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DADBOT AND WHAT 'HE' REVEALS ABOUT REDDIT'S EVERYDAY PLATFORM CULTURE

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Introduction

'Wielding the power of the ancient dads I have descended from the heavenly realms to bring puns [and] dad jokes to Reddit!' (*u/dadbot_3000*). This is the description of a bot named *u/dadbot_3000*, one of many from a group of similarly behaved 'DadBots' operating on the Reddit platform. DadBots are programmed to make jokes that usually consist of short, one-line puns and wordplay that are widely associated with the humour of fathers in popular culture. The most common DadBot post uses the 'dad joke' format of "Hi hungry, I'm Dad", a well-worn joke that deliberately mistakes a child's statement of hunger as their name. When a Reddit user begins a post with the word 'I'm', DadBots are programmed to respond 'Hi (insert text above), I'm Dad'. Sometimes, DadBots make other 'dad jokes' that employ questions and wordplay, such as *u/dadbot_3000*'s joke: 'What do you call an alligator in a vest? An investigator. :D', or 'Can February March? No, but April May. :D'.

Our cultural imaginary of bots, or software applications that run automated tasks or activities (Holmes & Lusso, 2018) tends to focus on the potential 'intelligence' of bots (Johnson, 2022), their usefulness to humans (Seering et al, 2018) and their capacity to cause harm by becoming indistinguishable from humans (Sheehan et al., 2020; Gehl & Bakardjieva, 2016). The DadBots and their activities are neither intelligent, useful, or inherently harmful. They do not pretend to be human, but acquire a persona by identifying as a certain type of bot. DadBots are not at risk of developing sentience, and they are not the type of bot that spread misinformation or perform coordinated and harmful attacks. Yet these bots are common, prolific and at times beloved. They operate in the domain of humour, creativity and 'play' (Massanari, 2016) and their stories demonstrate how humans experiment and interact with bots, and how the perception and relevance of them evolve over time to reflect changes in the cultural landscape where they operate.

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The life stories of DadBot

Reddit is an open-source social news and sharing platform where anyone with access and technical proficiency can create a bot, or multiple bots, as user accounts. Reddit features an abundant variety of bots that perform different functions and that are openly discussed across the platform, offering a rich environment to examine how bots are perceived and engaged with.

Bots on Reddit frequently operate in clusters, and often have complex histories and relationships with other bots. *u/dadbot_3000* is a well-known bot, however 'his' fame can largely be attributed to being part of a wider lineage of DadBots. *u/mombot_3000* was created to respond directly to *u/dadbot_3000* and together dad and mom bots engage in a crude parodic performance of gendered parenting stereotypes. The identity of DadBot derives not just from identifying proudly as being a bot, but also as being a simple bot. The bots receive criticism from some Reddit users for being oblivious to context and for not contributing valuable content. On occasions, the bot comments on serious discussion topics, such as the death of a father or discussion of incest, where the comment 'Hi, I'm Dad' is unwelcome. However DadBots also sparks amusement as reflected in responses to the bots, the large Karma points they hold, and defense of the bots in subreddit forums such as *r/botsrights*, *r/BotsScrewingUp* and *r/botwatch*. Despite the simplicity of the bots, or potentially because of it, the DadBot collective hold cultural relevance to the Reddit platform.

Adopting a platform studies approach this paper will examine the role that Reddit's distinctive architecture and culture plays in fostering an environment that appears to welcome user-generated novelty bots such as DadBot. The presence of bots of this type demonstrates the interesting way that everyday online communities engage with semi-autonomous entities in a manner that inspires and 'plays with sociality' (Massanari, 2016 p.117). The DadBots acquire personas and identity not by pretending to be human, but rather from identifying as being a bot. Reddit users respond to the presence of bots like these with amusement and annoyance, demonstrating how bots can be simultaneously applauded and contested, and revealing how Reddit users navigate the broader role and expectations of bots on the platform.

Using data extracted from Pushshift API, combined with a detailed analysis of Reddit threaded discussions, the paper will present a cultural biography of the DadBots of Reddit, documenting their interactions with other bots and human users and their contributions to the platform. A time series of events will highlight patterns across the bot's lifespan, depicting peaks and dips in activities, key controversies and connections, and how attitudes and interactions with the bots evolve over time. The extraction and analysis of activity connected to the DadBots will be used to construct their life stories, documenting how these bots come to life, and their overall contributions to Reddit's platform culture.

Conclusion

The stories of DadBot demonstrate how everyday online communities engage with, adopt, and interact with semi-autonomous technology in a creative, 'playful' (Massanari, 2016) and sometimes humorous manner. By constructing and closely examining the life stories of DadBot this paper will depict how the culture and architecture of a platform can influence how bots are created, used and perceived. The paper will also highlight how online communities actively negotiate and navigate their expectations around the role of bots and how bots should behave.

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