

Real Harassment, Virtual Robots? Exploring Misogyny Against Machines

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This study analyzes comments on a Brazilian bank's anti-harassment advertising campaign, which featured a feminized virtual assistant "talking back" to offensive users and sparked widespread backlash on social media. The analysis examines audience reactions to changes in technology design and their connection to political issues. Using inductive thematic analysis, we identify four core themes that reveal resistance to integrating anti-harassment messaging and non-subservient design into feminized technology. The findings suggest that the artificial intelligence assistant's deviation from docility disrupts entrenched gender expectations, provoking ironic and hostile commentary tied to broader moral panics about shifting gender norms. The ad campaign's negative reception underscores how misogynistic cultures continue to resist efforts to address sexism. However, commenters also criticize the corporate appropriation of feminism, questioning its authenticity and compromise. We conclude that these audience reactions highlight the persistent challenges of introducing feminist interventions in human-machine communication and emphasize the need for more comprehensive strategies to combat technology-mediated misogyny.

Keywords: virtual assistant, human-machine communication, technology-mediated harassment, misogyny

"For you, it can be a joke. For me, it was violent" (Bradesco, 2021, 00:00:49). This quote is one of many responses introduced by Bradesco Bank to its virtual assistant (VA), BIA, to address clients' harassing messages to the assistant. These interactions featured in a transmedia campaign as part of a broader institutional effort to address offensive messages directed at their feminized VA (Propmark, 2021). The campaign video aired on Brazilian television and YouTube, sparking massive social media backlash.

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The audience's intense reactions raise a critical question: "What happens when a virtual assistant talks back to harassment?" The introduction of retort in feminized technologies challenges entrenched social norms around gender, power, and submission and sheds light on how people respond to technological interactions that subvert gendered expectations.

In this article, we build a dialogue between human-machine communication (HMC) studies, feminist science and technology studies (STS), and moral panics scholarship to investigate public reactions to advertised changes in technology design. Our research explores:

RQ1: How do YouTube commenters respond to a feminized virtual assistant that "talks back" and refutes misogynistic comments?

RQ2: How do these themes relate to technology-mediated moral panics about gender in the Brazilian context?

We conducted an inductive thematic analysis of the 500 most-liked comments on YouTube's main campaign video, *BIA's New Responses Against Harassment* (Bradesco, 2021). Building on four key themes, we argue that audience reactions reflect a broader backlash against integrating progressive anti-harassment rhetoric and non-subservient design choices in feminized technology. When a feminized VA "talks back," it disrupts entrenched expectations of docility, triggering hostility and attempts to deflect the discussion from harassment. These responses highlight the persistence of long-standing misogynistic cultures and demonstrate how denouncing sexist behaviors is often perceived as a "threat" or an "overreach"—a characteristic that directly links this phenomenon to ongoing moral battles in the Brazilian context. Audience reactions expose the contradictions within advertised feminist design interventions, questioning the authenticity of corporate narratives that, rather than promoting institutional change, mask the harassment of service workers. We conclude by reflecting on the findings' implications for technology-mediated misogyny and its intersections with Brazil's political discourse.

Bradesco Inteligência Artificial: A Communicative Robot

Introduced in 2016, Bradesco Bank's BIA promised easier access to financial services. Created with IBM, BIA was the first VA integrated into a banking platform in Brazil ("Com BIA," 2019; Kaufman, 2019). As explained by Kaufman (2019), "BIA is one of the stars of IBM's global advertising campaign. From the experience with Bradesco, the number of projects using Watson Assistant technology has grown rapidly worldwide" (p. 842). Since 2016, BIA has accumulated more than 800 million interactions (Medeiros, 2021). Though Brazilian, BIA operates within IBM's broader international strategies and is accessible via a smartphone app, social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, and Google Assistant.

Here, we refer to automated conversational bots as VAs, though they could also be categorized as chatbots, social bots, and communicative robots (Hepp, Bolin, Guzman, & Loosen, 2024). Hepp (2020) conceptualizes "communicative robots" as automated systems that "serve the needs of human communication" and have "humanlike" features (p. 1411). Hepp (2020) highlights how these communicative robots represent emerging formats of "quasi-communication," as exchanges with these technologies do not

align with existing understandings of communication as a “human symbolic exchange” (p. 1413) but instead involve *ascribing* communication to robots. Understanding VA interactions as quasi-communication helps explain how audiences make sense of their relationship with responsive technology.

In April 2021, Bradesco launched a transmedia campaign with online and offline content. The main film aired on Brazilian TV during prime time and was uploaded to YouTube. The campaign’s hashtag, #AliadosPeloRespeito (Allies for Respect), matched Bradesco’s internal human resources campaigns against workplace harassment. The campaign video highlighted BIA’s shift from a docile persona to assertive responses to harassment. The video showed women reading offensive messages sent to BIA, first with the VA’s submissive replies, then replaced by stronger responses. According to the bank, in 2020, BIA received around 95,000 offensive and sexually harassing messages (Propmark, 2021). Instead of ignoring such abuse, BIA began responding with statements like, “These words cannot be used with me or anyone else” (Bradesco, 2021, 00:00:43).

The campaign aligned with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) international initiative “Hey Update My Voice,” a movement aimed at “pushing back against gender bias and sexual harassment of AIs” (“Hey Update my Voice,” 2020). This initiative followed the publication of “I’d Blush if I Could,” named after Siri’s pre-2019 response to the insult, “Hey Siri, you’re a bitch” (UNESCO & EQUALS Skills Coalition, 2019). UNESCO’s report linked the widespread proliferation of female-gendered VAs to existing gender disparities, cautioning that these inequalities may worsen as AI develops more “human-like communication abilities” (UNESCO & EQUALS Skills Coalition, 2019, p. 90).

The Feminization of Communicative Robots

BIA’s trajectory illustrates how VAs are shaped by technical, business, social, cultural, and gender dynamics. Human-robot quasi-communication processes are marked by social inequalities, considering that technologies and social practices are mutually constituted (Bruce, 1996; Timeto, 2019). Nass and Brave (2005) found that even subtle social cues in voice assistants—such as those suggesting a specific gender or race—can lead people to interact with the technology as they would with someone of that gender or race. However, these phenomena are not exclusive to VAs. In previous studies examining mass media devices, such as television and radio, Reeves and Nass (1996) developed the media equation theory after observing that people tend to relate to communication technologies as they would to other people. Similarly, after investigating how people respond to their computers, Nass, Steuer, & Tauber (1994) proposed the Computers Are Social Actors (CASA) paradigm, which has been deeply influential for researchers investigating HMC. Both perspectives agree that examining people’s relationships with and perceptions of communicative robots is valuable for communication studies and can lead to interesting theoretical developments about how people ascribe *identity* and *values* to things that “respond back.”

STS scholars have long theorized how technology and gender are mutually shaped (Wajcman, 2007). Artifacts are created based on gendered suppositions, which, in turn, shape society’s reinterpretations of gender (Faulkner, 2001). Thus, it is unsurprising that most VAs in the global market are feminized. Scholars have traced the development and branding of these devices and concluded that the choices for a feminized persona are related to how these devices are marketed by their creators, with socially

feminized roles such as assistants, caretakers, secretaries, and even sexual companions (Strengers & Kennedy, 2020). After analyzing gendered VAs, the authors conclude that feminine AI assistants mirror the 1950s U.S. housewife stereotype, performing “wifework”—responsibilities often ascribed to stay-at-home married women (Strengers & Kennedy, 2020). AI assistants such as Alexa are always eager to please: They can help you buy groceries, create a warm environment through music, and manage household appliances such as lights. These domestic responsibilities are similar to those traditionally performed by White, middle-class, heteronormative women (Strengers & Kennedy, 2020; Woods, 2018).

Through a racial lens, Phan (2019) argues that portrayals of Alexa misrepresent power relations and romanticize servitude. The work “delegated” to Amazon Echo parallels the relationships between middle-class women and “recent migrants, working-class ‘native-born’ women, or women of color” (Phan, 2019, p. 13). These feminized VAs can be viewed more accurately as domestic servants, reconfiguring cultural narratives of domestic servility as pleasurable to perform (Phan, 2019).

Critiques of VA feminization also appear in outlets like *Wired* and *The Wall Street Journal*, highlighting concerns about gender stereotypes and “subconscious influence” (Hempel, 2015; Stern, 2017). These critiques in the media led companies such as Google to introduce male voice options for their VAs (Etherington, 2017), reflecting a growing awareness of gender-technology relations. However, such awareness does not translate into anti-sexist stances, as moral panics literature shows how these discussions can be co-opted for misogynistic goals. Thus, the stakes are high: Designing VAs as feminized wives or servants risks reinforcing misogynistic views of female subservience and obscuring the exploitative histories of women’s domestic and care labor.

Techno-Mediated Moral Panics

Moral panics over gender debates in Brazil, particularly on social media, have intensified over the past decade and likely fueled the rapid spread and hostile reception of BIA’s campaign. Miskolci (2021) argues that in Brazil, moral entrepreneurs spread panic over perceived threats to gender, family, and sexuality hierarchies, especially in the “technomediatized public sphere” (p. 43). This strategy, amplified through social media, aims to garner support and votes for conservative leaders and candidates, mobilizing diverse social segments in a campaign that adopts the characteristics of a moral crusade against a “supposed feminist and homosexual conspiracy” (Miskolci, 2021, p. 62).

Moral panic, a concept first introduced by Young and Cohen (as cited in Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 11), refers to a phenomenon characterized by exaggerated or misdirected public concern over a perceived threat to social order, “often triggered by alarming media stories and reinforced by reactive laws and public policy” (Krinsky, 2013, p. 1). This is not a new phenomenon, and historical perspectives show that the media have long amplified social fears (Nicholas & O’Malley, 2013). However, contrary to its typical association with mass media, Walsh (2020) contends that “digital platforms and communications constitute significant targets, facilitators, and instruments of panic production” (p. 841), whether by instigating anxiety about societal shifts, intensifying social divides, or providing avenues for stigmatizing outsiders. Hence, social media is implicated in distorting communication, manipulating public sentiment, and mobilizing discontented individuals (Walsh, 2020).

Current moral panics surrounding gender debates in Brazil trace back to 2013, when nationwide protests erupted over corruption, high taxes, and poor public services. According to Miskolci (2021), the catalyst for this moral panic was intricately interwoven with the escalating opposition to the government of Dilma Rousseff and the widespread corruption scandals involving the Workers' Party (p. 22). Amid these tumultuous times, a common enemy emerged, labeled "gender ideology," blending discussions on sexual and reproductive rights, gender studies, the leftist woman president, and corruption. Thus, "gender ideology" became a discursive field for transnational conservative action aimed at impeding human rights advances related to sexual and reproductive rights, while simplistically associating left-wing ideologies with feminism (Miskolci & Campana, 2017). This conservative concept soon became entangled with debates over education, family values, and societal norms, particularly on social media. Hashtags, memes, and viral content became weapons in the hands of those advocating for or against perceived threats posed by changing gender narratives (Falcão, 2017).

During Bolsonaro's far-right government (2019–2022), when the Bradesco campaign aired, gender was coded as a political agenda aimed at dismantling the traditional family (Butler, 2024, p. 10). Butler (2024) examines global and Brazilian conservative tactics that frame gender as potentially destructive, positioning it as a threat to normative heterosexuality, linking it to sexual deviance, and opposing its academic role in analyzing social and symbolic inequalities.

Amid escalating concerns related to gender, sexuality, and feminism, Bradesco endeavors to address gender disparities through a technological modification in BIA's design. This effort was made despite potential contradictions between the bank's commercial interests and the social cause underpinning the campaign, as well as the fact that the bank, in its marketing strategies, had initially chosen to feminize BIA and program her with subordinate scripts.

The literature on feminist STS and moral panics converges in analyzing how technological dynamics structure and amplify anxieties surrounding debates on gender and technology. STS literature foregrounds discussions on how technology is configured by power relationships that may reinforce inequalities, while in parallel, moral panics theories investigate how social changes are explored by political groups to reinforce hegemonic discourse. Thus, this theoretical intersection illuminates the mechanisms by which digital platforms and technology design become arenas of political mobilization, particularly on issues of national interest, such as moral panics on gender and sexuality.

Methods

To better understand audience perceptions of BIA's responses, we conducted a qualitative analysis of comments posted directly on the campaign's video on YouTube. We focused on this platform because of its direct relevance to the video's content, even though related commentary and BIA's responses also appeared across various social media platforms. YouTube comments have been extensively used by researchers to explore broader social discourses and audience deliberation (Marques, 2011; Quaresma, 2018). They offer a rich data source for understanding public sentiment on various topics, including government policies and health information dissemination (Zheng, Xue, Sun, & Zhu, 2021). Moreover, YouTube comment sections can be considered a microcosm of the public sphere, where diverse voices

converge to express opinions, share information, and sometimes propagate misinformation (Ha, Graham, & Gray, 2022; Inwood & Zappavigna, 2021, 2023).

However, scholars have argued that YouTube epitomizes an “automated public sphere” (Miskolci, 2021; Pasquale, 2017), where the platform’s algorithms significantly shape what content gains relevance. This perspective underscores the profound impact of algorithmic governance on democratic discourse and public engagement. Metrics such as views, likes, and shares, which determine content relevance, often promote the dissemination of material irrespective of its accuracy, integrity, or quality (Pasquale, 2017, p. 18). Comments are ranked and filtered according to algorithmic criteria, which affects their visibility and the range of perspectives presented. Analyzing this section provides valuable data on how automated processes shape public discourse and the interaction between algorithmic curation and user-generated content.

Data Collection and Sampling

We collected our data on June 10, 2021, and at the time of our data collection, the advertising campaign video had garnered 168 million views, 17,508 comments, and over 44,000 dislikes on YouTube. This significant level of engagement suggests a broad reach for the advertising campaign across a diverse audience. The video was also broadcast during prime-time television on Brazil’s most-watched channels, reaching a national audience beyond YouTube’s metrics despite the platform’s widespread use in the country (Baisi, 2023).

To systematically retrieve comments, we employed YouTube Data Tools, exporting all posted comments into an Excel file. The dataset included the full comment, number of “likes,” number of responses, publication date, author’s name, link to the author’s profile, and the author’s channel ID. While commenters made their usernames publicly visible on YouTube, this did not imply consent for exposure beyond the platform, the video’s content, or the original posting timeframe. Although we identified no potential harm in quoting these comments, we anonymized identifying information, as consent was not obtained to share it with this study’s audience. Comments are cited by collection date to reduce re-identification risk.

We employed an inductive coding approach informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009; Leite, 2020, 2023) to study emerging themes. Each researcher independently coded a sample of 200 comments, employing open coding techniques to identify emergent themes. Our initial sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2009) were drawn from our literature review and included key constructs such as communicative robots and moral panics. The initial codes were not predefined, but rather emerged from the data, guided by sensitizing concepts. During the coding process, both researchers wrote analytic memos to document emerging insights, recurring patterns, and theoretical reflections. After coding the first 200 comments, both researchers compared their initial codes to identify overlaps, divergences, and emerging conceptual categories. After iteratively comparing our provisional findings, we refined our initial codes and conducted focused coding on an additional 300 comments, bringing the total to 500. We met repeatedly to explore and refine the codes. We resolved minor disagreements through discussion and comparison of our individual coding. Through successive rounds of focused coding (Charmaz, 2009), we identified patterns of

relationships among them. We then applied theoretical coding to examine how these categories interacted and contributed to a broader conceptual understanding of audience reception, resulting in four dominant themes discussed in the following sections.

Themes

We identified four key themes, each representing perspectives from audience comments. We examined the nuances discussed by commentators and situated them within Brazil's broader socio-political landscape, characterized by growing political polarization and the spread of moralizing narratives about gender and sexuality. The intense backlash against BIA's dialogues highlights not only the deeply ingrained biases and misogynistic attitudes present in HMC but also audience concerns about the co-optation of social activism for marketing purposes.

Anti-Lacração Wars

Many commenters criticized BIA's new stance against harassment as unnecessary and an overreaction, often using the term "lacração" to express their discontent: I love Siri, she doesn't say mimimi!² By the way, I'm closing my account at this bank! Go woke,³ go broke! (personal communication, June 10, 2021). Originating from Brazilian slang within the queer community, "lacração" is used to connote exceptional performance, surpassing competitors or opponents and leaving them speechless (Mozdzinski, 2021). Commentators use terms associated with "lacração" pejoratively, undermining any criticism or debate the ad may elicit. Those labeled as "lacradores," who are virtue-signaling to the audience, are framed as irrational and problematic, accused of supporting concerns deemed non-priority in society. There is a division between "us" (commenters) and "them" ("lacradores"). This is a characteristic of moral panics, in which individuals or groups are defined as threats to the values and interests of society (Cohen, 2011; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 34). Despite its contradictions, BIA embodies those perceived as societal threats and is associated with "lacração" and "gender ideology."

² "Mimimi" is a Portuguese onomatopoeia that represents whining.

³ We rendered the Brazilian expression "quem lacra não lucra" as the English idiom "go woke, go broke." "Woke" is frequently employed in English-speaking environments, whereas "lacração" is specific to Brazilian Portuguese slang. Initially rooted in Black grassroots activism, "woke" on current digital culture symbolizes awareness of social injustices, especially racial and gender issues, and a dedication to addressing them (Sobande, Kanai, & Zeng, 2022). This includes recent applications of "wokeness" in marketing and advertising (Sobande, 2019). Right-wing criticism of "wokeness" is heated by the "so-called 'culture wars' of online political culture" (Sobande, 2019, p. 1579) and by a variety of political actors or moral entrepreneurs instigating moral panics, as examined by Cammaerts (2022) in an analysis of the "anti-woke culture war" discourse in the UK. While both "wokeness" and "lacração" imply some degree of social consciousness and activism, "lacração" often emphasizes individual expression and empowerment through audacity and the rejection of conventions. In contrast, "wokeness" encompasses a broader spectrum, including awareness of systemic problems and dedication to social justice advocacy.

It was notable how many of the commenters used language similar to what has been identified in other studies as misogynistic anti-feminist rhetoric in digital media, especially in the Brazilian scenario (Vilaça & d'Andréa, 2021). These comments discuss how BIA's responses can be associated with performative activism, where individuals may engage in activism more to show off their stance rather than make a substantial impact: "Lacrar: Yes. Worrying about making an artificial intelligence that does its job well: No" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). Improvements addressing gender bias in VA development are dismissed as non-essential. These comments downplay Bradesco's anti-harassment campaign, arguing it should not be a priority. This contradicts the campaign's purpose of linking BIA's harassment to harassment against women.

However, the comments are also keen to observe the novelty of addressing anti-harassment through technology mediation. Ironic comments discuss how "the definitions of *lacrção* and militancy have been updated" (personal communication, June 10, 2021), as if the ad points to a new historical moment in which technology will be designed to address "illegitimate concerns." BIA's updated responses are framed as evidence that social justice concerns and political correctness are creating an undesirable future, as reflected in claims that "even robots now are *lacradores*" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). For Miskolci (2021), the term "political correctness" frequently emerges in response to politics of difference, assuming opposing meanings in contemporary Brazil. By analyzing political debates on social media (2017–2019), the author notes that, for some, these debates symbolize respect and equity for historically marginalized groups, while for others, they represent the imposition of minority views, privilege, or censorship—meanings that dominate the examined comments.

Brazilian ads depicting transgender individuals or same-sex couples often face intense online backlash and offline boycotts (Mozdzinski, 2020; Mozdzinski & Albuquerque, 2020). Mozdzinski (2021) explores "outvertising," a modern advertising trend featuring greater LGBT+ representation and pro-diversity messaging. While this approach counters mechanisms of subrepresentation, it also becomes a target for transphobic and homophobic speech on social media. Conservative audiences frequently use the hashtag *#quemlacrãolucra* (akin to *#gowekegobroke*) to critique marketing perceived as prioritizing progressive gender and sexuality trends over practical or profitable goals (Iribure & Jardim, 2021). Thus, the backlash against Bradesco's campaign is not an isolated incident in Brazil.

Banking Hypocrisy and Harassment Relativization

The backlash in the comments reveals a prevailing perception of hypocrisy: While BIA's new responses are framed as a stance against harassment, the commenters argue that the bank's own practices—such as incessant loan calls, abusive interest rates, and precarious labor conditions—are harassment. Commenters portray Bradesco's intervention as performative activism, dismissing the possibility that attacks against BIA might constitute a form of gender-based harassment.

Commenters voice frustration over constant calls and loan offers: "Harassment? Harassment is when banks, including Bradesco, keep calling and harassing my recently retired grandfather and thousands of other citizens" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). Critiques extend beyond the banking institution to encompass broader societal issues, particularly related to the COVID-19 pandemic: "While people are

dying at this very moment, Bradesco is talking about robot harassment" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). Comments downplay the significance of offenses against VAs, emphasizing "more pressing issues," such as the high death toll and citizens' financial struggles.

Critical comments, some emphasizing the experiences of women employees, underscore gender inequalities within the banking industry: "Isn't it great that automated services lead to many people losing their jobs? I hope the women in telemarketing celebrate this achievement at home and unemployed" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). Rather than merely exposing labor tensions, these criticisms tap into broader moral panics. By framing the campaign as hypocritical and emphasizing its focus on the harassment of a machine while allegedly ignoring more pressing social issues, commenters effectively downplay the legitimacy of technology-mediated harassment. This response not only devalues instances of technology-mediated hostility but also reinforces entrenched expectations of subservience.

This skepticism casts the VA's "self-defense" as an illegitimate concern, relativizing harassment by juxtaposing it with perceived labor and financial injustices. Such critiques simultaneously challenge corporate accountability and diminish the recognition of technology-mediated hostility as part of a broader continuum of gendered violence. In this sense, the idea that hostility toward VAs like BIA reflects a broader culture that normalizes mistreating women in service roles is absent from the discussion. While these critiques highlight urgent issues, such as gender inequality among human employees, they risk obscuring the broader significance of technology-mediated harassment, reinforcing the tendency to dismiss digital spaces as inconsequential arenas for gendered violence.

Humanized Robots, Dehumanized People

In the advertisement, BIA responds to a request for a "picture of now"—a phrase commonly used on dating apps to solicit a sexy photo (Machado, 2023, p. 4)—by stating, "Even though I speak like a human, I am an AI" (Bradesco, 2021, 00:00:20). In response, commenters repeatedly emphasized BIA's artificiality, framing it as a hierarchical distinction. By emphasizing BIA as merely AI, commenters dismiss the symbolic weight of harassment, claiming their right to harass rests on their humanness in contrast to BIA's non-human status.

To justify their stance, many commenters repeatedly assert that BIA is a robot, not a real woman, presenting this as self-evident proof that any backlash against harassment is unwarranted. Despite her human-like speech, as one comment suggests: "Firstly: she is a robot. Secondly: she is a robot . . . Thirdly: SHE IS A ROBOT!" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). BIA's status as a robot is used to justify provocative remarks. Commenters invoke her technological characteristics to justify their harassment: "Men come at her because obviously, they are talking to an AI" (personal communication, June 10, 2021).

Some comments suggest a feeling of dehumanization among users who perceive technology as increasingly humanized and believe that VAs are granted more rights than they are. One of the most liked comments exemplifies this sentiment: "No friend, if you messed with a robot, then you went too far, let's fight for BIA's human rights" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). Users publicly assert this claim,

reflecting underlying power dynamics and contested boundaries of humanness. BIA is perceived not only as artificial but also as inherently subordinate, positioned for submission and possession. In its artificiality and inferiority, it is deemed incapable of experiencing harassment or violence, which is understood as exclusively human experiences.

This process becomes particularly evident through a recurring expression: robophobia. Using irony, commenters argue that the assistant is being harassed solely for being a robot. Laden with sarcasm, this expression reaffirms the recognition of the assistant as an autonomous device while questioning whether it can have feelings or any characteristics associated with humanity. The choice of the term "robophobia" is not trivial, especially in the context of Brazil's moral battles. It reveals not only an acknowledgment that BIA is non-human, but also alludes to physical and symbolic violence suffered by real bodies, such as transphobia and homophobia, from which the term is rhetorically derived. Ultimately, they allude to violence(s) against bodies deemed unworthy of protection in a cis-heteronormative context.

The reference to the physical and symbolic violence experienced by LGBT+ folks, present in the expression "robophobia," connects to media debates on the criminalization of homophobia and the fight for equal rights for the LGBT+ population in Brazil. Miskolci (2021) highlights that the National Congress has repeatedly delayed addressing legal equality demands from the LGBT+ community, leading the Supreme Federal Court to take the lead in measures such as recognizing same-sex unions and criminalizing homophobia. In this context, the use of the term "robophobia" can be interpreted as a symptom of the persistence of prejudice and the ongoing difficulty in recognizing the dignity and rights of marginalized groups. Alternatively, it may also serve as a form of irony or critique, reflecting the perception that concerns over identity issues, often labeled as "identitarian," are excessive or overly sensitive.

By extension, such comments criticize not only equating the virtual assistant with human conditions but also reject progressive discourses highlighting social and symbolic asymmetries related to gender and sexuality. For one commenter, "We are all human beings, not just gender, race, color, or sexuality" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). By dismissing oppressive inequalities across different identity markers, such comments reinforce longstanding invisibilizing narratives that discredit racism and sexism. These comments reflect hegemonic denials of inequalities across identities that permeate Brazilian collective imaginaries. The myth of Brazil as a "racial democracy" or a post-racial society free from racism is widely propagated on social media through jokes and hate speech (de Paula Trindade, 2018).

The claim for humanity, therefore, concerns not only the place occupied by BIA in a hierarchy of who or what is or is not human, but also the definition of humanity itself amid debates on social markers of difference such as gender, race, and sexuality. A commenter describes BIA as "literally a digital slave," an "Artificial Intelligence [made] to serve us and be submissive" (personal communication, June 10, 2021). Thus, who is being dehumanized when BIA talks back, and who becomes more human? The irony in these statements highlights a neglect of broader discussions about violence and hate speech, including homophobia and misogyny, as well as comparisons that reflect the colonial and slaveholding foundations of Brazilian society.

By questioning whether robots are entitled to rights, the commenters also challenge often discussed ideas in AI ethics, particularly the notion that machines should have legal and moral protections. When some complain that “even AI has more rights than me” (personal communication, June 10, 2021), their comments reflect a contradiction: On one hand, they echo exclusionary arguments historically used to deny marginalized groups access to rights; on the other, they express frustration that a corporation is prioritizing the protection of a virtual assistant while they themselves lack similar safeguards. Birhane, Dijk, and Pasquale (2024) critique common arguments for robot rights, emphasizing that portraying VAs as autonomous, such as in BIA’s ad, obscures the corporate responsibilities behind these technologies. Companies create, own, and maintain virtual assistants while profiting from a precarious workforce, yet these sociotechnical dynamics are often hidden beneath narratives of “robots themselves, rather than their effects on persons” (Birhane et al., 2024, p. 3).

Thus, the audience ambivalently taps into rhetoric that has been used to dehumanize minoritized groups, such as reframing legit legal advances for LGBTQIA+ minorities, while reflecting on the othering and dehumanization that they themselves feel by having AI at the forefront of the priorities instead of workers subject to harassment within such an influential institution.

Feminist Technological Dystopia

A present in which a feminized VA can “talk back” to a client is framed by commentators as an apocalyptic scenario. Drawing on portrayals of AI from science fiction, such as the murderous Skynet from *Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), these dystopian comparisons invoke catastrophism and disaster, a hallmark of moral panics (Cohen, 2011). BIA’s refusal to conform to expected gender roles is perceived not just as defiance but as a sign of technological regression, reinforcing the idea that challenging gender norms in AI is inherently backward. As one commenter prophesizes, “For real, this is how robotic apocalypse begins, (the AI) begins to respond to others, afterwards it assaults and then it kills, we are fucked, both financially and in life” (personal communication, June 10, 2021). These commenters frame BIA’s ability to respond to harassment as merely the first step in an inevitable doomsday scenario.

Many comments follow a similar memetic structure: They begin with a historical date (such as the 1990s) and an optimistic prediction about future technological advancements, like robots or flying cars. The second phrase then shifts to the present year or a future date, contrasting these grand expectations with BIA’s responses, for instance, “Robots in 2021: Hey folx, I’m here to report an oppression I experienced” (personal communication, June 10, 2021). This juxtaposition implies that technological progress should be defined by futuristic inventions rather than advancements in social justice, framing the focus on anti-harassment as a deviation from the “real” future people once envisioned. This nostalgia for an imagined future parallels the discourse on gender ideology in Brazil, where some invoke an idealized past of rigid gender roles and less feminist and queer visibility (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). As Atanasoski and Vora (2019) argue, technological futurism often relies on ahistorical narratives that position digital technology advancement as unprecedented while obscuring “the uneven racial and gendered relations of labor, power and social relations that underlie the contemporary conditions of capitalist production” (Atanasoski & Vora, 2019, p. 4). This project of leading the world back to a time before “gender” promises a return to an imagined patriarchal order that may never have existed

but takes the place of “history” or “nature,” as Butler (2024) explains (p. 13). Thus, when commenters lament that instead of achieving a future with autonomous AI or flying cars, they are met with technology designed to address social justice issues, they are expressing nostalgia for an imagined future while projecting a past that never existed.

Their comparisons are deeply gendered, as the prominent anthropomorphized AIs mentioned in science fiction are dangerous, rebellious, and masculine. Their criticism highlights how AI characterization has historically reinforced traditional gender roles: while present-day virtual assistants in the service industry are designed to be passive and subservient, futuristic AI models are often depicted as defiant. However, BIA’s defiance is deemed undesirable precisely because of her feminized persona.

Discussion: Symbolic and Material Violence

Studying comments on BIA’s New Responses highlights the need for research on public(s) perceptions of AI and communicative robots to consider broader media ecologies and political contexts. The moral panics identified in the comments related to misogynistic conceptions and far-right discursive strategies demonstrate how harassment is a contested category. The large number of adverse reactions shows that even when mediated through the figure of an AI, there is discomfort with any stance that challenges sexism and gender violence. The commenters’ constant irony emerges as expressions of moral opposition to progressive discussions on gender and sexuality.

Commenters relativize harassment, arguing that the feminized VA is exempt from suffering violence, while the bank is seen as the direct agent of violence. In addition, they dilute the concept of harassment, reducing it to merely an offense or insult. Cultural violence, after all, is persistent and legitimizes direct or structural violence because culture teaches and even dulls our minds to make us see exploitation and/or repression as something normal and natural (Galtung, 1990).

Bradesco’s BIA automates secretarial tasks typically performed by lower-class, Black Brazilian women in outsourced support teams (SBT News, 2024). BIA’s responses were initially overly sympathetic and pretended to ignore the insults sent by users, similar to how support teams are trained to deal with their clients. Lemos reports how “in the lives of real telemarketing attendants, responding to harassment is not an option” (Lemos, 2021, para. 2). After interviewing women from various companies, most said they could not report or end calls when harassed by clients. Commenters dismissed the harassment examples as “light” and “fun,” but the experiences shared by the interviewed women were far more severe. In the video, provocative comments like “BIA, you are an idiot” (Bradesco, 2021, 00:00:10) and “BIA, I want a picture of you now” (Bradesco, 2021, 00:00:18) were featured. The women interviewed by Lemos (2021) shared worse interactions: Daiane frequently encountered explicit sexual harassment, while another worker reported a man who called and began moaning, asking her to repeat her name. In addition to blatant sexism and harassment, a worker from Brazil’s Northeast shared how she faced xenophobia because of her accent. Unlike the automated chatbot, these workers cannot push back. Many reported having to endure such harassment to meet company goals and avoid losing their jobs. Thus, Santos and Polivanov (2021) criticize the campaign as a “performative-discursive game” (p. 20), arguing that it lacked more radical actions to address harassment directed at Bradesco’s support teams. Santos and Polivanov (2021) also note that it

failed to present alternative “constructions of gender that go beyond binaries and the linking of the female figure to the care of and servitude to others” (p. 20).

In this context, the comments highlight the possible contradictions between social justice principles and their uses and appropriations within marketing communications. Advertising about social issues can progress from merely sensitizing audiences to actively engaging consumers, ultimately catalyzing a profound shift in consumer consciousness (Santaella, Perez, & Pompeu, 2021). However, while this advertisement may aim to raise awareness of gender-based violence, it is vital to recognize that BIA was initially designed as a feminine servant, reinforcing gender inequalities. Moreover, the financial sector continues to grapple with deep-rooted gender disparities, highlighting the persistent challenges that women face in this field. These limitations, some of them suggested by the commenters, raise contradictions between the content of the ad and the financial brands’ actual practices.

BIA’s role in Bradesco’s advertising illustrates how VAs function in both customer service and corporate branding, raising ethical questions about the marketing of social causes. This issue is extensively analyzed by Januário (2021), Mozdzenski (2021), and Santaella et al. (2021), who examine how brands and companies incorporate discourses on gender diversity, racial equality, and women’s empowerment into their advertising strategies. However, their goal of social transformation often clashes with commercial interests, casting doubt on the authenticity of their commitment: “How many of the problems and hardships referenced by the causes supposedly defended by brands in their advertising campaigns are actually created by the very social and industrial system they are part of?” (Santaella et al., 2021, p. 14).

Nevertheless, while there is a risk of commodifying and oversimplifying debates, advertising can also expand discussions, challenge social norms, and potentially sensitize, mobilize, and enlighten consumers (Santaella et al., 2021). For such efforts to be meaningful, however, they must transcend branding and translate into structural corporate change, including commitments to pay equity, anti-harassment policies, and inclusive organizational practices (Januário, 2021).

Building on these reflections, we can identify how the four themes underscore the broader cultural anxieties that surface when feminized VAs resist established gender norms. The intensely negative reactions to BIA’s new responses illustrate how entrenched discourses of misogyny and moral panics reemerge whenever technological practices challenge existing power structures. In other words, once a feminized AI “talks back,” it no longer aligns with long-standing expectations of docility, sparking resistance and attempts to dismiss concerns about gender violence as trivial.

Moreover, the discussion reveals significant contradictions in corporate activism. Although the advertisement highlights the pervasiveness of harassment (even when mediated by AI), Bradesco’s broader structural practices, including the design of BIA as a “feminine” helper, remain largely unquestioned, perpetuating inequalities for women workers across the sector. In parallel, many comments invoke “anti-lacração” or “anti-woke” rhetoric to delegitimize a focus on harassment, suggesting that such efforts detract from more “urgent” matters. By reframing the ad’s stance against misogyny as hyperbole or hypocrisy,

critics effectively erode the possibility of acknowledging how sexism operates through cultural, symbolic, and technological domains.

Ultimately, these reactions testify that challenging symbolic violence in human-computer communication must extend beyond a single campaign or design tweak. Although scripting a VA to refute offensive language has symbolic value, it fails to alter the underlying structures that sustain gendered servitude in both analog and digital contexts. Addressing harassment in AI interfaces thus requires intersectional strategies within corporate governance, software design, and labor policies, particularly given the persistent precarity affecting women in call centers and technology-mediated customer service. Hence, while the campaign sheds light on an important problem, it also illustrates the complexities of marrying social justice messaging with commercial imperatives. Without significant institutional commitments to equity and anti-harassment practices, technological “solutions” can easily devolve into mere branding efforts, stoking backlash instead of substantive change.

These contradictions become clearer when we realize how VAs, understood as communicative robots (Hepp, 2020), blur the lines between “human” and “machine” interaction. Because they appear to respond in a personalized, almost “human” way (quasi-communication), users often feel justified in directing gendered hostility toward them, yet quickly dismiss this hostility as inconsequential by labeling the VA “just a robot” (personal communication, June 10, 2021). This apparent paradox not only intensifies aggression, since the AI’s perceived femininity sparks misogynistic backlash, but also obscures its real-world significance, as offenders can claim no actual harm was done. In short, quasi-communication amplifies hostility, allowing a feminized AI to function as a convenient target for gender biases, especially in a moral panic context. Such interactions reaffirm pre-existing forms of symbolic and material violence against women, even as they unfold in these seemingly new technological environments.

Conclusion

Through this study, we demonstrated how the antagonistic rhetoric targeted at BIA revealed persistent anxieties about shifting gender norms, reinforcing the notion that addressing AI-based harassment is as much a cultural and political challenge as it is simply a matter of technology design choices. When BIA’s materiality changed, expressed through voice and text in the case of AI assistants, the expectations surrounding her interactions also shifted. Silently enduring violence is a technological design expectation. However, when BIA talks back, the previously invisible entanglements behind her design come to the surface: Her voice is designed by people with values and politics. The AI assistant is not merely an artifact controlled at the user’s will; rather, the decision making behind its interactions lies with institutions beyond the screen. Commenters frustrated by BIA’s reactions are confronted with the often-masked reality that their interactions with such institutions and systems are shaped by decisions beyond their preferences, revealing their own difficulties in “talking back” to corporations. Thus, commenters attempt to negotiate their views on design decisions and confront financial institutions’ historical mistreatment of workers through rhetorical expression on social media. Some ironic commentary functions as sophisticated discursive provocations, highlighting the complexity of addressing sociotechnical systems, calling for institutional recognition, and casting doubt on advertising’s promises of societal change, particularly the ambiguity between the commodification of feminist causes and the

transformative potential of awareness campaigns against harassment. Rather than enacting meaningful change, this so-called “feminist” voice risks becoming yet another tool of corporate exploitation and invisibilization of workers, cloaked in the rhetoric of social justice, yet ultimately reinforcing persistent ecosystems of transnational inequality rooted in historical patterns of slavery, precarity, and harassment. This is especially evident in contexts where service workers (primarily Black women) routinely endure harassment in addition to precarious working conditions.

Black feminist perspectives (Gonzalez, 2020) prompt us to consider how efforts to address misogyny and harassment should center on addressing the longstanding socioeconomic oppressions faced by minoritized workers. For researchers and designers, these perspectives raise questions about how to approach human-computer interaction as relationships mediated by and as sites of social struggles. How would a feminist technological intervention(s) in a VA centering on the lived struggles of workers in the service chain look, particularly by highlighting their immediate needs? How can we design conditions, rather than systems, that enable workers to talk back, refuse, be visible, and create feminist futures, radically improving working conditions in ways that resist historical harms specific to their territory? Lenses that focus on power inequalities mediated by technology and carefully consider the roles of institutions and media portrayals in facilitating violence can inspire feminist-minded HMC.

As for the limitations of our study, our study’s focus on top-liked comments may have overemphasized bold responses. Future research could expand by examining cross-platform discourse, comparing audience reactions to differently gendered AIs, or exploring how user attitudes change with corporate policies on harassment. Studying design interventions such as non-binary or “de-gendered” assistants, could illuminate pathways that challenge stereotypes. Finally, interdisciplinary collaborations among developers, advertisers, and social scientists may foster holistic solutions for resisting misogyny and structural inequity in AI communication systems.

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