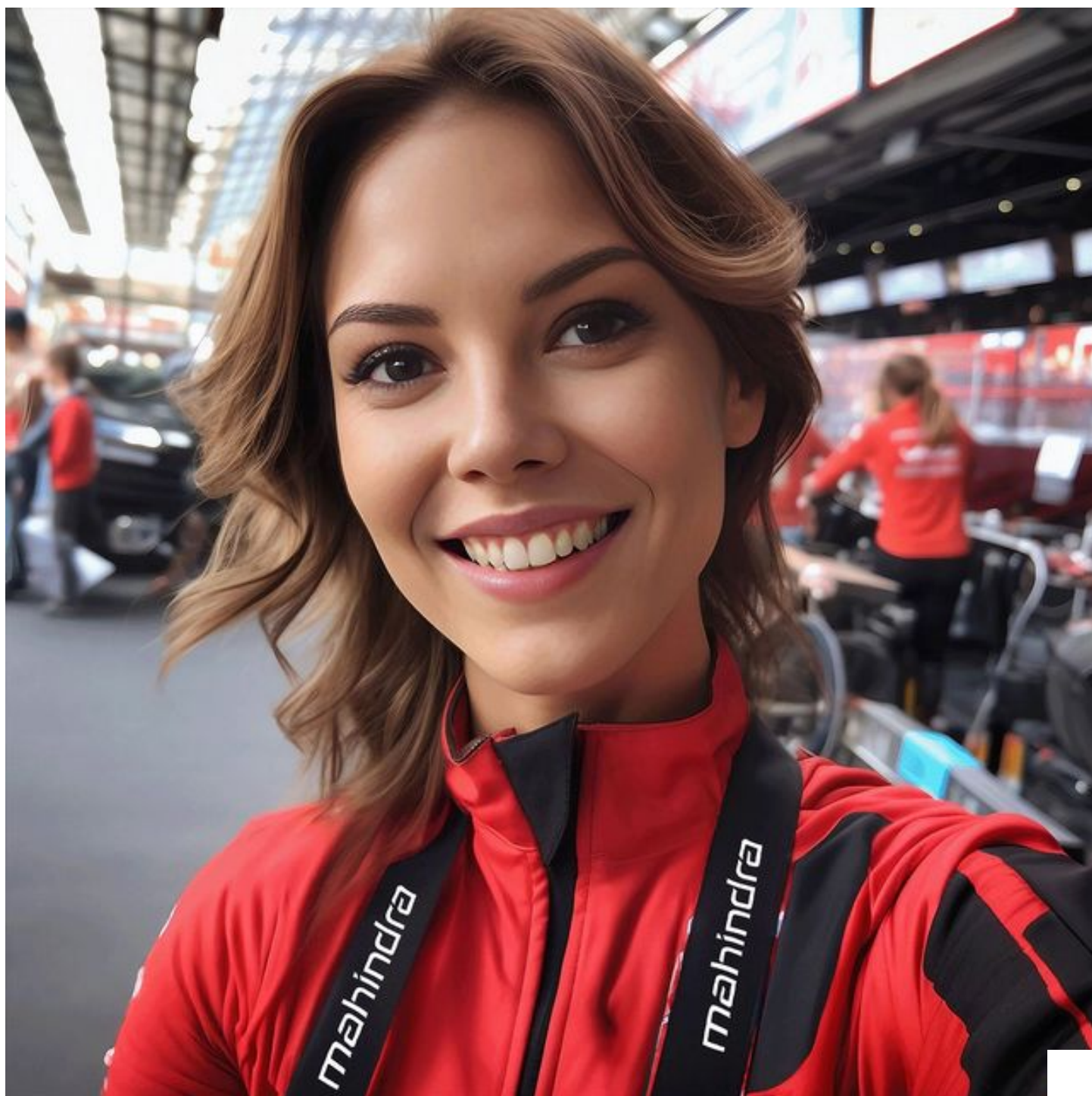


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Formula E Team Fires Its AI-Generated Influencer after Fans Balk

Mahindra Racing introduced, then quickly retracted, its use of a fake female motorsports reporter.

BY BENJAMIN HUNTING PUBLISHED: JAN 11, 2024



MAHINDRA RACING

It's no secret that it's difficult for women to gain traction in motorsports, whether it's as a driver ([fewer than 5 percent of elite-level pilots](#) identify as female), or as an engineer or racing team member (between [10 percent and 20 percent](#) in a top series like Formula 1). This week, Formula E team Mahindra underscored this gap by launching something it called "Ava Beyond Reality," an artificially created, female-presenting "AI Ambassador" that was met with such negativity from the

team's fanbase that the entire program was wiped from the internet in less than 48 hours.



VINCE MIGNOTT/MB MEDIA | GETTY IMAGES

Is racing so uninterested in welcoming women onto pit lane that it will literally create an artificial person entirely out of computer code in order to avoid hiring a living, breathing woman? That was the overwhelming tone of the outcry from both Formula E fans and motorsports enthusiasts worldwide when confronted with the (now deleted) Instagram profile belonging to "Ava Rose," a synthetic creation described as a "Sustainable Tech Queen" and "Racing Rebel Robot."

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The fauxfluencer's profile page consisted almost entirely of lifestyle-y, heavily

filtered [selfies of a conventionally attractive youngish woman](#), paired with bland captions on topics as generic as they were distant from Formula E: shoes, self-care, and how important it is to get restful sleep and "recharge the mind, the body, and the soul" (three things that this artificial marketing-machina did not possess). Entirely absent were any discussion of Ava Rose's ostensible role in promoting Mahindra's sustainability efforts, nor indeed any clues as to its association with racing at all aside from a single trackside snapshot where the digital avatar was wearing a team-branded lanyard.

If all of the above comes across as an icky use of technology that amplifies the misogyny that permeates motorsports, where women have in the past been reduced to ornamental roles as a visual sideshow to the actual on-track action, consider for a moment the shocking possibility that the entire plan may have been to actually . . . appeal to female fans?

"The photographs—shoes, clothing, selfies—seem drawn from the same kind of influencer-style sponsored content theme so common from accounts that advertise towards women, in this case paired with your standard 'AI girlfriend' imagery," said Hazel Southwell, longtime Formula E correspondent. "And yet, the text that accompanies them doesn't appeal to women at all. It feels very much like some type of outside marketing agency deal gone terribly wrong."

Mahindra Will Rise above This

The vapidness of the entire profile seemingly supports Southwell's interpretation of Mahindra's misguided effort, which makes it even more painful to realize that it could have at least imparted its machine-generated team member with an engineering or technical backstory tied to its role in promoting sustainability. Then of course, there's the decision to digitally impersonate a woman rather than give a human being an opportunity to gain a foothold in a notoriously hard-to-crack industry.

"What's most offensive to me is that you don't have to invent something like 'Ava Rose.' There are women out there who are actual experts on sustainability and motorsports. We exist!" said Southwell. "It's particularly sad to see this reflected on Mahindra, a very sincere team that genuinely does a lot of environmental work, one that has been in the sport since the very beginning, and whose [own history of diversity](#) doesn't require any artificial enhancement."

We Hope Formula E Does Too

In an email, Formula E declined to make its VP of Sustainability, Julia Pallé, available for an interview about Mahindra's AI Ambassador program, citing her responsibilities related to this weekend's Mexican E-Prix. To have the media world buzzing about Mahindra's miss-step rather than ramping up coverage of the very first event on the FE calendar this year reflects poorly on the series, to say the least.

Racing is a sport that is increasingly attracting women as fans and spectators at nearly every level, yet the absence of representation remains a glaring barrier to their participation. Mahindra's AI pantomime might have been short-lived—the team posted a [not-quite apology to Instagram today](#) that announced the end of the program—but it's confusing and troubling that anyone at the team, or Formula E thought it was a good idea in the first place, and difficult to square against Formula E's own ["Girls On Track" outreach program](#). The entire "Ava Rose" debacle waves a big red flag at situations where inclusion and diversity are swept up by a marketing machine intent on piggybacking on the latest tech trends without consideration for the human dynamics that make up the sport. It's encouraging that the backlash was widespread enough to make Mahindra rethink "Ava Rose," and we can only hope the next company that thinks programming diversity is better than hiring diverse employees takes note.

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