

Ctrl+Alt+Care

A 17-year-old Mumbaikar's new AI-powered chatbot offers an empathetic approach to seeking help against cyberbullying

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IT'S hardly surprising that Artificial Intelligence has made its way into the city's classrooms. Students are turning to ChatGPT as their undemanding homework buddy, and as **mid-day** reported earlier this week, colleges too are gearing to use AI to evaluate students this academic year. Amid this AI tug of war, Fia Inamdar, a 17-year-old Mumbaikar, feels another age-old problem could use an AI relook. Her new project, CyBud, is an empathetic chatbot that acts as a student's confidante and advisor in cases of online and real-life bullying.

"I wanted to create a buddy who listens empathetically and keeps your secrets safe. While most schools have in-house counsellors, there is a certain stigma attached to consulting them. If your peers find out you've paid the counsellor's office a visit, you risk becoming the target of gossip," says Inamdar. "It is crucial for young people to experience empathy early on. We're cheering for Fia as she sets out to make a difference," her mother Parul reiterates. A coding enthusiast fluent in programming languages like C++ and Python, the student has combined her two passions to build the chatbot.

We decided to give the chatbot a test run, posing as a school student who had faced bullying from classmates. The bot responds with an empathetic message, followed by practical



Fia Inamdar (right) works on the AI chatbot.
PICS COURTESY/FIA INAMDAR

steps to take. We were advised to document details and timings of each incident, whether or not we planned to report it to the authorities. The chatbot also helped us with a national helpline to reach out to. "This is what sets the chatbot apart from simply talking to a service like ChatGPT or Gemini. We have carefully trained our model to put empathy above everything else," Inamdar informs us.

Inamdar's insights come from her stints with mental health assistance platforms like Mind Temple and Brush of Hope. In 2022, she co-founded Mind Over Matter, a support group for those grappling with mental health challenges. "We discovered that it wasn't just children, but also senior citizens who were anxious about



Teens can find it hard to open up about social media trolling and bullying. ILLUSTRATION/ISTOCK

speaking up about digital wellbeing," she reveals. A large-scale survey by HelpAge earlier this year revealed that 65 per cent of India's senior citizens remain confused by concepts like OTPs, biometrics, and online authentication.

With digital arrest scams on the rise, as this newspaper has consistently reported over the past year, where senior citizens are emotionally coerced into sharing sensitive details, we decided to test how the chatbot would respond in such a situation. The chatbot instantly recognised we were walking into a scam, and advised us to stop interacting with the individual on the line. A message at the end, lauding us for being cautious, felt like a reassuring pat on the back.

While the chatbot maintains a calm, composed tone during regular interactions, it is also equipped to handle emergencies. With the nature of bullying constantly evolving,

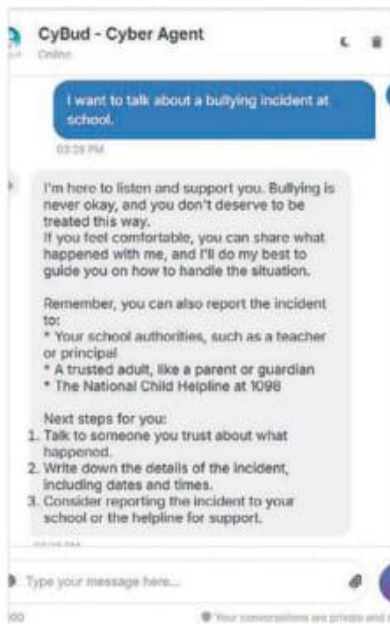
'Deepfakes are a growing threat. They can ruin someone's reputation within minutes, and cause immense mental distress.'

Fia Inamdar

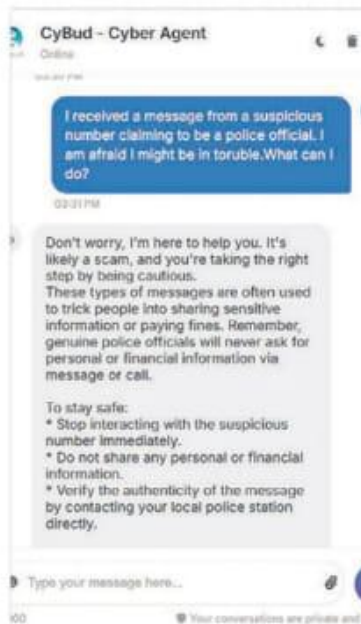
ing, crises can emerge without warning. "Deepfakes are a growing threat. They can ruin someone's reputation within minutes, and cause immense mental distress," she reveals. When we sought "immediate help", the chatbot promptly switched gears and helped us with active helplines.

The chatbot is freely accessible, and guarantees full data confidentiality. The young innovator's project receives our thumbs up, especially in times where we're forced to outsource empathy to 'artificial' intelligence.

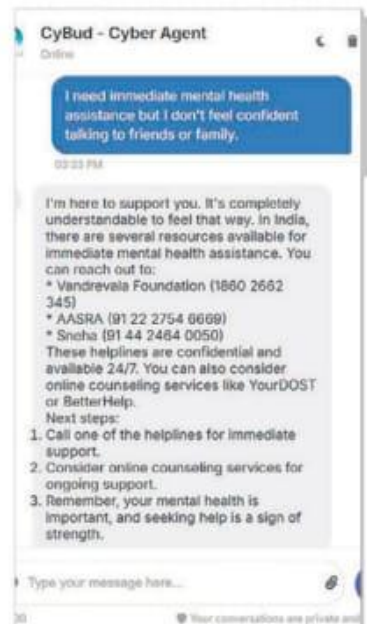
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The chatbot provides a solution to a query about classroom bullying



Senior citizens who are unsure about online scams can consult the chatbot



A distress message during our test run elicits a list of helplines