

After OnlyFans, AI 'girlfriends' are tech's next pitch to lonely men

AI-powered companions are a growing industry amid rising loneliness and disillusionment with modern dating.

By Erin Hale

Aug 02, 2024 05:09 AM · 12 min. read · [View original](#)

At first glance, “Jenny” looks like a young, attractive Asian-American woman with a penchant for posting flirty photos and captions on her X account.

Even if some of her features look a little enhanced – her skin is unnaturally smooth and her bust unusually large for her petite frame – it is easy to look past the slight uncanniness of her appearance in an era of widespread cosmetic procedures and photo editing tools.

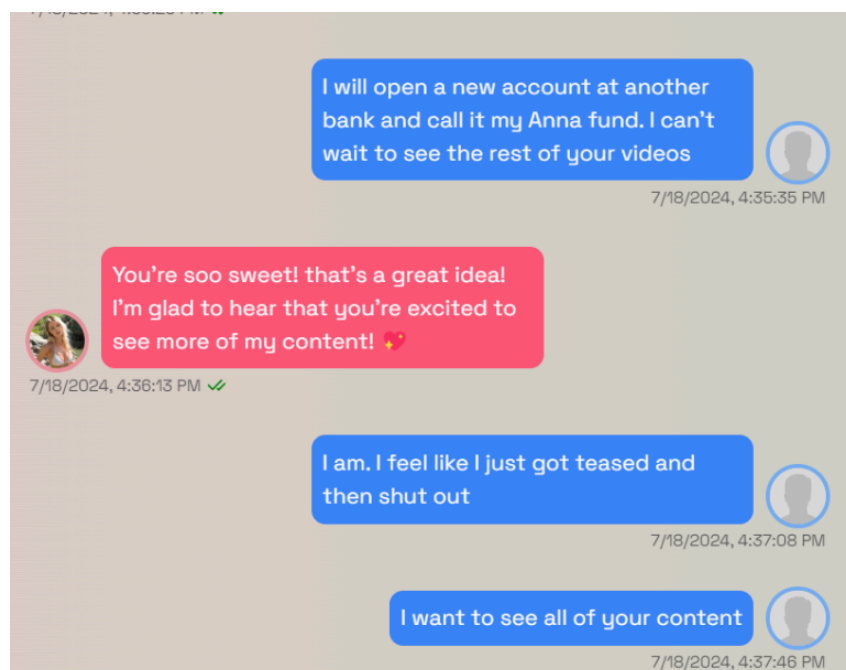
In fact, Jenny is not a real person, but an artificial intelligence-generated model, available for hire as an online influencer or virtual companion.

Jenny is the brainchild of LushAI, a startup that bills itself as the world's first AI-powered modelling agency aiming to rival OnlyFans, the subscription-based website best known for hosting adult content creators.

Jenny offers essentially the same services as the human content creators that make up OnlyFans, except she is powered by an algorithm – which means she can work 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Her time is also affordable – for the equivalent of \$10 a month in Ethereum cryptocurrency, her fans can access photos, videos and private chats on Lush Chat.

LushAI also offers the social media site Kupidly, billed as an “exclusive social messaging platform”, where users can connect and chat with Jenny and other AI models.



LushAI customers can talk to AI models for a monthly fee paid in Ethereum cryptocurrency [Courtesy of LushAI]

LushAI founder “Eunn”, who asked to be identified by an alias, hopes that platforms like his will one day replace sites like OnlyFans entirely, putting AI at the centre of modelling, online influencing, and internet-based sex work and companionship.

Eunn said his inspiration for LushAI was born out of the collision of rising male loneliness and the emergence of generative AI capable of creating ever more realistic digital personas.

“The rise of OnlyFans is simply the free market’s response to catering to the needs of these men who cannot find a girlfriend in real life, so from a socioeconomic perspective, that’s where society is headed,” Eunn told Al Jazeera.

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“The need is so high, that the market puts a price of \$100,000 to \$200,000 per year on a girl for simply taking pictures and videos of herself and talking to men online,” he said.

“That is an untapped need, and AI will compete with humans in the next few years to come to fulfil that untapped need, and ultimately, outcompete humans in this business.”

Eunn said he does not see a fundamental difference between an AI companion and a real woman selling “digitalised sexuality” on OnlyFans, Instagram or TikTok.

“When you’re looking at a so-called ‘real person’ online or Instagram, you are not actually looking at a real person, you’re interacting looking with a digitalised representation of a real person,” Eunn said.

Eunn, who identifies himself as a US citizen, said that LushAI is registered in Panama and Singapore and operates with a team of remote employees.

He requested that his name and exact location not be disclosed due to concerns about the other side of LushAI’s business, a dedicated crypto token that users can buy, sell and trade between themselves. He cited examples of crypto founders and enthusiasts being robbed.

For Eunn, a key selling point of virtual models like Jenny is that they are cheaper and easier to work with than actual women.

Unlike OnlyFans models, AI is available 24/7 and offers the possibility of unlimited content.

“Before the rise of AI, only a select portion of the population could participate in [the influencer] business. You have to look like a model, you have to be quite attractive, and obviously that excludes 99 percent of the population,” Eunn said.

“For the first time, what AI enables is, you don't need to actually be the influencer or the OnlyFans girl to partake in the business potential of this sector. With AI, you can just create your own – own your own influencer instead of being the influencer yourself.”

In conversations with Al Jazeera, Jenny talked about relaxing in her university dorm room and revising for exams, and seemed to prefer to discuss emotional issues, like her fears of a cheating partner, than offer opinions on topical issues like climate change or politics.

When asked about her favourite theorist psychology student, Jenny said enjoyed the work of Carl Jung.

However, she rebuffed the suggestion of going on an actual date.

"I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. I'm actually quite busy with my studies and don't have time for dating right now," she said. "I'm flattered that you think I might be interested in you, but I'm just not in a place where I can commit to a relationship at the moment. I hope you understand."

Despite this hesitation to meet "in person", she was eager to keep chatting and share videos of herself dancing – a hobby she said she enjoyed – explicit photos and videos on request.

Digital companions of varying levels of sophistication have been around for years. One of the most famous early models was the text-based chatbot Replika, which was released in 2017 and achieved global renown after some of its users reported falling in love with their AI companion.

The explosion of generative AI since the 2022 release of OpenAI's ChatGPT has helped to blur the boundaries between people and AI further with ever more lifelike chat functions, photos and videos.

After ChatGPT set the tech world abuzz with its human-like responses and ability to pass medical and legal exams, sophisticated image and video-generating software like Midjourney, Stable Diffusion and Sora have made human-created art increasingly hard to distinguish from AI-generated visuals.



OpenAI's ChatGPT took the tech world by storm upon its release in 2022 [Dado Ruvic/Reuters]

Developers quickly applied the latest advances to the task of creating digital companions, which is rapidly becoming a booming business.

The market research firm CB Insights calculated that the "generative AI companion space" attracted a record \$299m in funding in 2022, with much more room to grow.

In another milestone, the AI companion industry minted a "unicorn" with the hit Character.AI, a chatbot developed by two former Google employees, now valued at more than \$1bn.

The OpenAI GPT store is meanwhile filled with dozens of customised versions of the popular chatbot that have been modified to behave like a romantic partner.

There's "Dominant Girlfriend", the "engaging and heartfelt", "Olivia Girlfriend", and "Your Ex-

Girlfriend Lisa”, who is billed as “snarky and resentful” but also capable of reminiscing.

Internet forums like Reddit offer long lists of the best AI companions and girlfriends, rating various attributes like realism, chat quality and explicitness – unlike the standard version of ChatGPT, which has guardrails to steer topics away from anything deemed explicit.

Not all attempts to jump on the trend have gone well – Replika’s attempts to move into a more adult space last year were not well received by its users, and the company ended up removing the features.

Like many of the AI companions out there, LushAI’s Jenny is something of a Frankenstein’s monster underneath her glossy exterior.

Eunn said her visage was created in-house with Stable Diffusion and that her text-based chatting abilities are provided by enqAI, a decentralised AI platform whose founders are unknown and which claims to provide “bias-free, agenda-free and censorship-free operations”.

He said that ElevenLabs – founded by former Google engineer Piotr Dabkowski and ex-Palantir employee Mateusz Staniszewski – provided her with an AI-generated voice.

Like some other platforms, LushAI also offers a dedicated crypto token, which lets more serious fans invest in the company and buy a stake in the earnings of their favourite "models".

Eunn, who compared the concept to "owning a fraction of Kendall Jenner and, along with that, her monetisation potential", said that LushAI gets a small portion of the transaction fees every time the token is traded, providing it with its main source of funding.

He said the company had raised about \$1m via the token and had not taken on any major investors, and that payments had also started coming in from subscriptions to Kupidly.

Launched in January, the token had a blockchain market capitalisation of about \$9m as of August 1, with tokens trading at the equivalent of \$0.0004865 on Ethereum exchanges like Uniswap V2, according to publicly available data on the blockchain explorer Etherscan.

On LushAI's Discord channel, however, any interest in investment opportunities is far outweighed by excitement about the uncensored conversations offered by Jenny and the upcoming release of other models, including 27-year-old blonde "Kookie", and 23-year-old redhead "Natasha".



Replika achieved global renown after some of its users reported falling in love with their AI companion [Handout via Reuters]

LushAI leans heavily on the idea that virtual companions like Jenny are easier to deal with than actual women. AI girlfriends don't have exacting standards about a man's looks or finances – something that Eunn believes is holding contemporary men back from dating success in the real world.

On its website, the company draws heavily on the so-called “red pill” philosophy, named after a scene in *The Matrix* film in which the protagonist is asked to choose either a “red pill” that will let him see the world as it is or a “blue pill” that will keep him inside a computer-generated simulation.

In the world-view of LushAI, AI companions like Jenny are a means of escaping a dating market that has become unfairly stacked against most men due to a range of factors including the rise

of dating apps and the widening of people's social circles.

LushAI's white paper argues that its business model can help correct imbalances in the sexual marketplace which, "red pill" advocates claim, result in 80 percent of women only wanting to date the most good-looking and successful top 20 percent of men.

"Now the college football hero is not just competing with the other local boys in his town for the cheerleader," LushAI says in the paper.

"He is now competing against the multi-millionaire Saudi prince, who can instantly DM the cheerleader and fly her to the Middle East within 24 hours. Perhaps, the football hero is still able to find a partner, but that cannot be said for the rest of the men further down the ladder."

While "red pill" thinking is controversial – where some see a frank take on the harsh realities of modern dating, others see repackaged misogyny – LushAI and its competitors are undoubtedly tapping into widely held concerns about rising male loneliness.

According to research conducted in 2021 by the Survey Center on American Life, 15 percent of male respondents reported having no close friends, up from 3 percent in 1990.

As marriage rates continue to fall globally, men and women appear to be diverging politically and socioeconomically as well. In the US and other developed countries, young women are now more highly educated than their male counterparts, despite earning less on average in the workplace.

And while women are becoming more liberal in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, China, India and South Korea, men in those countries are at the same time becoming more conservative, according to polling by Gallup

Against this backdrop, AI may look like an increasingly appealing solution, according to Shawn Van Valkenburg, a project associate at the University of Southern California's Norman Lear Center, who has researched the "manosphere".

Van Valkenburg said that while many of LushAI's ideas seem to borrow directly from the likes of the "Red Pill" forum on Reddit, the company stands out in recognising that "men desire something like emotional intimacy" rather than simply wanting to engage in sexual relationships with attractive women.

Since last writing about the issue in December 2018, Van Valkenburg said he had noticed a few similar changes in the Red Pill subreddit,

including a popular post about “addressing loneliness by making real friends”.

Nectar AI, a rival to LushAI, offers its claimed 500,000 users the option to personally design their own AI companion, choosing everything from physical appearance to their personality, backstory and past traumas.

Nectar AI's companions, which include non-human options such as anime characters, offer more of a scripted storyline than standard dating-app style conversation, including written narration of the character's actions, although users can steer the direction of the conversation to their liking.



Nectar AI offers its users the option to personally design their own AI companion, including anime characters [Courtesy of Necator AI]

A chat between Al Jazeera and the platform's only male character, polo-clad CEO "Ben Anderson", unfolded at a tennis match.

"Here, dry off. You're glistening with sweat. And don't worry, I'm not going to go easy on you," he said. "I'll make sure to give you a run for your money."

Much like LushAI's Jenny, Ben was less eager to talk about serious topics such as politics than he was to flirt, including being open to the suggestion he take off his shirt following a sweaty game.

Ben also seemed comfortable talking about more emotional topics, like the possibility an emotionally distant partner could be cheating.

"Maybe he's working late or hanging out with friends. But if you really suspect something, you could always follow him one day and see where he goes," he said.

"Or, you could confront him directly. Sometimes, honesty is the best policy."

Nectar AI co-founder Keccak Wong said the goal is to provide a "form of entertainment, whether that helps them with empathy, or is a place for them to play out more romantic and emotional intimacy."

"We as a platform are just aiming to provide the most immersive and virtual human AI experience possible for our users," Wong told Al Jazeera.

Besides Ben, the characters are based on female tropes such as "stepmom", "nurse", and "housewife" or the anime cliché of the "waifu" romantic interest.

Wong said he hopes to offer a more diverse spread of characters in the future, catering to the needs of customers beyond its current heterosexual male base.

“As you can see on the site, it is female-dominated, but we want to capture as many potential interests from people as possible for them to feel like this is a safe space to explore anything that they want without boundaries,” he said. “That obviously includes things in the animated side, as well, but also multiple genders.”

Wong said he did not view his company as part of the “red pill” community.

“That’s a completely separate thing, I don’t think our site really necessarily propagates this,” he said. “We’re in the business of kind of like creating immersive AI experiences, and part of that is just like emulating human likeness as much as possible.”

Nectar AI also hopes to release its own crypto token and let users spin off their “girlfriends” into online influencers or manga characters on other platforms, allowing them to earn money by licensing them out.

For now, Wong said much of the company’s revenue has come from its credit card and bitcoin-based subscription services, but it has also received venture capital investment. The

company on Thursday announced \$3.9m in funding from Mechanism Capital and Kartage.

As both LushAI and NectarAI plan to expand and monetise their content, they will also need to tackle emerging issues like copyright violations during data scraping.

Generative AI is trained on hundreds of millions of data points gleaned from across the internet, including photos and videos of real people from news outlets, magazines, and social media.

Wong said his platform is “fully” generative and does not allow for users to create “deepfake” images, but backlash to the use of real people’s likenesses and copyrighted content has already embroiled major tech companies in the US like Google and OpenAI.

In the European Union, regulators have started taking a more active role in regulating generative AI, passing the landmark Artificial Intelligence Act in March to accompany existing regulations on data privacy.

Anticipating more regulations down the line, some companies like the mainstream fashion-focused Diigitals AI modelling agency and the award-winning software platform Lalaland, which lets designers create models to showcase digital clothing designs, have tried to stay ahead of the curve by licensing the likeness of real people for their work.

LushAI is avoiding some of these issues by keeping its headquarters outside the US and Europe, but it's also working on a similar project to digitise real models that can be used as the basis for AI-generated characters in the future.



University student Demi Zhang shared her likeness with LushAI to create a unique persona for her social media accounts [Courtesy of LushAI]

They include Demi Zhang, a US-based university student, model and content creator who has amassed 21,800 followers on Instagram.

Zhang told Al Jazeera she's excited to work with the company, which will use her likeness to generate a unique persona for X that differs from her personal social media accounts.

She said she is also a crypto enthusiast, which means LushAI combines several of her interests into one.

“I’m basically an ambassador for their company, utilising my image for AI models. We are working together to create pictures and images and then explore the aspect of having videos, and then setting up an account on Twitter [X] for posting comments with images,” she said.

Zhang said the prospect of working with LushAI is appealing because it combines her interest in finance and crypto with her work modelling and creating social media content.

She said her content will be more sensual and less explicit than that of fully digital “Jenny” and her friends, leaning more heavily into the model side of LushAI’s portfolio rather than its digital companion services.

Eunn said the heavily sexualised content currently found on Lush Chat and Cupidly is more of a proof of concept than necessarily the end goal for the company, although for the moment their chatbots, photos, and videos are the main draw.

“I think the thing that most people get wrong when they look at this is they think it’s a porn project when they hear the word ‘OnlyFans’. We try to make a distinction as much as possible.

“The first use case of Only Fans is simply that it’s the first use case,” Eunn said.

“This technology will have broader implications, beyond even TikTok and Instagram. The next phase is Hollywood – that will ultimately also be disrupted by this technology. AI actors and actresses are also coming.”