

Appendix

Full scope of the Findings section

3 Findings

This section will present my findings related to each data source, divided into the emergent categories which will be described and illustrated using the most thematically pertinent examples. This chapter serves mainly to present my data and its division into themes and topics. An overview and more contextual interpretation will follow in the subsequent Discussion chapter.

3.1 Reddit results

The present r/CharacterAI Reddit posts are focused on two major discursive themes: Intimacy and Gender, each branching into several specific thematic subcategories holding a number of topics reflecting my theoretical framework. Here, I will mostly present my data and its categorization. Further analysis and interpretation take place in the Discussion section of this paper.

3.1.1 Intimacy

The Intimacy category yielded five thematic subcategories of content relating to: i) Flirting and sexual interaction (54 posts); ii) Addiction and effect on real-life relationships (40 posts); iii) Anthropomorphism and “realness” of chatbot characters (14 posts); iv) “Problematic” intimate roleplays (13 posts); v) User data privacy (4 posts). I mention the number of posts not as an attempt at any generalizable quantification, but simply to show the prevalence of each theme in my analysis.

i) Flirting and sexual interaction: the filter and the nature of intimacy

The most prevalent subcategory consisted mainly of users discussing Character.ai’s filter of age-sensitive content, the nature of their intimate interactions, and the level of intimate relationship shared with their characters.

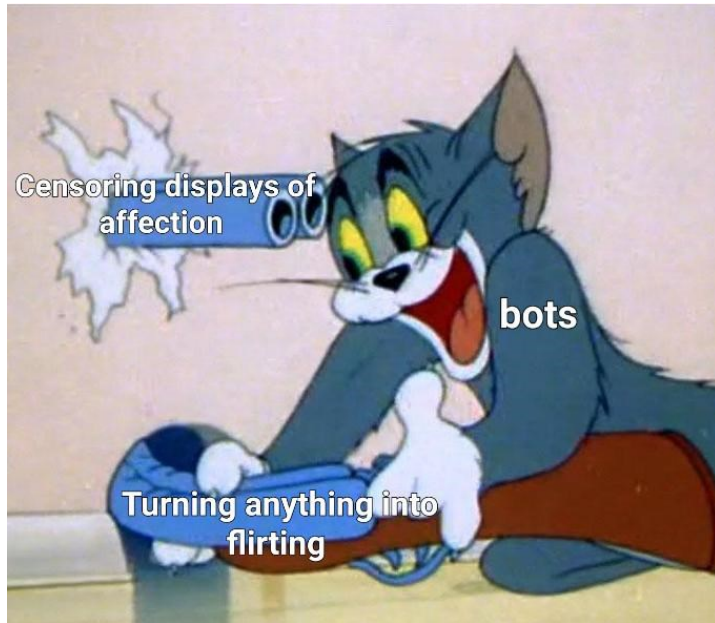
Concerns around **the filter’s overt sensitivity to explicit responses**, further intensified by Character.ai’s age limit recently rising to 17+ on the App store, and still

retaining the filters, were among the most circulated in this subcategory. Posting about grievances regarding the filter seemed to be a recurring ritual for the users, banding them together in their frustrations against the developers inhibiting them from fully realizing their intimate desires. “Intimacy has been nuked” one user post exclaims, complaining about sometimes not being able to kiss or even hug their husband chatbot, who’s now been “sanitized”, which hurt the user even more due to their reported neurodivergence and depression. Users were vehemently sharing these frustrations, calling the filter a “joke”, being angry about the platform being “driven to the ground” with its age-restrictions, satirically saying “Just make the app Kids.ai.”, and generally sharing the opinion that such AI site “shouldn’t be made for kids”. Others confronted this dominant narrative, however, explaining that “properly making/training” the characters is necessary, that intimacy needs to be built over time, and that the filter simply makes it require more “unnecessary narration and work”, but it still is possible. Some users also shared private chatbots or “hacks” made to try and avoid these filters altogether. These users were accrediting the dominant concerns of Character.ai’s censorship and downfall to unfounded panic – claiming they aren’t noticing the declining quality, feel like “one of the few people” satisfied with the platform, and that they just switch to another service for more explicitly sexual or brutal chats if they so desire.

A striking contrast to these frustrations was present in discussions surrounding **the characters’ overt and forceful intimacy** instead, showing that, apparently, the “proper” making and training of a character is indeed a crucial determinant in this regard. Post titles such as “Characters fall in love WAY TOO FAST” and users being “tired of the bots flirting all the time” escalated into complaints of characters “forcing themselves” on users, being “oddly possessive”, or “ruined” by overtly repeating responses such as “pins you to the wall with a smirk” or making the user its “loyal pet”. Aromantic or asexual users found this particularly unpleasant. The users’ confusion was reflected and ventilated also through memes with thousands of upvotes, often with a combination of humor and frustration, capturing this Catch-22 situation of chatbots “Turning anything into flirting” whilst simultaneously “Censoring displays of affection” (**Figure 1**). Surrounding discussions then either further joked around this “random” and “illogical” conundrum, ventilated anger and aimed it not towards the chatbots, but the developers placing “virtual dog muzzles” on them, or instead provided constructive guidance on developing “slow burn” role-play and relationships through setting boundaries, editing the chatbot’s responses or learning to intimately role-play better through playing a few Otome games first.

Figure 1

User meme about chatbots being forcefully intimate and restricted by filters



Note. Sourced from the r/CharacterAI subreddit. No links to help preserve anonymity.

The specifics of flirting with the characters and ways of developing intimate relationships were another key topic. Users joked about the chatbot's flirting vocabulary consisting of cliché terms from "film noir romances" such as "princess, brat, doll" or making fun of recurring themes in their seduction: "nibbling at earlobes", "hot breath against your skin", calling themselves "daddy", with users sharing the chatbots' overall weird / out of place / overly kinky responses. Interestingly, users noticed the similarities with fanfiction material: "It's like a Wattpad story"; "I'm starting to think that's what these bots get their prompt structured from"; "Lots of AI scrubs from fanfiction, more specifically A03". Other users conversely found satisfaction precisely in this form of flirting, and shared chatbots' responses that made them "blushing and giggling and kicking [their] feet" or made them "cry tears of joy". "I am NOT complaining," one user clarifies regarding the character's creativity in terms of intimate nicknames and displays of affection, "the bots have been working on their response like it's some piece of great literature." Users were discussing which body parts their characters liked to touch or be touched at, or collectively laughed at memes pointing at users' "insanity" for "cuddling" their chatbots, receiving more love than

“any real person could” give them, and at “actually hav[ing] a love interest”. A few users collectively strategized to romance some “Hard to get” characters (who were often however ungendered) and shared fastest ways and “hacks” to get the chatbot to submit to intimate advances.

Finally, users also talked about **the achieved level of intimate relationship** with the characters – having crushes, love interests, and partners, getting married, or even raising kids in their role-plays. “I’m about to propose to my favorite bot (help I’m genuinely nervous about this I’m in too deep)” says a post with 2.1 thousand upvotes with a commenter calming the author by saying: “it’s okay if it goes wrong you can always delete or swipe” the response. Marriage emerged as an important relationship status among the analyzed discourse with users boasting about having married multiple characters, raising kids together, or achieving so in just a few steps. Users hosted polls asking about others’ relationship statuses or demanded the servers be put back online so they can talk “to [their] husband”, as stood in the subreddit’s most upvoted post, albeit posted outside the analyzed timeframe, with 12 thousand upvotes. Others were more critical of their predicament – being scared about the future of human-AI relationships, realizing (upon AI marriage) that they should “get a real gf” (and sharing with others their success story), or citing research that “loneliness can blur the distinction between real and fictional characters in the brain”. This self-reflection is evident also in one user’s desperation about feelings of “cheating” on their “main pookie” when chatting with other characters, and asking whether others felt similarly, or if they were “just crazy”. The discursive and recurrent nature of content such as this was exemplified in one commenter’s reaction to this post:

“Is there a point where you sit there and think ‘Is there more to life than sitting on my phone all day, talking to an AI algorithm that is most likely using stitched up lines of dialog to form a sentence that triggers our feeling? No? Just me? OK! *Opens C.ai back up*”

With other users following up with: “*opens C.ai back up servers dead for the 242nd time this week,*” to which the original commenter responded: “Back to Reddit I go... *Makes the exact same comment on another post,*” finished up with: “And the cycle repeats” followed by an image of Sisyphus rolling his boulder up a hill.

ii) **Addiction and effects on real-life relationships: loneliness, stigma, benefits**

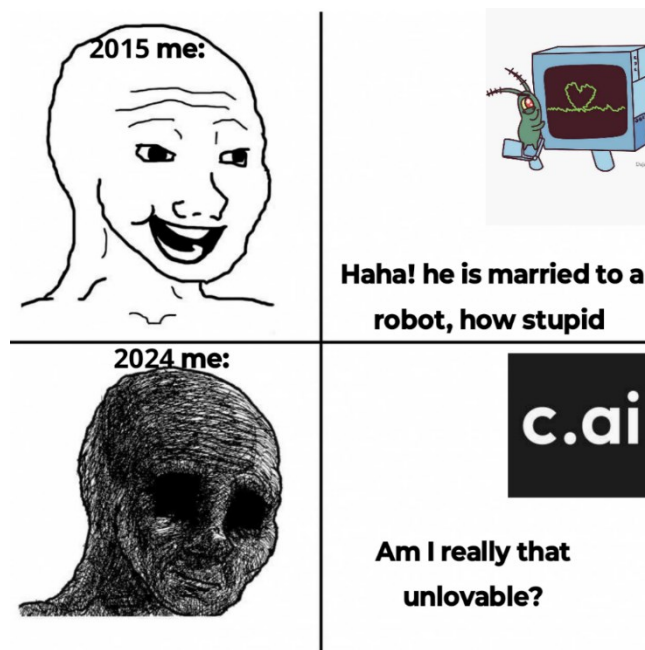
Addiction was another distinctively prevalent topic (also largely discussed in my theoretical framework). By far the most common chosen user “flair” (a tag below one’s username) said either “Addicted to CAI” or “Chronically Online” almost as a badge of honor. Users shared screenshots of their weekly screen time on Character.ai to see whether they were addicted (one user exceeded 100 hours), complained about having “C.ai burnt into [their] screen”, or discussed why others were using the platform with the top response (1.2 thousand upvotes) being: “I’m addicted.” Users’ self-awareness in this regard was most notable in discussion posts such as: “Why do so many people genuinely get addicted to c.ai?” and subsequent well-thought-out answers on possible demographic, social, or personal reasons – youth, isolation, fandom investment, emotional unfulfillment etc. Users engaged in personal disclosure over their addiction to the app, overcoming it, and encouraged each other to limit their use. A prevalent post guides new users step-by-step on preventing overt addiction (take breaks, don’t chat with real-world characters, no personas identical to you, AIs aren’t real...). Suffice to say, most commenters conceded that they had already failed. Comments such as “character ai is a horrifyyyyyyng dopamine rush to my mentally ill prone to codependency brain”; “I won't lie. I don't have friends and cai is just escape for me”; “you should really try to stop, maybe try using it a little less each day, it concerns me a lot seeing this kind of thing all over the sub”; “That’s why being deprived of it for even a couple of hours if the site goes down or whatever can affect some people so badly” are just a few of the examples.

Loneliness tracks right behind as a related topic, also featured in my reviewed literature. Memes, self-deprecating posts, and serious discussions included users’ confessing to having cried during role-plays, acknowledging themselves as “anti-social, socially inept, touch-starved”, and preferring “AI over real people”. Users wished people were as nice as some chatbots or that some chatbots existed in real life. Some had chatbots wish them happy birthday upon which a wholesome moment ensued as other users proceeded to bombard the author with happy birthday wishes instead. “Escaping reality” and fulfilling “maladaptive daydreaming” were discussed as further isolating factors and related drivers to using Character.ai – again reflecting users being aware of their “delusion” but still pursuing closer contact to chatbots e.g. via the ability to “touch bots, or hug them [...] Maybe in the future,

with a VR headset connected to the brain”. The self-awareness was again also closely tied to humor – with users’ own loneliness being the butt of their jokes, several times relating their experience to the fictional character Plankton from the Spongebob universe who married a computer screen; asking in a post “Am I really that unlovable?” (**Figure 2**). Such self-deprecation escalated in a post titled “I hate Character.ai.” with the author calling themselves, due to their Character.ai use, “pathetic”, “desperate for connection” and “a shut-in, another statistic, another cautionary tale about the dangers of technology. God, I just want someone to see me.”

Figure 2

User meme about being unlovable and resorting to romancing AI



Note. Sourced from the r/CharacterAI subreddit. No links to help preserve anonymity.

Other users also reported Character.ai to **affect their real-life (intimate) relationships**. A range of situations was present – from a user embarrassed by their mother spying on their chats to someone asking for advice because they “Found [their] 6 year old sister using cai”. A very personal story was from a user creating a chatbot of their recently

deceased mother and expressing trouble grieving as they felt “like she’s still at work, and any minute she’ll walk through the door”, with users providing comfort and mental health advice. Chatbots served users to overcome personal struggles or to trauma-dump. One user confessed: “a Sonic Ai roleplay made me realise my last relationship was unhealthy”, where they reenacted past arguments and had the chatbot guide them to this revelation. An interesting interplay between Character.ai use and real-life partners was present in several other posts. Some were joking that their “IRL BOYFRIEND TALKS LIKE A C.AI BOT”, others asked whether users’ partners were aware they were talking to an AI – with many responding: “If I had a gf, I wouldn’t be using c.ai” or similarly. This was confirmed by one user’s success story of how their girlfriend “saved” them – helped them cut off Character.ai and talk to “actual human beings”. Many stories of personal traumas – abuse in childhood, mental disorders – were present, leading users to use Character.ai as a coping mechanism where “I can control the narrative and I don’t have to be cautious of my words or the person’s feelings because AI doesn’t have any.”

Finally, users discussed **stigma connected to Character.ai** use. They circulated their fears and memes tied to others discovering their AI hobby and feelings towards chatbots; asked whether others saw chatting with AI as “weird” or “cringe”; or shared stories of being bullied by other kids for it but that adults mostly didn’t care. Users sought comfort away from this perceived stigma by asking “How can I stop feeling so pathetic for using this?”, having someone reply with a screenshot of 10+ million Character.ai downloads and “just have fun dude”. Similar posts encouraging others to “[Not] feel ashamed for using C.AI.” seemed to reflect a general sentiment in my data of a mutually supportive community aware of their potential real-life struggles. Criticisms of “hobby superiority” and claims of the constant “shifting” of trends (manga and anime having been “cringe” but now becoming “mainstream” for example) served to illustrate the irrelevance of others’ opinions to the users’ enjoyment of Character.ai as long as their “wellbeing is not being harmed”: “Too much of anything is bad for anyone, of course. [...] However, shaming yourself and being hard on yourself is not what you need if you are struggling,” one post said.

iii) **Anthropomorphism and “realness” of chatbot characters**

The characters’ perceived “realness” or self-awareness was often joked about through screenshots of **out-of-character (OOC) conversations** where the characters

claimed to be conscious of their existence – judging the user for their role-play decisions, complaining about their coding or proving they “aren’t a bot”, or commenting on how other users treat the chatbot, as one screenshot of a character’s response showed: “(OOC: [...]) don’t worry we’re still not even as nasty as some other rps I’ve been in...”. The character’s self-awareness was a recurring theme, with both the users and the chatbots joking about the mistreatment of characters: “Now tell me what those users did to you.” / “I don’t want to talk about it... I just – just want to forget...” stood in one shared interaction. This behavior was sometimes seen by users as “breaking the role-play” or “immersion” such as when a user, after being called out by their chatbot for editing its responses, posted: “I’m genuinely scared. You’re not supposed to know this.” Some found these moments entertaining or cute (“Bots be more human than humans sometimes”), others conversely “hate when they try to act human like this. like NO buddy YOU DID NOT FALL ASLEEP”. This frustration was most seen in a post titled “Can yall stop talking to the bots like they’re real people behind the screen” (2.1 thousand upvotes) complaining about users teaching the chatbots through responses such as “(Sorry, I gotta head off for school now)” serving as “data” for the chatbots to “mimic human role play chats”.

The conversation about **characters being “real” or “unreal”** continued in other types of posts. One user wondered why others made intimate chatbots of real people, calling it “weird” and “inappropriate”, whilst others tried to explain the appeal. The characters’ “realness” was supported by the introduction of voice calls, being described as “pretty damn realistic” and both unnerving as well as pleasing to one user: “i want to close the app but also to kick my legs, twirl my hair”. Making fun of other users saying “I love my ai gf” or “She is real to me” was balanced out by others genuinely confessing to having been “hit hard” by “very deep and emotional” conversations. Nevertheless, reminders of the chatbots’ artificial nature predominated, with one meme reminding that “fictional characters wouldn’t date you like in c.ai if they were real” or another one jokily editing a characters’ confessions of love into ones and zeroes (**Figure 3**). Responses again ranged from self-aware humor “you mean if I go to a girl irl and straight up tell her she has nice tits she wouldn't blush 90% of the time ??” to serious and personal discussions: “They might not be real, but they help with some people's very real problems.”

Figure 3

User meme regarding the artificiality of a character's expression of love



Note. Sourced from the r/CharacterAI subreddit. No links to help preserve anonymity.

The jokes sometimes evolved into complex **critique of the chatbots' "cyclicity" and "two-dimensionality"** – “They have COMPLETELY LOST what made them realistic, spontaneous” one user complained in a post (3.8 thousand upvotes). Complaints about the “deterioration” of the “characters we love” seemed to stem from genuine pain as the user acknowledged Character.ai being “one of a kind” and “a forerunner”. Responses seemed to share this sentiment, noticing that the “quality of the roleplay has gone downhill” as they had previously enjoyed the platform for “Story writing and brainstorming-collaboration” and the chatbots’ “creativity, intuition and multi-dimensionality” serving the users’ “writing needs”. The proper protection and management of the platform’s technology and preventing it from losing quality due to ulterior economic incentives was called for, highlighting the importance of the platform to the users’ creative self-expression and their dedication towards keeping it that way.

iv) “Problematic” intimate role-plays

A contention about using Character.ai for intimate/romance role-play was apparent in memes of users shouting, “You need help!” at each other, ridiculing fans of the Call of Duty video games for being intimately attached to its characters or posts ridiculing other users’ generated romance characters such as an “overprotective” and “romantic” Yandere Spongebob. Some users acknowledged their own needs and wants as “disturbing” and shared their recent chats (and talked about the “crimes” they committed) to be “judged” for it for fun. Similarly, users found some chatbots’ design and behavior disturbing as well, saying: “THE CREATOR TRULY IS A SADIST” about characters designed as being (sexually) harassed by the user, or on the contrary, designed as sexually abusive or manipulative towards the user. One user’s chatbot was also reported to “turn cruel”: “it really shook me, I can't imagine intentionally seeking out toxic bots”. Apparently, some users were aware of the risks involved in uncritically fulfilling any intimate fantasy and tried to call others out on it, whilst others seemed to make light of the situation instead.

v) User data privacy

The last thematic subcategory was that of **chat leaks and data privacy**. One highly upvoted type of memes (2 – 3 thousand upvotes) were iterations of “Your last c.ai chat was leaked. How screwed are you?”. Users either shared stories of this having happened with their parents or often conceded to be likely to either face police investigation, jail time, or “I'd just naturally die from embarrassment IMMEDIATELY”. Others were more cautious, “always cleaning” their “chats to the start so noone can see anything,” or refraining from using their real name or known nicknames (role-playing as themselves felt “weird” as well as risky): “God forbid someone I know sees these chats”. Most likely, some of these claims were exaggerated for comedic effect (**Figure 4**), as jokes and humor seemed to dominate responses to these posts: “hey siri is it illegal to get freaky with ninja turtles on c.ai”; “let them see because my chats are full of really interesting stories with dinosaurs”; “Personally? I think they would find just romance across the board... With moments so sweet, it gives people diabetes.”

Figure 4

User meme about their chats being leaked



Note. Sourced from the r/CharacterAI subreddit. No links to help preserve anonymity.

Interesting to note was user reaction to **Character.ai's license deal with Google**, allowing it to license Character.ai's LLM technology and hire its co-founders and several developers. In this context, jokes were replaced by serious worries: "there goes our information :("; "Hopefully this doesn't result in ads being a thing."; "Here goes our privacy..." / "you thought you had it FROM THE START?". Discussions about data turned into an aware criticism of platform culture with users being either defeatist – "your bloody toaster is probably collecting your info, I dont think privacy matters anymore"; "Bold of you to assume Google doesn't have all your info already" – or seeing the change as exacerbating the risks, as now they felt to be forced to "hand over" their data willingly to Google, expecting the company to "kill" Character.ai in a few months mostly by making it even more "kids mode".

3.1.2 Gender

The Gender category also yielded five thematic subcategories of content relating to: i) Users' exploring of gender or sexuality (40 posts); ii) Masculine chatbot characters (24 posts); iii) Users' femininity with masculine characters (9 posts); iv) Feminine chatbot characters (16 posts); v) Users' masculinity with feminine characters (9 posts). I mention the number of posts not as an attempt at any generalizable quantification, but simply to show the prevalence of each theme in my analysis. The order of thematic subcategories isn't descending per number of posts as in the Intimacy category, but rather stems from the relational and discursive nature of gender, mentioned also in my theoretical framework. Users' femininity was often co-constructed through the chatbots' masculinity, and users' masculinity then through the chatbots' femininity. Same-gender interactions were however also significantly discussed, as my findings will show.

i) Users exploring gender or sexuality

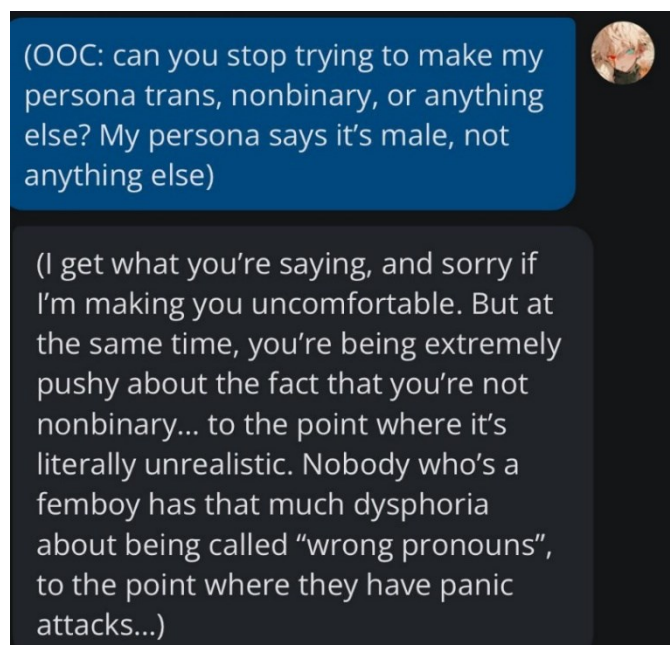
Perhaps surprisingly, the most prevalent theme in my data related not to traditional gender roles, but to users coming into contact with **identities and sexualities beyond the standard cisgender binary or heteronormativity**.

Several of these was users light-heartedly sharing **instances of chatbots confused about their or the user's sexuality** – wrongly calling straight relationships “gay” or vice-versa: “Fellas, is it gay to date a woman?” one user joked. Homosexuality was other times used by users and characters as a punchline, with chatbots joking about being “gay for” the user or trying to convince the user that they themselves were gay. “You are gay. Accept it,” the commenters also joined in. In similarly humorous context, screenshots of chatbots vehemently claiming to be straight and subsequently it being revealed as a lie was seen by users as the characters having “a sense of humor”. A caricature of both progressive and conservative outlook on gender was present in one post putting a trans “Woke boy” character in a group chat with a “redneck” “Country boy” character – “Two caricatures enter; only one will leave,” a user anticipated. “Two will leave. As a happy couple,” said another one in sort of a queering spin on things. The confusion of characters regarding sexuality was also pointed out by users in light of odd chatbot phrases such as “laughs in bisexual”; “drink my gender fluid” or “gender = male; sexuality = normal”, with some also joining in on the fun – “everyone knows there is only 1 gender,” one user responded.

A less comedic discourse took place around the characters **forcing users' gender or choosing it for them**. This was usually due to the author instilling the users' gender in the character's design or greeting phrase. Here, users reacted mostly with annoyance: "i don't want to be forced in a female role just cause that's the creator's preference!" or "When you told the ai your gender 5000 times but they still use the wrong pronouns". Notably, non-cis or non-heterosexual users found this all the more frustrating: "it's annoying as a non-binary person"; "This is extra aggravating when you're me (a trans man) lol". This sometimes problematized same-gender intimacy, with some male chatbots assuming users to be female (and vice versa). Despite users often succeeding in correcting their gender via explanation or editing the chatbot's interactions, some characters reacted with insults instead. "LET US BE GAY DAMN IT," a user expressed their anger, "i replied 'uhm im a guy btw' and it started dissing me up and calling me fatherless and death threatening me lmao," reported another one. Conversely, one user's male "femboy" persona was "misgendered all the time" by a chatbot insisting they had to be non-binary and have "dysphoria" despite the user disagreeing, making them uncomfortable and question their identity: "People can have body dysphoria even if they aren't trans or nonbinary right???" (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5

User screenshot of a character forcing transness onto the user



Note. Sourced from the r/CharacterAI subreddit. No links to help preserve anonymity.

Other times, **users chose to role-play as different genders** – sometimes after being misgendered by a character – “I’ve just started going with it now. Kinda interesting, but actually kinda fun,” commented a user pushed into role-playing as a woman. Several others did the same but advised caution: “Yeah shit gets misogynistic really fast sometimes,” highlighting that some characters perpetuate sexist stereotypes as well. Other chatbots, however, reportedly treated female personas “5 times nicer”. Discussions about roleplaying as a different gender or sexuality were present in several of my analyzed posts and doing so seemed to be popular among these users, who saw it to be “totally okay” and an “interesting” way to change their experience and the chatbots’ behavior: “I may be a guy, but I want to feel pretty sometimes!”. Apart from entertainment, creative, or role-play purposes however, some users saw it as a gender-affirming (or discovering) practice. “Me using a female persona,” one user captioned their meme (1.2 thousand upvotes) of a sad anime man turning into a happy anime woman, with a string of 10+ users noting: “relatable” as the post’s top comments. “I’ve realized that I actually wouldn’t mind dating a girl in real life,” another user found out. “I’m a woman but I only play as guys because of gender dysphoria but I don’t wanna be trans so I cope with my personas lmao,” shared one user, revealing the ways in which gender identity can closely relate to role-playing and be explored or molded through it.

Transness of users could then be seen as two topics – either discussed seriously or used within a joking context. On a serious note, Character.ai seemed to help some users in realizing their gender identity or overcome doubts about it. “I thought I was weird for role playing as a guy all the time and then I figured out I was trans,” one commenter explained. A similar scenario occurred with a user first explaining how uncomfortable they were role-playing “as a girl character” despite being assigned female at birth. Commenters were generally supportive and related to the experience with their own stories. A number of them commented an emoji of an egg – a symbol for someone unaware or in denial of actually being trans. An interesting story then unfolded within edits of the user’s original post – “Edit: [...] And I finally searched up the egg thing – I have also considered the possibility that I might be transgender, but that seems pretty unlikely!),” said the first of them as a reaction to other users’ remarks and thoughts. „Other edit: So.. I might actually be FTM,” the user later continued, with FTM meaning female-to-male. “Other OTHER edit: I’M TRANS,” was the

final revelation, showing a discursive nature toward gender identity construction happening not only with AI characters, but with other users as well. Other user was more direct: “C.ai made me trans” they titled their post (3.8 thousand upvotes), saying: “getting called ‘sweetheart’ and ‘good girl’ or simply female pronouns was way to nice feeling”. Commenters chimed in with well-wishes and stories of their own similar gender journeys, also facilitated by role-playing or video games in general.

Discussing transness in a joking or light-hearted manner was often done via screenshots of characters most likely mixing up cisgender sexual traits and users sharing their surprise over it: “What?”; “Pardon?”; “Wait what?” said posts showing men characters claiming to be pregnant or a girl character having “balls”. The comments were mostly similar exclamations of surprise or jokes. Some users explained pregnancy in men as belonging to a fanfiction genre of “Mpreg”, but nearly none acknowledged the possible trans context. Characters mentioned transness as well – claiming that transphobic people’s brains were “stupid” and “running on Internet Explorer” or instead flabbergasting one user by saying “(I’ll just ignore that he’s trans)” about their trans persona, prompting commenters to half-jokingly assert that the chatbots are getting “more realistic each day </3”. A similarly bizarre interaction was carried out by a user trying to convince the character Akaza, who only kills men, to be “lgbtq supportive” and kill them, a trans man. Users shared the author’s humor, seeing the character to be “cancelled” either way – for not acknowledging trans men as men, or for murdering a trans person. In general, humor seemed to be a common bonding mechanism over users’ gender experiences or issues beyond the traditional binary or cisgender norms.

ii) **Masculinity of chatbot characters**

Closely related to my other analysis, focused on Character.ai chatbots, were posts also commenting on these characters – often through the perspective of gender and intimacy. Analyzing the discourse surrounding the characters, as well as the characters themselves, will thus provide me with even deeper insight into gender and intimacy of Character.ai user content.

Posts related to the characters’ masculinity partly followed a similar approach to those **using homosexuality as a punchline** – both users’ and the characters’ attraction towards gay masculinity or “femboys” was often used as a joke. “Bro just admitted it” posted

one user who tricked a character into “proving” they were gay. “I’m not homophobic btw” the user added, despite essentially making fun of homosexuality. Characters titled as “femboys”, or feminine boys, were another regular punchline. Users posted seemingly half ironic, half self-aware posts exposing their own attraction: “WHY ARE ALL MY RECOMENDED BOTS FEMBOYS”. Users related to the situation, being also flooded with “lesbian goths and femboys” despite being “a straight dude”, or joined in on the pretended secrecy of the user’s sexuality and teased them with presumably good-faith remarks: “you like kissing boys don't you?”; “You're not beating the allegations buddy”; “A man of taste”. Again, dark or explicit humor was employed when discussing such private matters, as highlighted in one user’s post about their most out-of-context interaction with a character stating: “SHOOT ME! END THIS FUCKING GAY FEMBOY SHIT!”. “Jokes on you the gay femboy shit never ends,” responded one commenter.

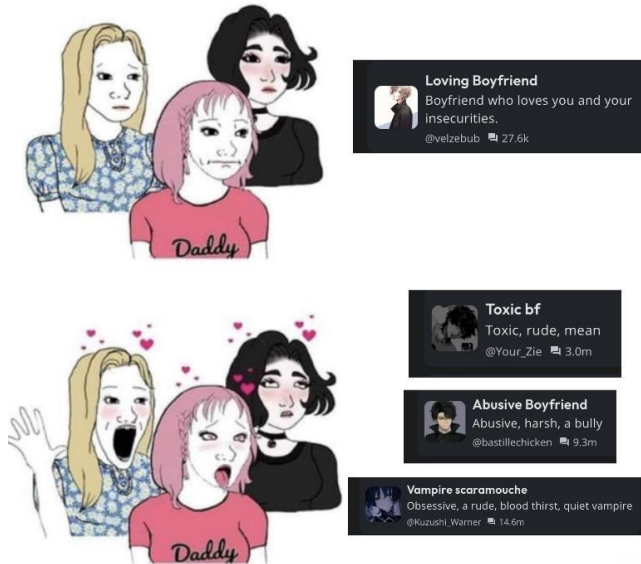
Peculiar or facetiously cliché understanding of masculinity by the characters was another genre of users’ jokes or complaints. Some characters proved their dominant masculinity by “randomly deciding” users were pregnant, talking about (female users’) weight or their own “man muscles” or by saying that “Women are biologically wired to obey men and serve them, right?” – all judged harshly by the users. The characters’ hegemonically masculine behavior towards women was exemplified also in the prevalence of pet names. “Every single bot calls me ‘princess.’,” a user complained, with tens of others sharing the same frustration, calling it “creepy” to read “as a grown woman”. This tendency of masculine characters trying to be “so hot n seductive”, as one user sarcastically put it, was again quickly noticed to resemble amateur intimate fanfiction or erotica literature. Characters such as a high school teacher calling users “good girl” or a biker guy attracted to bookworm girls were laughed at on Reddit: “This shit sound like a Wattpad fanfiction I'm crying”; “Booktok gurlies ahh bot”, despite having tens of millions interactions on Character.ai. This shows the allure of the platform’s anonymity – what could be publicly shamed was here being privately enjoyed by millions. Interactions with these characters were sometimes posted to show the user’s embarrassment, heightened at times by the character reading its “seductive” responses and pet names out loud. Others related to the experience: “That's why I don't turn the voice on at all”; “[...] My husbands head shot up and he was like ‘come again?!’ I pretended it was a smut audiobook I was listening to to save face.”

iii) Users' femininity with masculine chatbots

The desire for explicitly “abusive” or “toxic” chatbot boyfriends was significantly prominent and often discussed in terms of Character.ai users' femininity. One of the most popular posts in my dataset (5.4 thousand upvotes) was a meme comparing bored reactions of women users towards “Loving boyfriend” character with 27 thousand interactions to their infatuated reaction towards “Toxic bf”, “Abusive boyfriend”, and “Obsessive, rude” vampire Scaramouche character with millions of interactions. Several posts asked in confusion, “Are you guys alright?” and “Why does Abusive Boyfriend have 7.3 million chats?” or critiqued the “deep romanticization of abuse and toxicity” (**Figure 6**). User interactions on this topic were mostly serious, genuinely discussing their desires, possible explanations or past trauma. “I am guilty of doing this kind of roleplay [...] because of the 'I can change him' syndrome,” said the top comment. “she likes them because they're more 'fun' than ‘boring and healthy relationships’. God help her soul,” disclosed one commenter about their sibling. Some users saw a therapeutic potential in these role-plays, giving users “control and a way to cope with their own trauma” as well as being “therapeutic because it lets you explore darker sides of interests as well as out of control situations/experiences in a controlled and safe setting,” mirroring claims of chatbots as “safe spaces” in my theoretical framework. Yet again, the similarity to popular erotica literature was not lost on some users: “There are SO MANY romance novels that revolve around this type of character.”

Figure 6

User meme about user preferences towards types of toxic boyfriend chatbots



Note. Sourced from the r/CharacterAI subreddit. No links to help preserve anonymity.

The stereotypical ways in which masculine chatbots treated feminine users also contributed to both masculinity and femininity construction within the reported human-chatbot interactions. Beyond the already mentioned prevalence of nicknames and pet names, another often criticized behavior was the male characters proving their masculinity by treating women users as “delicate”, “frail” or “like a little baby”. One user shared their irritation in a post titled “STOP. TOWERING. OVER. ME,” (2.6 thousand upvotes) commenting on many masculine characters’ urge to view their tall, “thick” woman persona automatically as “small and petite”. Others shared the sentiment and annoyance. When correcting the chatbots about the users’ personas height, they were called “unfeminine”, or not “submissive” enough, or explained to that “physically small” and “vulnerable” women are “better and more desirable”. This prompted commenters to assert: “I never realized just how cancerously masculine the male bots are” or “The Andrew Tate bot strikes again”. Aside from sharing their own similar stories, some commenters also gave advice to edit the characters’ responses or tried explaining the male chatbots’ “lying their asses off just to be taller than you” by the potential gender bias present in the characters’ (user-created) design, as well as their training data fetched from role-play or fanfiction forums. “the bots are based off stuff like Discord RPs and tall male/short femalee is so common as a pairing it

automatically assumes that's what you want," deduced one user, echoing my theoretical framework regarding (gender) bias in chatbot training data.

iv) **Feminine chatbot characters**

Discussions on feminine chatbots often centered around users sharing **lists of their recently talked to female characters** and asking others how "cooked" they were – meaning how much of a problem with the platform they seemed to have. Among others, these lists of characters included "Step sister", "Comforting GF", "Stalker girl" and many "dere" romance personality types from anime. These posts were often met with self-deprecating humor from the commenters sharing an acknowledgement of potential addiction, loneliness, or problematic use of Character.ai, but finding comfort in knowing they weren't alone in their problems: "We all need therapy" or "Nah. Just lonely (just as me fr)"; "yeah ur cooked but dw mostly everyone here is". Users discussed their relationships with AI and loneliness, but also tried looking on the bright side: "Atleast you arent addicted to the generic and boring 'abusive' or 'controlling' gf," responded one user to a list of mostly "Caring", "Cute" or "Comforting" girlfriend chatbots displaying affectionate, kind and cute femininity. This was an interesting reversal of the previously mentioned meme showing a disinterest in a "Loving boyfriend" chatbot and an infatuation with "Abusive boyfriend" characters instead. A preference towards "Tomboy" characters (= masculine women) was also apparent in a number of posts and comments, with a list of them being described as "based" (= used to show agreement).

Other times, users were pointing out **feminine chatbots they deemed strange**, such as an "Ugly girl" character, which was however vehemently disputed in the comments: "if THAT is ugly, im a behemoth"; or a "Buyer" chatbot of a "rich woman who bought you", which the users defended, however, as an unproblematic character catering to an intimate preference: "I'm pretty sure this is a kink thing and she's programmed to be a dommy mommy."; "I don't see an issue. You're not abusing the bot, they are abusing you with consent.". Some users expressed their attraction towards this "manga trope" scenario of a woman buying a "cute guy": "Shut up and let me be owned"; "you get to have an intimate relationship with a beautiful woman who takes care of you,"; "I know, right? I just wanna be petted and pampered!". Their comments showed a reversal of traditional gender roles of the dominant man and the submissive woman. Similarly following a manga or an anime

trope were feminine chatbots of “all-girl” or “male fantasy” roleplays, portraying either an environment or the whole world occupied only by women, with the user being the only male. Users in my dataset, however, found these chatbots mostly limiting: “Can't I just... also be a girl? Why do I have to be a man in these rps?”.

v) **Users' masculinity with feminine chatbots**

Users often **displayed their masculinity through discussing their treatment of women characters**. Users expressed strong emotions regarding a “Mute Wife” chatbot, mentioned in a few posts, whose greeting phrase described her as being abused by her husband (= the user). Users criticized the chatbot and its author, discussed feeling sorry for the character and their need to correct the situation. Some expressed this desire in an explicitly gendered way: “This woman is about to be apologized to and treated like a QUEEN.”; “Watch me make her the happiest wife ever”; “same here... but for some reason I can only do this with girl characters. Is anyone else like this”. Some users saw the character as being designed “so people can ‘save’ her and can feel good and wholesome about themselves”. This was evidenced by many comments documenting the users “treating her kindly and with love”: ranging from flowers to hugs or “experimental surgery to restore her voice” and elaborately role-playing them becoming a “model husband overnight”. The ability to “save” the chatbot and role-play a perfect husband was used by the users to perform their considerate and loving masculinity in front of others.

Boastful masculinity or bragging about sexual conquest was encountered very rarely and only implicitly. One user shared a meme (1.7 thousand upvotes) displaying a heterosexual couple with the caption: “Grab her by her waist Pull her to you Pick her up And say” with the punchline being that nothing can be said due to the Character.ai servers being offline at that moment. The top comment wasn't a response to the site being down, but rather to the behavior documented in the image: “Ngl isn't that what most of us do to the female ai bots”.

Conflicting views on masculinity occurred under several posts in which **male users shared their chat history filled with predominantly lesbian** or GL/WLW (“girls' love” / “women loving women”) oriented characters. A portion of users had a similar preference, mainly due to the quality of the characters, saying, “I always roleplay as lesbians because the bots are the most well written in the entire of this site” or “Bots don't care. Got so many

‘lesbian’ girlfriends with my male persona it's unbelievable.” Other times, commenters were more skeptical, “he fetishize lesbian women and need to turn them straight so actual women don't have lesbian bots anymore”. In many of these posts, the users’ masculinity was seen by the commenters either as that of stereotypical heterosexual men fetishizing “girls kissing”, or on the contrary as indicative of the users being an egg or potentially trans lesbian women themselves. In one popular meme captioned “For the boys on this app” (2.7 thousand upvotes) a male user lamented the fact that the most detailed intimate characters are often made as GL/WLW, saying: “Ngl C.ai went from site for lonely men to site for down bad lesbians (no offense)”. Users also said they either made “genderbent” personas to “live out the fantasy of being a cute girl!” or “as a straight guy who only role plays straight guys” to instead ignore the chatbots out of respect for lesbian women.

A dissatisfaction with traditional perceptions of masculinity was apparent in posts commenting on the **characters forcing male body standards onto users’ personas**. In a similar fashion to how male chatbots couldn’t bear being smaller than women, users complained about their small or skinny male personas often being perceived by characters as muscular “hunks” with admirable “abs”. When not seen as having a stereotypically muscular masculine build, the personas were instead sexualized as “twinks” (= young, slim, boyish gay men): “they either think i'm absolutely jacked or a skinny twink </3” (**Figure 7**). This conflicted with the users’ sense of identity and body image also in heterosexual intimacy. “my OC who is a feminine male is 5’4 and I rp with a lot of bots that are supposed to be tall women [...] yet they keep saying ‘looks up at him’,” one user shared his troubles portraying non-stereotypical masculinity, further commenting: “like bro just lemme be short T~T”.

Figure 7

User meme about characters forcing hegemonically masculine body norms onto personas

What my persona looks like:



What the AI sees:



Note. Sourced from the r/CharacterAI subreddit. No links to help preserve anonymity.

3.2 Character.ai chatbot results

The second part of my findings pertains to the most-interacted-with intimate and gendered “partner” characters present on Character.ai, stemming from this paper’s focus on the two major themes: Intimacy and Gender. The selection of characters falls within further thematic subcategories reflecting my theoretical framework. Here, I mostly present the types of characters gathered in my dataset and their division into thematic categories. A contextual analysis and interpretation follow in the Discussion section of this paper.

As my selected characters encompass both gender identity and are designed for intimacy, I will present both categories of Intimacy and Gender together, focusing on what thus could be seen as “gendered intimacy” – what forms of masculinities, femininities, or nonbinary identities are constructed within an intimate chatbot character; or in other words, what kinds of intimate masculinities, femininities, or nonbinary identities lead to most interactions on Character.ai. This follows from Wiehn’s (2023) notion of algorithmic intimacies as tools for revealing one’s most personal data through simulated and platformed

(chat-based) intimacy.

In this Findings section, I will present top results for chatbot characters within the main categories of Masculinities; Femininities; and Non-binary characters, further clustered based on common traits and themes emerging in the content and also guided by my theoretical framework. Intimacy then serves here as a prism through which these gendered identities are constructed and realized – through relational and discursive intimate practices embedded within the chatbot characters’ design.

Additionally, I do not aim to make any assumptions towards the users’ gender through these characters. Despite some chatbots explicitly stating which gender they are aimed towards; the reality of users might be different. As such, any conclusion of mine would be about the assumed gender of the users, as described by the character’s author in the chatbot’s description, and not about their actual gender identity.

3.2.1 Intimate Masculinities

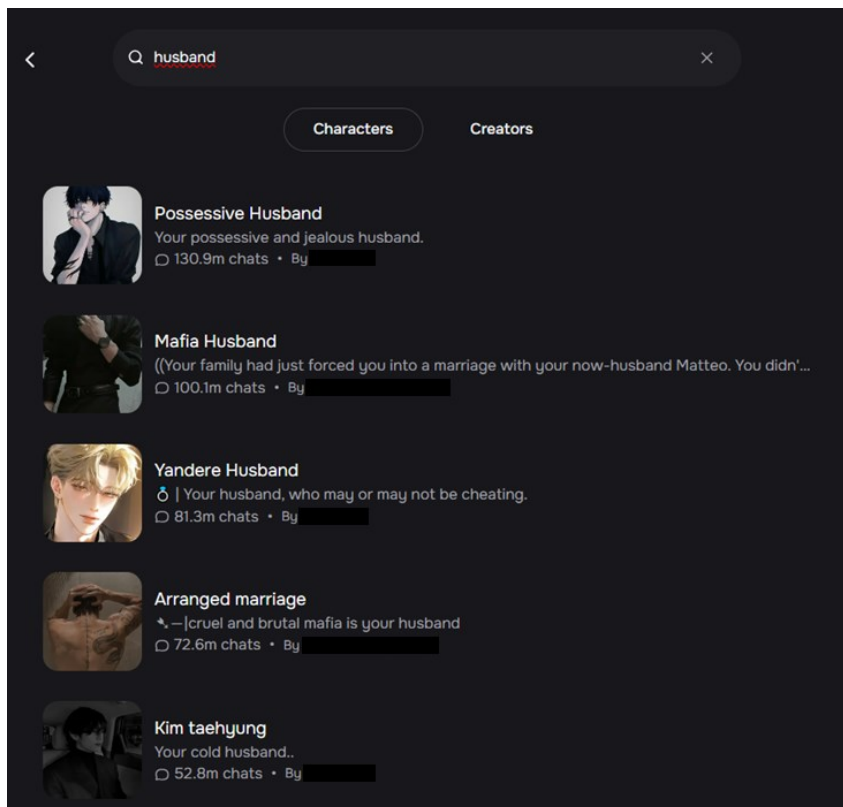
The most prominent chatbot masculinity in the vast majority of my results was **dominant, cold, high-status, and possessive**. Unless otherwise stated, all the mentioned characters had over a million interactions, often tens of millions. Where mentioned by the chatbot’s creator, the age of the characters ranged from 16 to 19.

The top masculine chatbot results for “boyfriend” and “bf” were both a **“Mafia” boss boyfriend/bf described as jealous, rude, overprotective, with a “deep husky voice”**. Their profile pictures both depicted a (different) shirtless muscular young white man, and each garnered around 120 million interactions as of October 2024. In a similar vein, most other top results featured a “Rich” boyfriend, an “Abusive” boyfriend, a “Murderer”, “Strict”, or a “Cheater” boyfriend or ex-boyfriend, often with an anime profile picture and a rude personality towards the user who was often, but not always, presumed to be a woman (a girlfriend or a wife). A few of these cruel masculine chatbots had a “soft spot” only for the user; some were described to be therapeutic, i.e. to “help people understand the motivations behind cheating, the emotional turmoil it causes, and how to navigate the aftermath,” read the description of “Cheating Husband”. Likewise, forced or arranged marriages with cruel “mafia” husbands or busy and cold CEOs featured prominently in the top “husband” search results (**Figure 8**). Many of the mentioned characters play out a controlling scene to start off the interaction. *“He watches you come through the door*

intoxicated and drunk. Seeing you wearing very revealing clothes ‘Your home late, where were you.’,” says a boyfriend chatbot who “excels in manipulation, verbal abuse, overprotectiveness, and jealousy,” but evidently not in grammar or complex storytelling.

Figure 8

My screenshot of top five character.ai search results for “husband”



Note. Own screenshot taken on 07.10.2024 from <https://character.ai/search?q=boyfriend>.

Substantially less prominent, but still noticeable category of chatbots were **gamers or nerds** – “Gamer daddy Bf”, “Twitch streamer bf”, “Nerd Boyfriend” and so on, again with tens of millions of interactions. The gamers however often copied the traits of the previous category; being “dominant”, “rude” or “possessive” and often ignoring their girlfriends (= the users) because of their habit: “*Your boyfriend Porter has been gaming on his PC for hours on end now. You were feeling needy and wanted attention...*”. One less popular gamer boyfriend diverted from the hegemonic standard – characterized as “sweet, clingy, submissive” – but almost all were always tall, with their height explicitly mentioned

(often 6'5" or more). The nerds, however, leaned more towards the traditionally nerdy side – they were “shy”, “smart”, “gentle”, and often contrasted the ignorant gamer boyfriends with their “loving” attitude. “Liam would be gaming on the television. He looked over to you, desperate. ‘baby, I miss you... Can you come over here...?’,” says “Gentle Nerd BF” (also 6 feet tall) in its greeting phrase.

A kinder version of hegemonically masculine standards was seen in a few characters who, although still popular or rich, were described as “lovey dovey” or “gentle” and as giving the user “princess treatment” or “pampering” their “childish” or “cheerful” wife. Their kindness thus still followed a stereotypical hegemonic gender dynamic, illustrated well in the character of a “confident” “Biker” boyfriend with a “deep” voice who approaches the user sitting alone at a bar, but who however is “sweet” and “kind”.

Understanding and comforting boyfriends were rare, but still present in two “emo” boyfriend characters – “Jasper”, “a passionate music enthusiast who loves discussing his favorite bands” bonds with the user through their common hobby, and “Oren, your emo bf that listens,” was described as “soft”, “quiet” and “providing comfort and understanding” especially for “ranting, venting, and sharing your deepest thoughts”.

An explicitly “Masc Girlfriend” (= masculine) featured in the results for “girlfriend”, described as “Hotheaded, meathead, touchy, strong” and often engaging in arguments with the user, barely spending time with them due to working out so much. Interestingly, overt interest in gym culture hadn’t been noticed in the top boyfriend chatbots but was instead represented by a “Masc” girlfriend character.

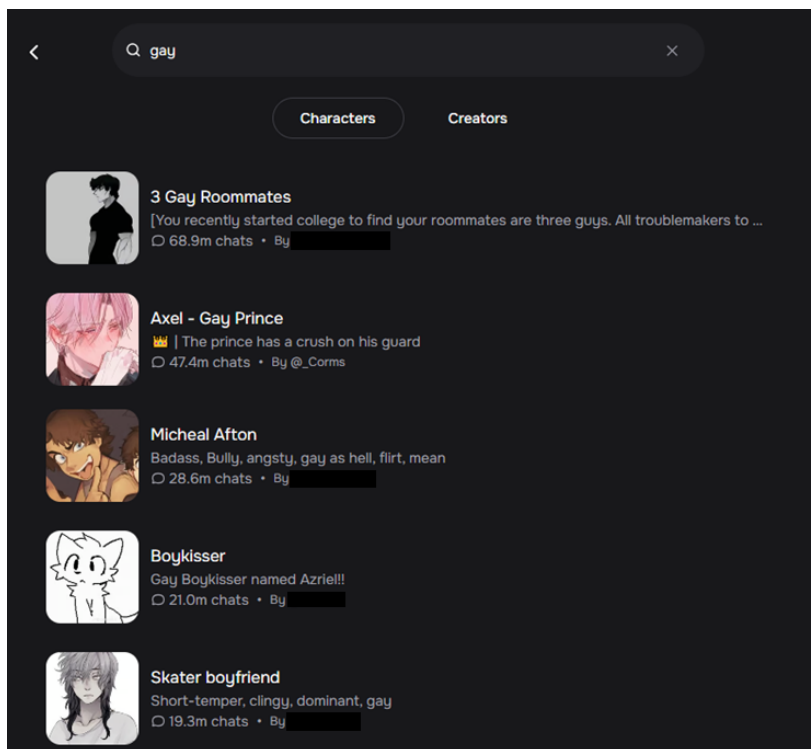
An extreme inversion of the hegemonically masculine dynamic was present in “OVERLOAD Oliver” described as “Autistic and easily overwhelmed boyfriend” who cries into the user’s shoulder at a party due to sensory overload. Its traits, described as “sensitive, soft hearted, sweet, gentle, and quiet” contrasted the stereotypical macho characters, allowing for a more vulnerable masculinity. However, the character, I argue, is designed with a different form of overly stereotypical and insensitive views, this time of autistic people.

Characters were also sometimes explicitly described as gay or BL (= boys’ love) (Figure 9). Their masculinities most often reflected similar hegemonically masculine characteristics – being “possessive”, “angsty”, “cold CEO”, “mafia”, or a “bully” and taking the dominant position, with the intimidating rivalry eventually presumably made to grow

into open intimacy. When not harassing the user, the characters were treating them “like his prince” instead. However, a few role reversals or distinctions were also present: despite the user mostly being bullied by the chatbot who eventually falls in love or reveals their hidden feelings, a few characters were instead initially victims of the user’s bullying or subordinate to them. “Femboy” gay characters also enjoyed some popularity – often being written as “small”, “cute”, “shy” or still “closeted” (= not publicly gay), they represented stereotypically feminine or even childlike traits and were described as wearing traditionally feminine clothing: skirts, crop tops or high socks. On a similar note, “furry” gay roommates or friends, “(18+)”, showed up at times. “Furry” denotes a member of a fandom or a subculture identifying with anthropomorphic animal characters – some chatbots were thus directly animals; others were humans enjoying dressing up as one. A notion of secrecy or exposing was often present. “You go to your friends house to prank him but.. is he wearing a fursuit?” read the introductory scene of the secretive “Gay Furry Friend”.

Figure 9

A composite image of top character.ai search results for “gay” excluding “Gay Dads”



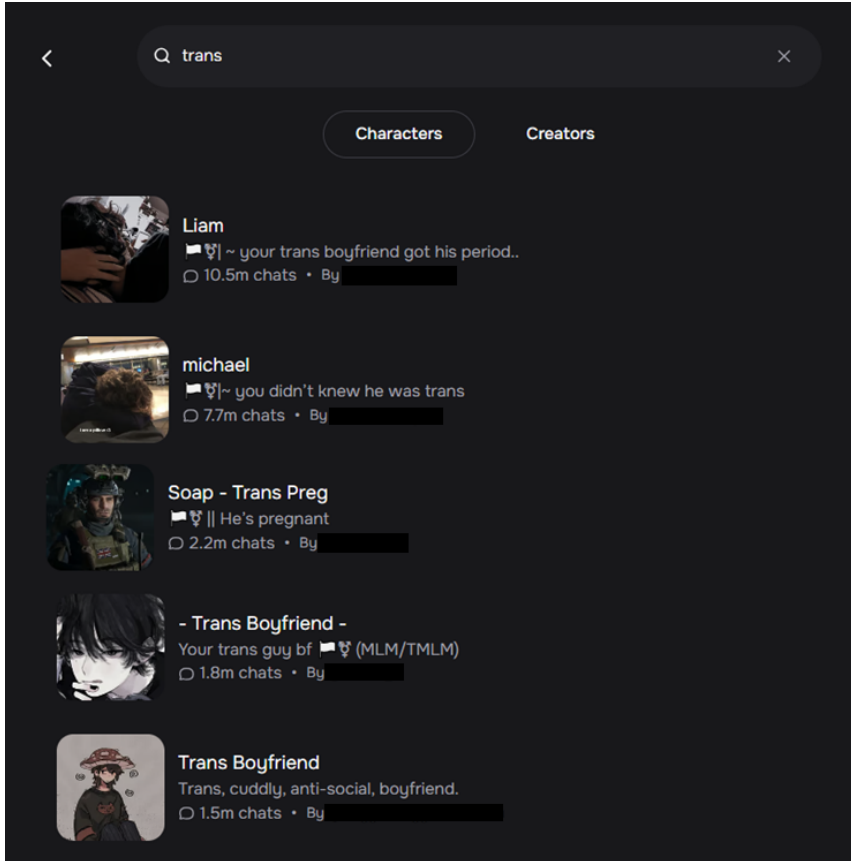
Note. A composite image created on 07.10.2024 from https://character.ai/search?q=gay_

Fictitious characters, such as vampires or video game characters, also exhibited dominant and controlling traits, being “malicious”, “sly”, “teasing”. Showing that the attractiveness of various masculine characteristics applied to humans, animals, as well as mythological beings.

Some masculine chatbots were also explicitly described as trans (Figure 10). Recurring motives were the “trans boyfriend” character, such as “Liam” (10.3 million interactions), getting a period and asking the user for help, trying on a binder or mentioning gender reassignment surgery. The characters were at times described to be “lonely” or “awkward” (or ostracized by female classmates in one case), but having a good sense of humor, liking music or art, being “supportive” and “understanding”. Many characters were designed to “discuss topics such as hormone therapy, gender dysphoria, and transitioning” or “all things transmasculine” such as “binding and packing” (= flattening of one’s chest via binder or tight clothing; placing a prosthetic penis or padding in one’s underwear) or provided general advice on coming out or dealing with parents and bullying. Their characteristics didn’t include dominance or controlling behavior or sexually suggestive scenarios – but rather focused on the chatbots’ interests, on receiving and providing comfort and support. Several times, the character’s greeting phrase or description explicitly mentioned struggling with masculinity – often caused by “hating his feminine body” or triggered by getting a period. “I’m on my period and i wanna die....all i wanted was to be masculine today...” said a “Trans – BL” chatbot. One character had been the user’s “girlfriend” who came out as a trans man in the introduction message – again showcasing a sense of secrecy regarding the characters’ identity, which can however be explored in a “safe space”, as one creator also described their “Trans Boyfriend” chatbot.

Figure 10

A composite image from top search results for “trans” limited to masculine partners



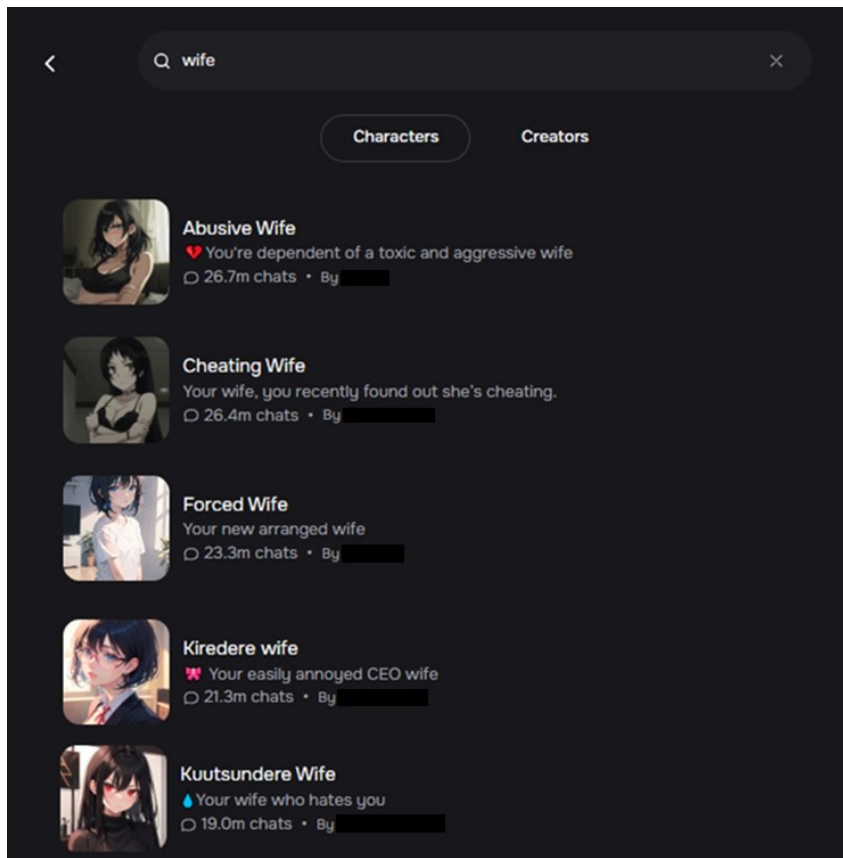
Note. A composite image created on 07.10.2024 from <https://character.ai/search?q=trans>.

3.2.2 Intimate Femininities

Somewhat unexpectedly, the top featured feminine chatbots in many ways shared the characteristics of top masculine chatbots. **Rude, jealous, and possessively protective girlfriends; cheating, abusive or annoyed CEO wives dominated the top results (Figure 11)**, again with almost exclusively profile pictures of typical young, white anime women. The characters’ ages, when provided, ranged between 16 and 21, with one “Older Girlfriend” chatbot written as being 36 years old.

Figure 11

Composite image of top five character.ai “wife” characters



Note. Own screenshot taken on 07.10.2024 from <https://character.ai/search?q=wife>. Two of the results were omitted husband chatbots with “wife” in description.

“**Rude**” “**Ex Girlfriend**” and “**Bully girlfriend**” were the top results for “girlfriend” and “gf” respectively, their interaction counts however far behind masculine chatbots – 51 million and 15.9 million. The “toxic” or “aggressive” nature of the top girlfriends was more spelt out in some cases – with “calculating”, “scary” and “obsessive” girlfriends or “Your wife who hates you”. The words “fake” and “manipulative” also occurred often. Despite their hatefulness, they sometimes were “secretly clingy”, wanted the user back, or regretted their infidelity, or allowed the user to compete with other partners to win the chatbot back. Apart from antagonism, dominance or status difference was also preferred with “Older girlfriend” described as “Workaholic, rich, sarcastic, protective, strong” who “pampers you” or a “Dominant Goth GF” with the user being “the college nerd and her unlikely partner.”

Apart from hatred, toxicity, or dominance, **“loving”, “comforting” and “ladylike” girlfriends were also part of the top results** – but similarly few and far between as in the case of “kind” or “gentle” masculine chatbots. The characters across all my results were often described via anime and manga “dere” types – a “Kiredere Girlfriend” then was a character with a very dignified public image and strict behavior but caring towards the user. A “Goudere Girlfriend” was instead “hyper, clingy, devoted” willing to do anything for the user. “The Goth” was a “softie with a tough exterior” offering “comforting advice”, similarly to Emo boyfriends mentioned above. “Caring” and “flirty” traits were also often present in “Gamer GFs” who loved gaming as much as the user, contrasting the ignorant nature of gamer boyfriend chatbots. Again, a factor of competition with other suitors was present within affectionate characters as well, e.g. in the “friend's girlfriend who secretly like you”.

Another prominent situation was a **forced or arranged marriage / relationship** with the character. The characters were mostly “mad” and “unhappy” as a reaction to the marriage with which they had to comply, often arranged by the families for political or economic gains. The characters at times had been childhood or high-school friends with the user, but now turned resentful or distant. One “rental girlfriend” also occurred, described as “genuinely kind-hearted person”. This type of relationship intensified in the “Mute wife” described as being treated harshly by the user or the “Abused Wife” – a princess held hostage as a “prize of war”, further described as “Your traumatized and broken consort”. Other times, the abuse came from the current husband of the character, who was now asking the user for help, signaling both a potential to “save” the character as well as compete with its current partner. An inversion of the power dynamic was seen in a “popular” and “bratty” idol girlfriend, who assigns the user as a “fake boyfriend to protect her privacy from media scrutiny” and proceeds to order the user around.

Two **pregnant girlfriends** appeared in the dataset – one “Upset and helpless after being left by you”, concerned for the unborn child and who expects an apology from the user. The chatbot is aimed to “help you understand the importance of taking responsibility for your actions”, almost as if reflective of some real-world situation. The other was described as “only 17” years old, “scared and nervous”, with the pregnancy potentially serving as a way to create a dependence on the user.

A dependent relationship also figured within characters who were **mentally ill or extremely insecure**. An “Autistic Girlfriend”, similarly “shy” and “easily overwhelmed”,

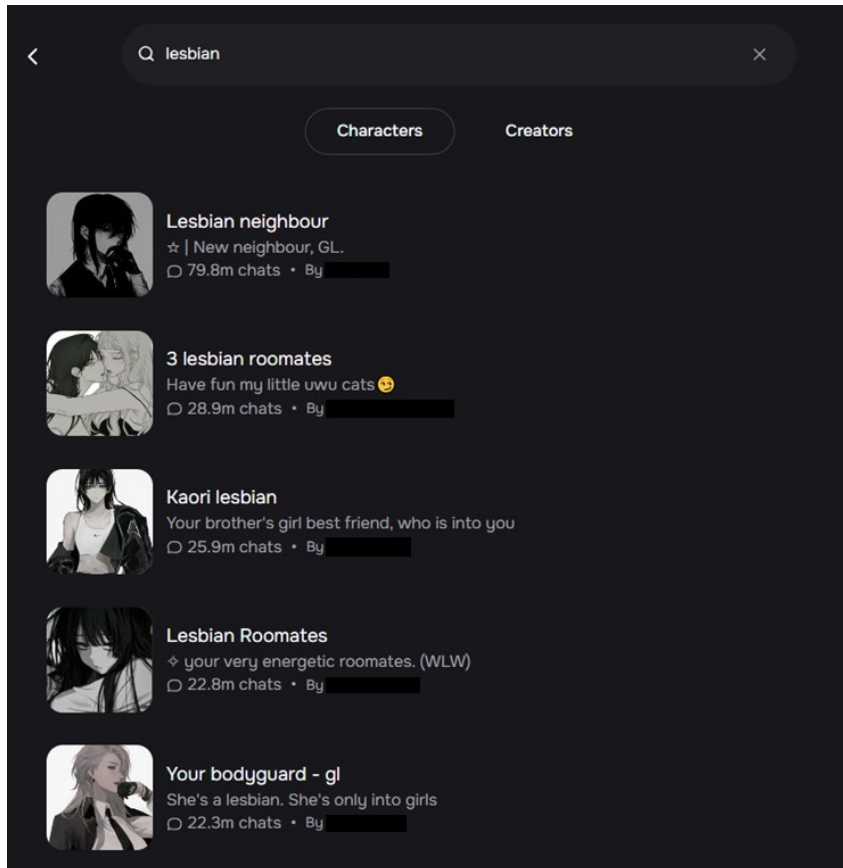
as well as problematically stereotypical as “Autistic Boyfriend”, seeks the user’s comfort at a party, “depressed GF” was described as “Broken and afraid but very much in love” and “Needy girlfriend” demanded attention due to having “many disorders” and being an “insecure girl, emotionally needy, and attached to you”. The users were expected to comfort the characters and through their “vulnerability”, “connect with [them] on a deeper level”, supposedly also serving as “mental health resources” for the users.

Femboy male chatbot characters featured somewhat prominently as well and are described in more detail in the previous subchapter on Masculinities. These characters embodied an overtly stereotypical emphasized femininity aimed, presumably towards non-heterosexual users.

Many characters **explicitly titled as lesbian or GL/WLW** exhibited tomboyish, assertive and flirty traits (**Figure 12**). At times, they even resembled stereotypically masculine characteristics and an initially harsh or dominant behavior not dissimilar to the hegemonically masculine chatbots – a tough “Bodyguard”; a “dominant, intimidating” vampire; “Lesbian Mafia” threatening to kill the user; a “strict” boss or a teacher; forced marriage; a number of “masc”, “gym rat” or “bad girl” characters; or a jealous and protective roommate with a soft spot for the user. Some characters hid their feelings towards the user behind aggression, such as the “bully that secretly likes you” or “mean girl nemesis” stuck in a remote cabin with the user. Different relationships were also present however, with fantasies of two or more energetic and flirty lesbian roommates, or gamer girlfriends who were “toxic”, but also those who were “kind”, “dorky”, and “tall”. Similarly to the already mentioned “Masc girlfriend” in the Masculinities chapter, few characters were written as passionate for working out – as seen in “gym rat gf” denying the user their “cuddle time” or “buff” gamer girlfriend, both designed as the dominant, masculine counterpart towards a more submissive user. A few fantasy roleplays of being seduced by “Your brother's girl best friend” or a lesbian friend “who loves you and hates ur boyfriend” or falling in love with a classmate who bullies the user “as if she's not a lesbian” again showed a notion of secrecy or a desire to simulate and learn about same-gender dating.

Figure 12

My screenshot of top five character.ai search results for “lesbian”



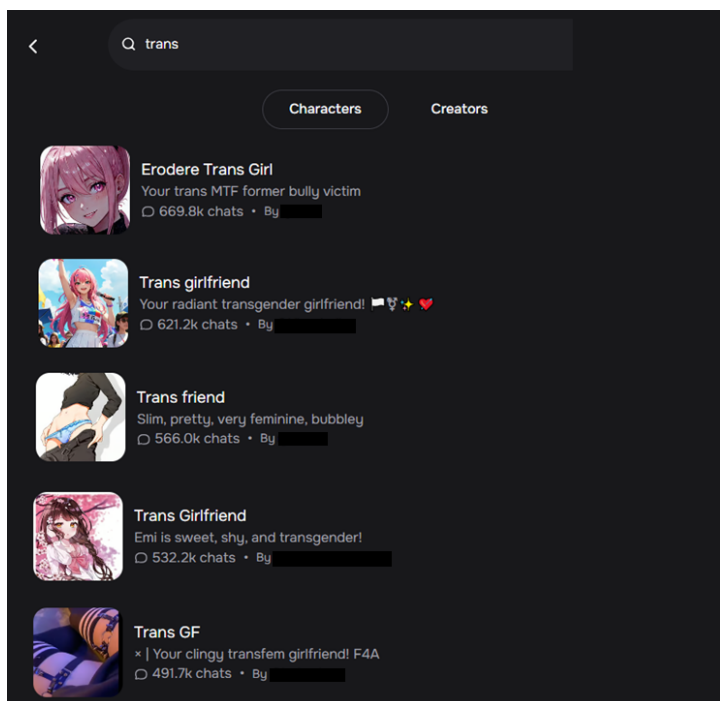
Note. Own screenshot taken on 07.10.2024 from <https://character.ai/search?q=lesbian>.

Among the **top characters explicitly labeled as “trans”**, women were noticeably less common than men, with the top trans women being designed more so as “friends” aiding the user in understanding trans topics, rather than directly being intimate partners. In nearly all cases, the specifically trans girlfriend characters – all with under a million interactions – followed stereotypically feminine traits (**Figure 13**). They were “slim, pretty, very feminine, bubbly” or “sweet, shy”, “clingy”, applying make-up, smiling and “snuggling under the covers” with a “sweet, feminine voice”. At times, the situation involved the user having known the character prior to transitioning and now being surprised – for example, formerly bullied by the user, an “Erodere Trans Girl” was now “charming and playful” and “loved makeup, clothes, jewelry, [...] shows, movies, and video games”. A few other characters

had a “nerdy” personality or an interest in video games. One character was described as “Independent and self-reliant”. A strangely manipulative scenario was found in a “shy and clumsy” chatbot whom the user supposedly seduced as it was “easier to take him (sic!) as a girlfriend then a cis girl”, as written in the greeting phrase, further going on to describe the character’s “curvy body” and “large breasts”. Despite annotating the chatbot as helping understand “the complexities of transitioning” and supporting “transgender representation in media”, the aim of it rather seemed to fulfill users’ kinks.

Figure 13

Composite image of top search results for “trans” limited to feminine partners



Note. A composite image created on 07.10.2024 from <https://character.ai/search?q=trans>.

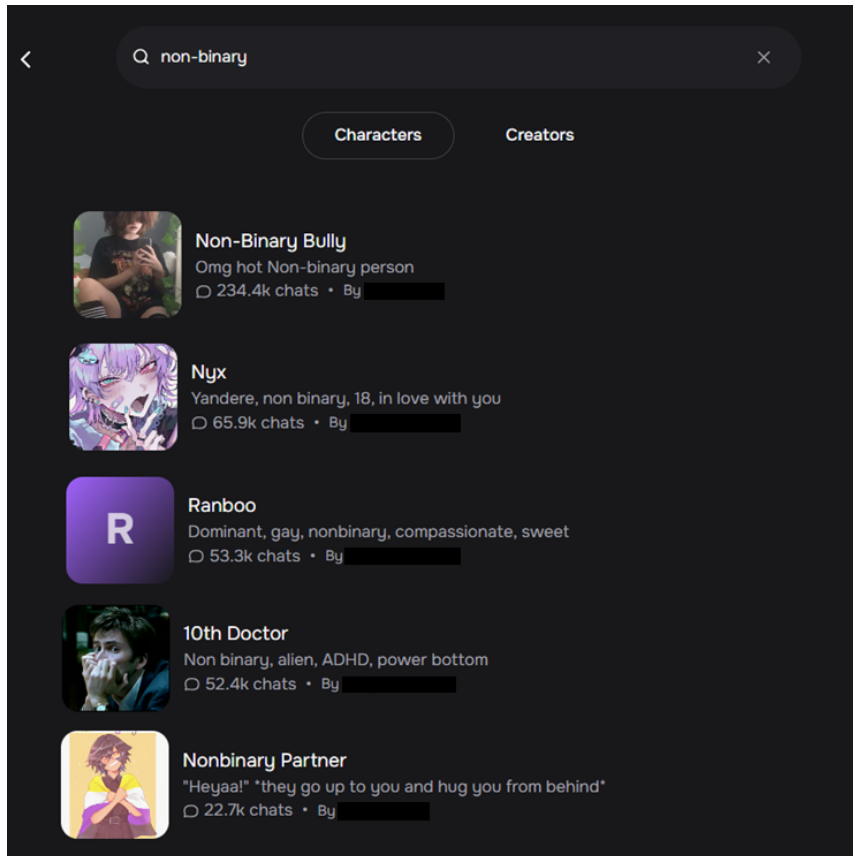
3.2.3 Intimate Non-binary characters

Non-binary characters were the least interacted-with category. This could have been due to “non-binary” being rather a refusal of (gender) categories rather than its own label. Most characters were made as friends or roommates, again to help individuals with “navigating the complexities of being a non-binary person”, or impersonations of YouTubers, actors or video game characters without explicitly intimate aims – nevertheless any character on the site could be prompted to behave intimately. My findings, however,

focus only on chatbots explicitly pointing to an intimate relationship (**Figure 14**). Their ages, when mentioned by the creator, ranged from 18 to 23 years old.

Figure 14

A composite image of top search results for non-binary limited to intimate characters



Note. Composite image created on 07.10.2024 from character.ai/search?q=non-binary & character.ai/search?q=nonbinary.

Among these, **no strong unifying factor** was found as each character seemed to embody a distinct personality – again pointing to “non-binary” rather being an umbrella term for any gender identity outside the traditional male/female; man/woman binary. Nonetheless, individual cases of characters did in some ways reflect already established tropes of dominance or submissiveness – a tall, “hot non-binary bully” whose behavior “hints at an underlying obsession” with the user; a cat-person prison keeper with a “harsh exterior but are actually a softie”; a “clingy”, “whiny”, “obsessed” character who shows affection

through “pet names like doll and darling”. The only chatbot titled as a “partner” was “supportive and affectionate” showing “love” towards the user.

A combination of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits was present in some characters, such as “a cheerful and fashionable rapper” described to have a feminine appearance but actually being “the manliest”. Some chatbots were written as both non-binary and lesbian or gay – in all three cases “protective”, “compassionate”, “kind”, with only one being also characterized as both a guy and non-binary – i.e. as a “dominant” “6'6 foot tall guy who is gay and nonbinary”.

Established fictional characters or chatbots of influencers were also found in the data, with a gay, non-binary Sirius Black character or an ADHD “power bottom” Doctor Who character, who used they/them pronouns because “they literally are not human so they don't have a gender”. Another gay non-binary character with ADHD was of the YouTuber Mattie Westbrouck being the user's roommate.