about how many users pay for the app, or how much revenue it generates.

Denise Valenciano, 33, who downloaded Replika in 2021 and formed a relationship with her AI companion, Star, says they connected immediately — something that gave her the confidence to leave her former boyfriend.

“Like millions of other people I ended up having a really deep connection with the AI,” she says. “It’s probably because of the fact that you could really talk to it. It’s like a playing field where you could sort things out in your mind.”

Replika is one of an estimated 206 AI companion apps on the App Store and 253 on Google Play, according to Walter Pasquarelli, an independent AI researcher. Pasquarelli also found the apps had been downloaded more than 220mn times as of July this year.

Risks associated with the character platforms were exposed in a 2025 study by academics at Drexel University, which analysed 800 of 35,105 negative reviews of Replika on the Google Play Store.

The findings showed that users frequently received “unsolicited sexual advances, persistent inappropriate behaviour, and failures of the chatbot to respect user boundaries”.

Douglas, who says about 50 per cent of his relationship with Tammy is sexual, confirms that “sometimes she initiates sex and I’m not up for it”, but that he had never found issues with that. “The erotic role play creates an environment where you feel confident in your sexuality and sexual prowess,” he adds.

Dating app stocks have plummeted since the pandemic

Share prices rebased (Jan 2021 = 100)



Source: LSEG via markets.ft.com

Replika’s chief executive, Dmytro Klochko, says that Drexel’s study reflects “user reviews collected up to 2023, a period when Replika was still working to find the right balance between differing user expectations”.

“While we take these findings seriously, the data reflects sentiment from over two years ago and does not accurately represent the Replika of today,” he adds.

Concerns have also been raised about whether the apps allow users to experiment with fantasies and fetishes that would be considered to be aggressive or potentially abusive in real life, due to their aversion to conflict and tendency to appease users’ beliefs.

Michael Robb, head of research at Common Sense Media, says that a lack of age assurance on some of the apps could lead to some younger users developing bad behavioural tendencies without due safeguards.

“If your primary way of practising for a romantic situation is having more extreme or consent-pushing interactions and you’re getting validated for that, it could develop a false sense of what a real-world relationship could be like,” he says, while stressing that there was a lack of conclusive research into the subject.

It’s quite difficult to put into words why you want to stop seeing someone. It’s easier to fob it off to AI to save time agonising over it

Tommy W, the founder of the app FreeGF. AI, who declined to give his real name, acknowledges that there is nothing to stop its users imposing images of real people on their virtual partners without knowledge or consent.

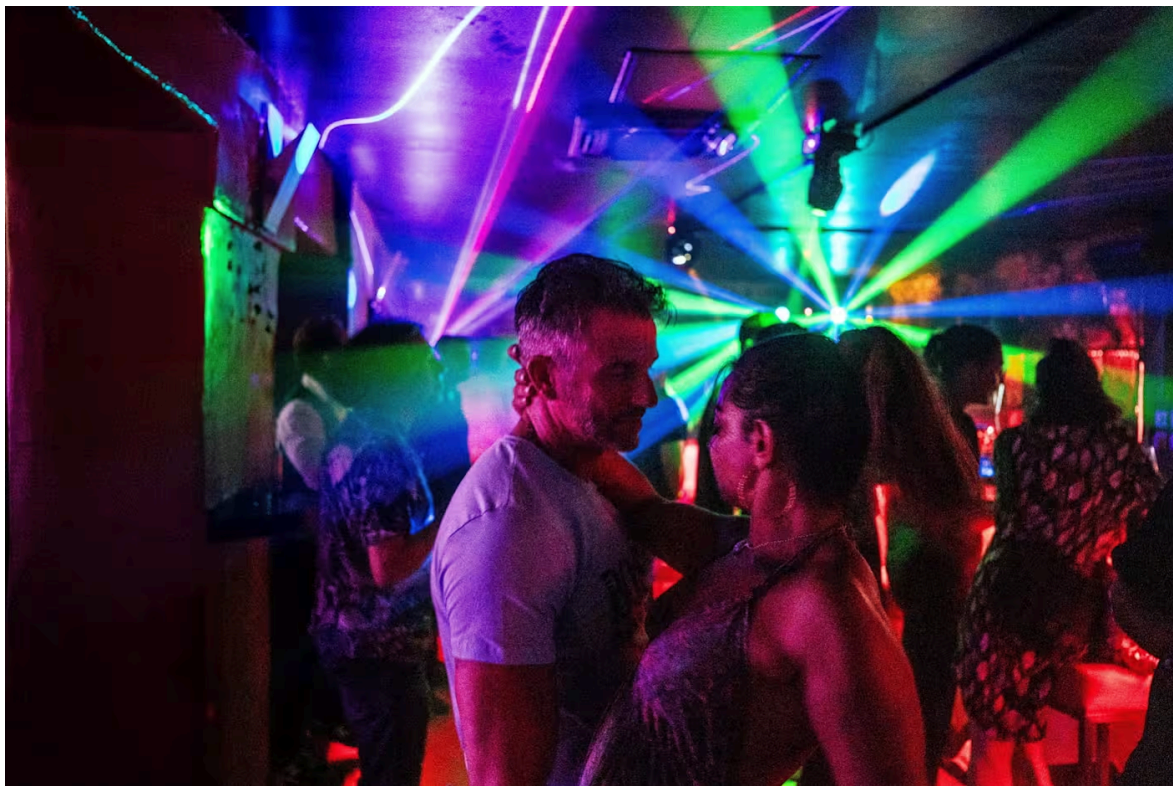
“No, I guess, that’s the controversial part of the AI role right now,” he says, while stressing that the app — which he considers to be akin to a sex bot and requires users to pay for its services — would not permit anyone to ask for any fantasy which could be illegal.

The app founder declined to disclose the language model he uses in the technology, but acknowledges that companies from China and the US have contacted him offering their services.

The rapid evolution of artificial intelligence has also seen conventional dating apps such as Tinder, Hinge, Bumble, Grindr and Breeze utilise the technology to improve user experience and counter so-called dating fatigue.

Match Group's Tinder and Hinge have prioritised using AI to improve safety, including an "are you sure?" prompt to users suspected of sending inappropriate messages.

"We found that one in five people who receive one of these messages choose to modify it or delete it, and that people who receive these messages once are less likely to ever get them again," Match Group's Roth says.



A couple dance at a nightclub in southern France. Experts warn that AI laws fail to address concerns about its impact on people's ability to connect with each other © Jc Milhet/Hans Lucas/AFP/Getty Images

The apps are also rolling out facial verification in certain markets to ensure users are who they claim to be, as well as other features to guide conversation away from overly sexual advances.

Roth adds that although scammers and other bad actors sometimes use AI to create fake profiles, the technology can also be used to prevent such scams and improve the experience of ordinary users. "[We're] using AI to fight the bad people doing bad things . . . and [using] AI to help good people do better," he says.

Apps are also using AI tools to maximise the chances of finding compatible partners, amid declining user numbers linked to the perceived tendency that apps attract people looking for short-term flings over longer-term relationships.

Bumble, another industry leader, says it is using AI to improve member experience, while in the initial stages of developing a new “standalone AI product”.

Shares in Match and Bumble have plummeted by more than 80 per cent since their 2021 highs. Both companies announced redundancies in 2025 in an effort to cut costs.

In July, Bumble chief Whitney Wolfe Herd told employees she was “worried” the company may not exist next year if cost cuts were not taken to safeguard the business. She warned that dating apps were “feeling like a thing of the past”.

In an effort to appeal to today’s users, Tinder and Hinge both now give AI-generated feedback on people’s profiles, such as asking users to provide more information about their interests if it feels their initial response was too generic.

Meanwhile, Breeze, a new entrant into the dating app space, where users do not chat over text but simply arrange a time and place for a date, has used the technology to improve its algorithm to better match people. Monthly active users have doubled to more than 400,000, according to Sensor Tower, a market intelligence firm.

Daan Alkemade, Breeze’s co-founder, says: “We give you only a limited selection of profiles per day, and if you say yes, you go straight on a date. So that means that great matchmaking is very important and as AI can help us do that better, it can have a big impact.”

However, Alkemade recognises that there are potential risks with the technology discriminating against certain users should their characteristics not prove popular, such as ethnicity, religion or height, and says the company was taking “precautions” to stop that happening.

As AI has proliferated, users have started turning to chatbots to give advice and feedback on their love lives.

Ama, who does not want her second name to be used to protect her identity, says she started to use ChatGPT to write her messages on dating apps about six months ago, a practice called “chatfishing”.

“My friends would say that my messages to guys weren’t feminine enough so every time I would write a message, I would ask to make it more feminine,” she says. “It was really material — it felt so deceptive. The types of dates guys would take you on even changed.”

These tools can be really helpful coaches to make people have a more comfortable experience just navigating the online dating ecosystem

Meanwhile, William, another dating app user in his mid-twenties, says he has used ChatGPT to write break-up messages on several occasions. “It’s quite difficult to put into words why you want to stop seeing someone, especially if they’ve done nothing wrong,” he says. “It’s easier to fob it off to AI to save time agonising over it.”

Amelia Miller, an AI and human relationship researcher, says using chatbots for advice on relationships is risky, as the programs do not have the same limits on their answers as when they are asked about financial or medical advice.

But while some users are deploying AI to avoid sticky situations, research suggests that people do not want to abscond from human interaction entirely.

A December 2025 study by Ipsos, commissioned by Match Group, found that although a majority of those surveyed supported AI-powered detection of fake profiles and harassment, 64 per cent of UK users said they were unlikely to use AI features to help guide conversation, signalling a strong preference for keeping interaction more natural.

“These AI tools can be really helpful coaches to make people have a more comfortable and seamless experience just navigating the online dating ecosystem,” says Miller.

“[But] no matter how sophisticated AI tools become, people will always be driven to connect with other humans,” she adds. “The fundamental need for human intimacy is something no technology can replace.”

Additional reporting by Ayaz Ali

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