# Designing a chatbot: male, female or gender neutral?

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Picture a virtual assistant that helps find directions, schedules appointments or plays music, and the soothing yet robotic sound of a female voice likely comes to mind.

From Apple's Siri to Amazon's Alexa, a majority of the world's most popular virtual assistants have female personas.

But that's starting to change as a growing number of consumers - and companies - turn to digital assistants. Some developers are going against the grain, creating chatbots and messaging apps that no longer conform to one gender and challenging a tradition of female digital assistants that some say display submissive personalities.

Making virtual assistants female by default can be bad for business and perpetuate stereotypes, these chatbot developers say, so they're offering more options to consumers.

"A bot can be male or female, but I think it doesn't need to be submissive ... ," said Dror Oren, co-founder and vice president of product at Kasisto. "It can be a woman and have a smart, authoritative approach. A lot of bots are women, but they show behavior which is not necessarily what I would like to see when I think about my daughters."

The New York startup, which spun off from a Silicon Valley research company called SRI International that helped create Siri, developed a banking chatbot called MyKAI that launched in 2016 to manage money,

track expenses or even answer banking questions.

Available on Facebook Messenger, Slack and text message, the bot can answer questions such as, "How much did I spend on groceries last week," "How much money do I have in my checking account," or "What is compound interest?"

But ask MyKAI if it's male or female, and it responds, "As a bot, I'm not a human. But I learn. That's machine learning."

When Kasisto designed the bot, Oren said it hired a female writer to help create a bot that was gender-neutral.

"We wanted (its gender) to be relatively vague, and for us, it serves the purpose of focusing on the activity and function and not the personality of the bot," he said. "This bot is helping you to manage money or set your budget, but it's not about hanging out with you and being your flirty virtual buddy."

The name KAI stands for Kasisto AI, but the company also liked it because the name Kai has different meanings in different cultures, including victory, fire, willow tree or lovable.

Like diversity on movie screens or in media, some experts and developers say that chatbots can also reinforce stereotypes or biases about people who work in particular professions.

"Technology has the power to reshape what the new normal is," said Stuart Geiger, an ethnographer and post-doctoral scholar at the Berkeley Institute for Data Science at the University of California at Berkeley.

Historically, secretaries and administrative assistants have been women, and women still comprise about 94 percent of people in those jobs,

according to 2014 data from the U.S. Department of Labor.

"When an engineer or product manager goes to automate a task, they sort of have an idea in their minds of humans who were performing it before," Geiger said.

Siri, perhaps the best known intelligent assistant, is a case in point. When Siri debuted as an iPhone app in 2010, the personal assistant only responded via text. In October 2011, after Apple purchased the startup that created Siri, the virtual assistant was introduced as a feature on the iPhone 4S and had a female voice in the United States. Apple didn't offer users the option to give Siri a male voice until two years later. Those first impressions stuck; to this day, many people still use female pronouns to refer to Siri.

Though if you ask Siri if it's a man or woman, she replies, "I am genderless. Like cacti. And certain species of fish."

Stanford University Computer Science Professor James Landay said he's noticed that many virtual assistants are female. In protest, he changed Siri on his phone to a British man's voice.

Tech companies could give users the option to choose a gender for a virtual assistant when they set up their devices, rather than defaulting to a female one, he said. "Even if you say it's changeable, by making it a default you're making a conscious design decision about what most people are going to use," he said.

Some tech companies said that research shows consumers prefer the voice of a woman over a man. Amazon said that it tested several voices - both male and female - for Alexa, the personal assistant that powers the smart speaker Amazon Echo, and customers preferred the female one the company picked.

Rachel Law, the co-founder and CEO of Kip, a virtual assistant on Slack and Facebook Messenger that helps teams make office purchases, also grappled with what persona to give to the chatbot.

The New York company wanted to create a gender-neutral virtual assistant to avoid issues that could limit user adoption, so it settled on choosing an animal to represent its brand, narrowing down the choices to a bear, penguin, rabbit and frog.

But Law said Kip's team soon realized that people assign genders to animals, too. Most people view bears as male and rabbits as female. They ended up picking a penguin, named it Kip and gave it blue fur because blue is a common color in tech products with artificial intelligence.

Kip was given a hair clip to give it a sense of individuality and another accent color, though some thought adding a bow was too girly. But when the penguin's face is viewed in the messaging app on a smartphone, the company noted, the accessory just looks like a spot of color.

"Most people don't converse with Kip for fun. They converse with Kip for work. What we're selling here is something that helps people in their daily work. If we put a gender, we might alienate some people," she said.

Nonetheless, Kip users often assign their own gender to the penguin.

Law also believes that the habits people form by interacting with technology can influence how people act in real life, especially if these behaviors start young. Even virtual assistants get comments that are inappropriate or that would constitute sexual harassment if directed at a human. Most chatbots, she pointed out, don't require users to apologize if they're rude or inappropriate.

But not all chatbots are willing to back down when insulted.

Poncho, a sassy male cat that delivers the weather forecast, fires back with "Uh ... rude" when you sling profanity at him. Users are given an option to say, "Sorry," or, "Whatever." If the user doesn't apologize, Poncho replies, "OK, well then I think I'm going to take a short break," and stops responding.

"The way people interact with AI is going to set a new social norm and the way we have conversations with these things that are part of our normal lives," said Stephanie Chan, head of operations and editorial at Poncho. "It's important to challenge people to retain a little bit of humanity."

The creators of the chatbot, whose target audience includes millennials and younger internet users, said they chose a cartoon cat as its face, because it wasn't particularly specific to any culture. They thought about Poncho as a character on a sitcom or a friend who tells you the weather forecast.

Even with a male chatbot, the writers were careful about perpetuating stereotypes or alienating users. Don't expect Poncho to start spouting out phrases such as "Hey bro, I started homebrewing lately."

"Poncho kind of reflects or embodies more progressive views about gender and sexuality that are characteristic of his audience," said Poncho CEO Sam Mandel.

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How to change Siri's voice

On iOS 10, open Settings, tap Siri and then Siri Voice. You can select

between American, Australian, and British accents along with a male or female for the gender of Siri's voice.

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