

Masochist Britain: why is everyone asking Alexa to insult them?

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Name: Alexa. Age: Born 6 November 2014. Appearance: Back then, like a dehumidifier that spied on you; now more of an invisible, all-knowing presence. You mean the woman who tells me the football scores? Yes, that Alexa – Amazon's ubiquitous virtual assistant, voiced by a speech synthesiser and powered by weak AI. What about her? It's the end of the year, so time for Amazon to reveal the questions Britons most often asked Alexa in 2023. What were they? There are so many they are grouped into categories, such as "top height questions". OK, then – what was the top height question? "Alexa, how tall is Lionel Messi?" And? According to Alexa, Lionel Messi is 5ft 7in (1.7 metres) tall. This is actually more boring than I feared it would be. There is also a special "surprising request" category. Go on then, surprise me. The top surprising request was: "Alexa, insult me." More evidence that Britain's long national nervous breakdown continues. That was followed by "Alexa, how old are you?" and "Alexa, will you marry me?" Why on earth would you ask a virtual assistant to insult you? Probably because Alexa has an ample store of put-downs to hand, and people want to hear some of them. Give me an example of Alexa's coruscating wit. "You always exceed expectations ... of how annoying you can be." Yeesh. Talk about weak AI. Another one goes: "Thanks for chatting with me. I needed a good nap." Don't quit your day job, Alexa. Amazon also revealed the Top 10 in a "fart requests" category. Please don't tell me what No 1 is. I'll tell you No 9 instead: "Alexa, fart 17 times in a row." I know I'm going to be sorry I asked, but what happens when you do that? Alexa immediately engages an "Alexa skill" called "big fart". An Alexa skill? They're extension apps created by third-party developers to expand Alexa's capabilities and range. And this one? It's actually just a load of fart noises on demand. Doesn't give you a tremendous amount of confidence in civilisation's continued survival, does it? Alexa's UK and Ireland manager, Meryem Tom, says: "From the more meaningful to the mundane and the downright quirky, Alexa's most-asked questions provide another fascinating snapshot of how customers in the UK use Alexa to learn, get help with tasks or ask for some quickfire entertainment." I'm so depressed. What next? I don't know – do I look like your AI-powered personal assistant? Do ask: "Alexa, what's the score?" Don't ask: "Alexa, is my existence meaningless?"