

# Alexa, Siri, Cortana: The problem with all-female digital assistants

Men and women may prefer female voices, but it's about time we had more male options

Joanna Stern | WSJ February 24, 2017 Last Updated at 14:10 IST



Over on Greek Row is the Delta Phi AI sorority. They don't sip boxed wine or throw carwash fundraisers; instead they learn responses to every single question humankind throws at them, from weather reports to a calculation of pi to the 65th digit.

Notable members include Siri, Cortana, Google Assistant and the newly elected chapter

president, Alexa. They have tried to arrange keggers with the Ro-bro fraternity, but it only had one member: IBM's Watson. Sad.

You get the point: The virtual assistants popping up in our lives sound overwhelmingly **female**. "I'm **female** in character," Amazon's Alexa responds if you ask her if she is a woman. In their own clever ways Google, Apple and Microsoft's voice assistants will tell you they're genderless...in unmistakably womanlike voices.

As femme bot after femme bot has invaded our phones, speakers, cars, TVs—even our refrigerators—I've been left wondering: Where the man bots at? And why do these hunks of plastic and electronics need to be assigned a gender at all? My Amazon Echo doesn't have any reproductive organs.

It's easy to assume sexism, given the dominance of men in the tech industry and the fact that, historically, women more often filled secretarial jobs. According to academic studies and market research, though, it's more about our natural preferences—how both men and women best warm up to robots.

That may not be much better: We're carrying primitive norms and human hang-ups into our technical future, and the companies who have given birth to our digital helpers aren't doing enough to counteract that.

### **Why do robots need a gender?**

"It's Pat," one of the best (and worst) "Saturday Night Live" sketches of the early '90s, featured an androgynous character whose gender is never revealed. Things always got awkward. Apparently, it's the same for "Pat" bots. Every robotics expert and tech executive I spoke to said that humans are social beings who relate better to things that resemble what they know, including, yes, girls and boys. (I'm aware that some people don't identify as either.)

It's not that there aren't—or can't be—"Pat" bots, but even when designers don't specify the gender, users tend to. Brian Scassellati, a professor at the Yale Social Robotics Lab, says that in studies where he and his team were meticulous about introducing a particular humanoid robot as "it," invariably people referred to it as "he" or "she."

The biggest giveaway? The computer-synthesized voice. Take Google. The company was so careful not to give its AI a gender that it named it "Assistant," yet it now has a distinctively feminine voice—one you, for the moment, cannot change. "We are thinking

about how to expand beyond a [female](#) voice,” a Google spokeswoman said.

Likely that means adding a dude. “Genderless voice is hard,” says Robert Weideman, an executive vice president at Nuance Communications Inc. As such, Nuance—which provides the voices for speech interfaces and voice assistants found in cars, TVs, smartphones and more—doesn’t have a stock gender-neutral voice. It did create a childlike, less-gendered voice for SoftBank’s Pepper (though Pepper is identified as male).

### **Why [female](#) then?**

So if we can’t have genderless helpers, why did we end up with so many more gal bots than guy bots? The answer is pretty simple: Both women and men find the [female](#) voice more welcoming and warm.

In 2008, Karl MacDorman, a professor at Indiana University who specializes in human-computer interaction, set up an experiment with some fellow researchers. When they had men and women listen to [male](#) and [female](#) synthesized voices, both groups said the [female](#) voices were “warmer.” The most interesting part? In further tests of less voluntary responses, women showed a stronger implicit preference for the [female](#) voice. (Men showed no significant implicit preference for either gender.)

Amazon and Microsoft found the same preference for the [female](#) voice in their market research. “For our objectives—building a helpful, supportive, trustworthy assistant—a [female](#) voice was the stronger choice,” says a Microsoft spokeswoman. Amazon says it tested several voices with customers and internal groups and found that Alexa’s [female](#) voice was preferred.

Siri may default to a [female](#) voice in the U.S. but Apple provides both [male](#) and [female](#) voice options for iPhone and iPad users to choose from. In fact, on iPhones where the language is Arabic, French, Dutch or British English, Siri defaults to a [male](#) voice. Apple as well as Nuance stressed that there are cultural differences when it comes to the gender preferences of personal assistants. IBM auditioned 25 [male](#) and [female](#) voice actors for its Watson AI and went with a man as the basis for its “pleasant” but intentionally nonhuman persona.

### **So what’s the problem?**

But here is the most worrisome thing I discovered: In other bots, ones that instruct rather than take orders, [male](#) voices may be preferred for certain subject areas.

Nearly 20 years ago, the late Clifford Nass and fellow researchers at Stanford University found that a [male](#) computerized voice was perceived to be a better teacher of computers, while a [female](#) computerized voice was preferred for guidance on love and relationships.

Prof. MacDorman, who is continuing this type of research, says device designers face “an ethical quandary here. Maybe they shouldn’t be reinforcing the stereotypes but challenging them or being neutral on them.”

Not only is there a fear of perpetuating stereotypes, but the potential subconscious influence is apparent. Are we more likely to buy Alexa’s Valentine’s Day gift suggestions if they’re delivered by a [female](#) voice? Will a [male](#) voice convince us to spring for an expensive leaf blower? Knowing its younger [male](#) demographic, Domino’s chose Dom, a [male](#) voice and persona for its in-app pizza-ordering assistant.

Samsung has trademarked the names Kestra and Bixby for, among other things, voice-enabled software. The company declined to comment on future plans but I’d love a Galaxy S8 that gave me a choice of [female](#) or [male](#) helpers.

We humans should have greater say in what our new AI helpers sound like. We should be able to pick a voice when we first set up our phones or other AI-powered devices, and change them whenever we like.

If you’ve got an iPhone, you can be a leader in the movement. I challenge you to go to Settings > Siri, then switch the gender to [male](#) for at least a week. (While you’re at it, why not go full Russell Crowe and pick an Australian accent?)

As we forge our AI-assisted future, let’s break from ancient stereotypes that hold us back. Let there be gender equality—even if, for now, all we want is a weather report.