A FEMINIST GUIDE TO HACKING THIS TECH
GATEBOX "AZUMA HIKARI"

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The use of virtual assistants is increasing every day, as a technological tool that is marketed

as a necessity to assist in making our modern lives more efficient. These tools are designed to help

us with daily tasks such as searching for information, reading emails, writing messages, making calls and scheduling meetings with others. The most popular examples "Siri" or "Alexa" have been created with specific gendered characteristics and behavior as the author points out "virtual assistants are very obviously gendered. Siri and Alexa both have female names" (Fellows, forthcoming 2022) designed with a personality of submissive and serviceable, as the author mentions "they portray a gender binary dominant-submissive relationship, positioning the user in the dominant position, and they play out subordination as feminine" (Fellows, forthcoming 2022).

In this essay I will focus on the software Gatebox and the character "Azuma Hikari". Gatebox is a device designed to create a character that not only helps you in all the tasks that a normal virtual assistant would, but also to generate a more personal connection as promoted on the website of the Japanese tech company "Gatebox is a character summoning device developed to allow you to live together with characters. Gatebox has four features that bring characters to life. Reality, rear projection technology lets you feel a character's presence as if they were actually there. Network, you can connect to the internet through a wireless LAN. With infrared rays and Bluetooth, you can also link household electrical appliances and other devices to Gatebox. Characters can notify you of internet and device information. Communication, internal sensors such as a camera and microphone allow you to enjoy conversing with the projected character (Allows for both natural voice and speech synthesis). Platform, allows for the development and distribution of a variety of character applications (business, household, etc)" ("Gatebox", 2019).

The female hologram character "Azuma Hikari" is marketed by this tech company as "The Comforting Bride, a bride character who develops over time, and helps you relax after a hard day. Through day-to-day conversations with Hikari, and her day-to-day behavior, you will be able to

enjoy a lifestyle that is more relaxed" ("Gatebox", 2019), a companion for a male consumer. In this essay I argue that "Azuma Hikari" is a technological sexist tool because it represents in the digital world the stereotype of women as submissive and serviceable which reinforce the assumption of male power and domination over women, and that is marketed as a way to solve the problem of loneliness and a need to reaffirm the masculinity of the male consumers.

The character "Azuma Hikari", as the website mentions "Develops as your personal bride, Hikari grows and changes through her conversations and other experiences with you. She always has you foremost in her mind, and will, from time to time, sow a new side to herself. Hikari is a young woman form a world that is more technologically advanced than Earth. Having travelled to this world by crossing other dimensions, she is ready to give her all to help you. Age: 20 Height 158 cm, Personality: soothing, hard-working, spontaneous. Family: Mother, father, younger sister." ("Gatebox", 2019), it recreates a fantasy of a young woman with characteristics of helpful, submissive and attentive attributes, presented as a "perfect wife or girlfriend" and with a childlike and sexualized look, created specifically to generate a personal connection with a male audience.

Image: Gatebox Official Website https://www.gatebox.ai/en/hikari

This character is designed as the stereotypical female model in patriarchal society, where women are seen as delicate, submissive, dependent, serviceable and assigned the role of "wife" in the domestic sphere. In patriarchal society women are considered to be in a position of

subordination and as a "possession" controlled and dominated by a male authority. I consider that this virtual assistant was specifically designed as female, so men would feel comfortable giving orders, interacting and relating with it, and to reaffirm their masculinity. The hegemonic masculinity as the authors explain are "qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity that guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Siltanen, J., & Doucet, A, 2017). Gender roles determine how men and women are expected to act and behave, in patriarchal society men are taught to be the one giving the orders, the "heads of the family" and to be pleased by a women as the author points out "The attitudes and values we teach, the influences we mean to effect are often alien to us, originating not in our own perspectives but in worldviews we inherit and internalize" (Ruth, 2001), these models of behavior are transferred into the virtual world.

Hikari is marketed as the wife that is willing to please all that is ordered for the male authority, as the authors mention "VPAs offer perfect subservience and total availability, free of messy things like autonomy, emotion and dignity" (Loideain & Adams, 2019). A relation characterized by obedience and control, as the author explains "this gendering is done on purpose in order to subvert the Hegelian master/slave dialectic and gain an epistemic advantage over the users of these VA's" (Fellows, forthcoming 2022), in the picture below we can see this relationship expressed in this message on the website "I will work as hard as I can for master" calling the consumer "master", reaffirming with this the male domination and the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Image: Gatebox Official Website https://www.gatebox.ai/en/hikari

This virtual assistant is also marketed as an emotional support, someone who is there for you at home, to listen to you and to give you messages of encouragement, so that you feel heard and valued even though it is a fictional connection, as the website for gatebox promotes her "She always has you foremost in her mind". They promote the idea that a "wife" should take care of the husband, have the house ready for when he gets home and provide undivided attention without any complaints, the author explains "virtual assistants enact digital domesticity by performing a feminine persona which mobilizes traditional, conservative values of homemaking, care-taking, and administrative pink collar labor" (Woods, 2018). This shows how technology is also presented as a way to "solve" a problem of social disconnection.

It is important to analyze this technological tool applying the intersectionality perspective and using the theories of gender binary, modernism and standpoint. I will start explaining first intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw which is the perspective that allows us to see the different elements of identity that interconnect to produce specific levels of oppression (Fellows & Smith, forthcoming 2022). As I mentioned before, the virtual assistant "Azuma Hikari"

represents female subordination to the will and orders of the male consumer, this relation of dominance "master and server" conveys an unequal dynamic of power and gender. They consider that the role of women is to be "wives" which in itself is sexism and promote the idea of women as domestic servers as the author points out "AI technologies are not neutral; they inherit the biases of their society, culture, and creators" (Raza, forthcoming 2022). Furthermore, this virtual assistant is marketed to a specific male audience of middle and upper class that can afford this device because it's expensive, so power is presented as something available for those who can afford it. This is how factors of gender, class and power shape the experiences of the consumer and the public market.

The gender binary theory, allows us to analyze the gender and sex categories that are traditionally seen as essentialist ideas of identity. The development of Hikari as a female character with traditional characteristics and behavior associated with feminine and created to interact with a male consumer, reproduces the binary construction of gender and sex, the feminine is associated with being submissive, passive, dependent and caregiver that belong in the domestic space, and the masculine with being assertive, active, aggressive, independent, dominant, breadwinner with a role in the public space, these are essentialist ideas that favor gender inequalities, because they justify the behavior that a woman and man should have, based on binarism, recognizing only the category of male and female. Furthermore, assuming also a heterosexual relation between the female character and the male consumer, because it's marketed as a "wife" for men in the website and commercials which shows us that this device reproduces gender stereotypes and doesn't represent and recognise peoples diverse identities, expressions and sexuality.

The theory of modernism as the author argues is "characterized by a rejection of traditionalism and a rejection of old ways of thinking" and technology is seen as necessary to achieve progress (Raza, forthcoming 2022). In the marketing of Hikari we see this "myth of progress" of technology (Smith, forthcoming 2022) that tries to solve a personal problem of loneliness and social disconnection. Loneliness "is a distressing feeling arising from perceived deficiencies in one's social relationships. Although common in contemporary society, for most people, feeling lonely is a transient phenomenon. For others, however, loneliness can be a prolonged condition that is associated with a variety of negative health outcomes" (Stickley & Koyanagi, 2016).

In Japan there is a well-known social problem of loneliness and depression as the news of the digital media platform mentions "Japan has appointed a "Minister of Loneliness" in an attempt to reduce loneliness and social isolation among its residents as the country deals with rising suicide rates" (Warren, 2021). Japanese developers are using the artificial intelligence to create a device to try to solve this social problem and make profit out of that, and with concept that it is possible to replace the physical human connection with a virtual tool. Hikari is marketed for lonely men to give them company and recreate the fantasy of a relationship, we can see how this is marketed in the commercial for the character of "Azuma Hikari" as she says to the male protagonist "missed you darling" and he replies "you know, somebody's home for me, feels great. Thought so on my way home." (Gatebox, 2016), we can see this type of relation of "living with the character" in the image below.

Image: Gatebox Official Website https://www.gatebox.ai/en/hikari

This technology gives the "promise" of helping to fulfill a need to be loved, valued and to improve self-esteem as the author tell us about her experience "being desired by scores of young men made me feel empowered" (Orchard, forthcoming 2022) the same with men being loved by a young woman albeit virtual, it gives them that feeling of personal value, reaffirming their manhood. But even though this technology can recreate this fantasy I consider that it can't fix the deeper problem, which is mental health. Believing that with technology we will solve the loneliness and depression of someone distracts us from seeing other personal and social factors of the problem.

This narrative of virtual love which we can see in the cinematography of the movie "her" about the story of a man that engages in a romantic relationship with a virtual assistant, as the male protagonist points out "she is not just a computer" (Burbank, 2014) the virtual assistant is seen as a real woman, and the male protagonist falls in love with her as he express in the film "I've never loved anyone the way I love you." Another example of the use of this narrative is the documentary "In The Machine that feels" that tells the true story of a man from Tokyo who married a hologram

of the singer Hatsune Miku using a certificate issued by Gatebox (CBC, 2021). In the documentary the man says "I love and see her as a real woman" (Bicknell, 2021). So even the tech company is promoting the "certification" of these virtual relationships.

The standpoint theory allows us to understand why I argue that this virtual assistant is sexist, as the author points out "Standpoint Theory proposes that social location matters when it comes to what kind of knowledge you have access to (and don't). Standpoint Theory holds the thesis of epistemic advantage, pointing out that people in marginalized groups often have greater access to some forms of knowledge than those in dominant groups. So women are often much more knowledgeable about the patriarchal systems of power and oppression that affect us all than men are" (Fellows, forthcoming 2022). The developers of virtual assistants usually are men, because tech companies are male dominated "If programming departments are made up primarily of men, then they would have an epistemic disadvantage when it comes to understanding sexism precisely because they do not occupy the correct social location to have lived experience of sexism" (Fellows & Smith, forthcoming 2022), their male privilege difficult them to address this problem. With all that I mention, we can conclude that "Azuma Hikari" is a technological sexist tool which reinforces gender stereotypes and the subordination of women, while serving as a medium to reaffirm hegemonic masculinity.

I believe the solution is not to eliminate these technological tools, because people are accustomed to using virtual assistants in their daily lives, but it is definitely necessary to eradicate the sexism in their design and marketing and to include more inclusive models. A proposal from a

feminist and intersectional perspective for digital characters and assistants that convey positive messages such as the autonomy and empowerment of women, as well as making them accessible to people with disabilities, and representative of diverse identities, expressions and sexuality would be a much needed message of equality, inclusion and diversity in the digital world.

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