

Chatbots don't judge! Customers prefer robots over humans when it comes to those 'um, you know' purchases

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When it comes to inquiring about – ahem – certain products, shoppers prefer the inhuman touch.

That is what we found in a study of consumer habits when it comes to products that traditionally have come with a degree of embarrassment – think acne cream, diarrhea medication, adult sex toys or personal lubricant.

While brands may assume consumers hate chatbots, our series of studies involving more than 6,000 participants found a clear pattern: When it comes to purchases that make people feel embarrassed, consumers prefer chatbots over human service reps.

In one experiment, we asked participants to imagine shopping for medications for diarrhea and hay fever. They were offered two online pharmacies, one with a human pharmacist and the other with a chatbot pharmacist.

The medications were packaged identically, with the only difference being their labels for “diarrhea” or “hay fever.” More than 80% of consumers looking for diarrhea treatment preferred a store with a clearly nonhuman chatbot. In comparison, just 9% of those shopping for hay fever medication preferred nonhuman chatbots.

This is because, participants told us, they did not think chatbots have “minds” – that is, the ability to judge or feel.

In fact, when it comes to selling embarrassing products, making chatbots look or sound human can actually backfire. In another study, we asked 1,500 people to imagine buying diarrhea pills online. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: an online drugstore with a human service rep, the same store with a humanlike chatbot with a profile photo and name, or the same store with a chatbot that was clearly botlike in both its name and icon.

We then asked participants how likely they would be to seek help from the service agent. The results were clear: Willingness to interact dropped as the agent seemed more human. Interest peaked with the clearly machinelike chatbot and hit its lowest point with the human service rep.

Why it matters

As a scholar of marketing and consumer behavior, I know Chatbots play an increasingly large part in e-retail. In fact, one report found 80% of retail and e-commerce business use AI chatbots or plan to use them in the near future.

When it comes to chatbots, companies want to answer two questions: When should they deploy chatbots? And how should the chatbots be designed?

Many companies may assume the best strategy is to make bots look and sound more human, intuiting that consumers don't want to talk to machines.

But our findings show the opposite can be true. In moments when embarrassment looms large, humanlike chatbots can backfire.

The practical takeaway is that brands should not default to humanizing their chatbots. Sometimes the most effective bot is the one that looks and sounds like a machine.

What still isn't known

So far, we've looked at everyday purchases where embarrassment is easy to imagine, such as hemorrhoid cream, anti-wrinkle cream, personal lubricant and adult toys.

However, we believe the insights extend more broadly. For example, women getting a quote for car repair may be more self-conscious, as this is a purchase context where women have been traditionally more stigmatized. Similarly, men shopping for cosmetic products may feel judged in a category that has traditionally been marketed to women.

In contexts like these, companies could deploy chatbots – especially ones that clearly sound machinelike – to reduce discomfort and provide a better service. But more work is needed to test that hypothesis.

The Research Brief is a short take on interesting academic work.

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