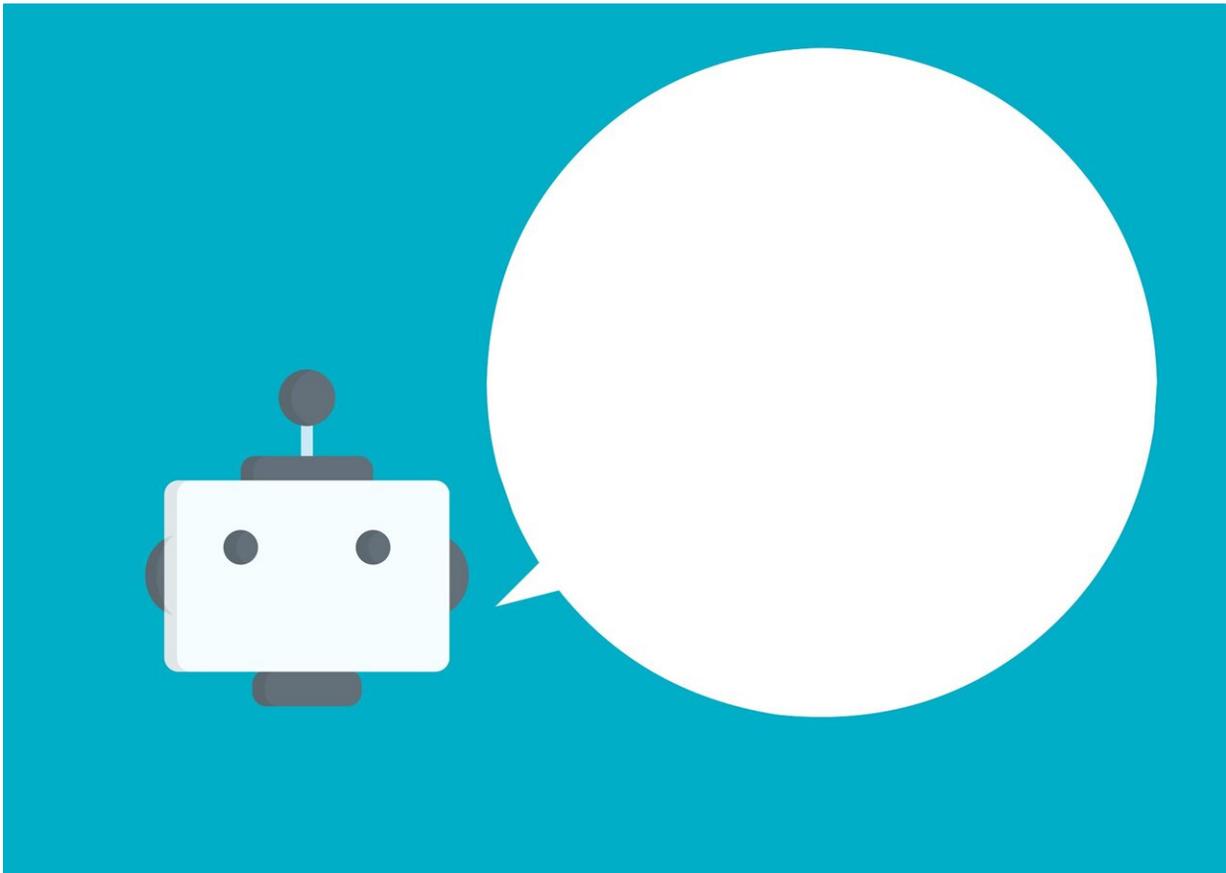


# When consumers would prefer a chatbot over a person

May 13 2024, by Jeff Grabmeier

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Actually, sometimes consumers don't want to talk to a real person when they're shopping online, a new study suggests. In fact, what they really

want is a chatbot that makes it clear that it is not human at all.

In a new study, researchers at The Ohio State University found that people preferred interacting with chatbots when they felt embarrassed about what they were buying online—items like antidiarrheal medicine or, for some people, skin care products.

"In general, research shows people would rather interact with a human customer service agent than a chatbot," said Jianna Jin, who led the study as a doctoral student at Ohio State's Fisher College of Business.

"But we found that when people are worried about others judging them, that tendency reverses and they would rather interact with a chatbot because they feel less embarrassed dealing with a chatbot than a human."

The study was [published](#) recently in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* with study co-authors Jesse Walker, assistant professor, and Rebecca Walker Reczek, professor, both in marketing at Ohio State's Fisher College.

"Chatbots are becoming more and more common as customer service agents, and companies are not required in most states to disclose if they use them," Reczek said. "But it may be important for companies to let consumers know if they're dealing with a chatbot."

The new research explored what happened when consumers had what psychologists call self-presentation concerns—this is when people worry about how their behavior and actions may affect how others perceive them. Buying some products may trigger these concerns.

In one of the five studies that was part of the paper, the researchers asked 386 [undergraduate students](#) to imagine buying either antidiarrheal or hay fever medication. They were given the choice between two online

drug stores, one of which used chatbots and another that used customer service agents.

When participants were told they were buying hay fever medication, which doesn't cause most people to feel embarrassed, 91% said they would use the store that had human service agents. But when they were buying antidiarrheal medicine, 81% chose the store with the chatbots.

But that's just the beginning of the story. The researchers found in other studies that it was important how human the chatbots appeared and acted onscreen.

In another study, participants were asked to imagine buying an antidiarrheal medicine from an online drugstore. They were then shown one of three live chat icons: One was a chatbot with an icon that was just a speech bubble, with no human characteristics; a second was a chatbot with a cartoon of a human; and the third featured a profile picture of a real clearly human woman.

Both chatbots clearly identified themselves to participants as chatbots—but the one with the cartoon of a real human used more emotional language during the exchange, such as "I am so excited to see you!"

Results showed that participants were more willing to receive information about the embarrassing product from the two chatbots than from the human. But the effect was not as strong for the chatbot with the human cartoon avatar that used more emotional language than the other chatbot.

The fact that this chatbot had a cartoon human avatar and used emotional language may have left those in the study feeling uneasy and less willing to interact—even though they were told it was a chatbot,

Walker said.

"It was as if the participants were proactively protecting themselves against embarrassment by assuming the chatbot could be human," Walker said.

In another study, Jin actually designed a chatbot and had participants engage in a real back-and-forth interaction. Participants in this study were chosen because they all strongly agreed that they wanted to make a good impression on others with their skin.

In other words, they had self-presentation concerns related to their skin and may have been interested in buying skincare products because they were embarrassed about their skin. Because of this, the researchers believed that they would respond more positively to clearly identified chatbots.

Participants in the study were told they were interacting with an agent for a skincare brand and whether they were talking to a chatbot or a customer service representative. Participants answered a series of questions, including one in which they were asked if they would like to provide their email address to get a free sample of the brand.

As the researchers hypothesized, participants were more likely to provide their email address if they thought they were interacting with a [chatbot](#) (62%) than a human (38%).

In this study, as well as others, the researchers asked questions designed to get at why participants prefer chatbots when they had self-presentation concerns.

Walker said the results of the study suggest chatbots decrease embarrassment because consumers perceive chatbots as less able to feel

emotions and make appraisals about people.

"Consumers feel less embarrassed because chatbots don't have the level of consciousness and ability to judge them," he said.

Jin, who is now an assistant professor at the University of Notre Dame, said the results suggest companies need to pay attention to the role of chatbots in their business.

"Managers may not realize the importance of using chatbots when consumers have self-presentation concerns," she said.

And as conversational AI continues to get better, it may become more difficult for consumers to tell the difference between chatbots and human service agents, Reczek said. That could be a problem for companies whose customers may prefer to interact with chatbots because of their self-presentation concerns and fears of embarrassment.

"It is going to be even more important for firms to clearly disclose that they use chatbots if they want consumers to realize they are interacting with a bot," Reczek said.

**More information:** Jianna Jin et al, Avoiding embarrassment online: Response to and inferences about chatbots when purchases activate self-presentation concerns, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1414](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1414)

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