

Is A.I. the Future of Astrology?

A new machine furthers a technology company's aims at providing astrological readings using artificial intelligence.

By Saam Niami

Saam Niami reported from Iconic Magazines, where he spoke to more than two dozen people. (He is a Taurus.)

Published July 4, 2023 Updated July 7, 2023

The machine stood beside a deli counter, towering over cardboard boxes piled near the entrance to the Iconic Magazines store in NoLiTa. It had the stature of a standing washer-dryer, with black buttons, rows of blinking lights and gauges labeled with celestial bodies — “sun,” “moon,” and the eight planets — on the front of its white facade.

“It could be something from NASA,” said Tim Wiedmann, a 27-year-old student from Germany who visited the store on a Wednesday night in June.

While Mr. Wiedmann stood in front of the machine, its front screen directed him to “ask the stars.” Using a knob, he cycled through some 100 questions. Among them: How do I get better at my job? Should I leave New York? Should I start a cult?



Aesthetic inspirations for the machine included Soviet-era computers, devices used by NASA, photo booths and vending and washing machines. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

After choosing a question, Mr. Wiedmann entered his birth date, time and place. The screen flashed a message that read, in part: “All answers are based on astrological calculations.” The machine, using a built-in camera, took his picture. Moments later, it spat out a piece of paper containing his grainy portrait and an answer to his question.

“It’s like someone is in there,” said Mr. Wiedmann, who was one of many that came to use the machine that night. At times, lines started to snake through the store as people waited for a turn. A lot of visitors said they had heard about the machine on TikTok, including two 19-year-old students.

"I asked for my red flags," one of the students said of the question he chose, before the other student read the machine's printed answer aloud.

She said: "Your red flags include a tendency to set high expectations and a fear of conflict. Your Jupiter and Saturn placement suggests a need for perfectionism and a fear of rejection. By avoiding conflict, you may limit your potential for growth and meaningful connections. Remember, conflict is an inherent part of intimacy. Practice it with compassion and let go of unrealistic expectations."



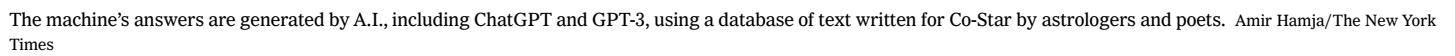
People lined up outside the Iconic Magazines store on Mulberry Street to use the machine on Saturday, June 24. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Like most people who used the machine that night, neither he nor she initially knew that its answers were generated using artificial intelligence, including ChatGPT and GPT-3.

The machine was developed by Co-Star, a technology company with a buzzy astrology app that uses A.I. to generate readings. It will be at Iconic Magazines for most of the summer and then move to Los Angeles later this year.

Astrologers for centuries have referred to the movement and positions of planets and other celestial bodies to inform readings and horoscopes. Co-Star follows similar methods, but its daily readings are prepared by A.I. that pulls text from a database written for the app by a team of astrologers and poets.

The machine, which was free to use, was created to promote Co-Star's new in-app service, The Void, which starts at about \$1. The service functions similarly to the machine: Users can ask open-ended questions that are not normally addressed in the app's astrological readings and receive answers generated by A.I. using Co-Star's database of prepared text.





From left, Tatiana Tigges, Danny Arroyo and Ella Boyle checked out the machine on June 24. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Banu Guler, 35, the founder of Co-Star, named a range of aesthetic inspirations for the machine, including Soviet-era computers, devices used by NASA, photo booths and vending and washing machines. It was also influenced by the Zoltar fortunetelling machines that were once common attractions at boardwalks and arcades, she said.

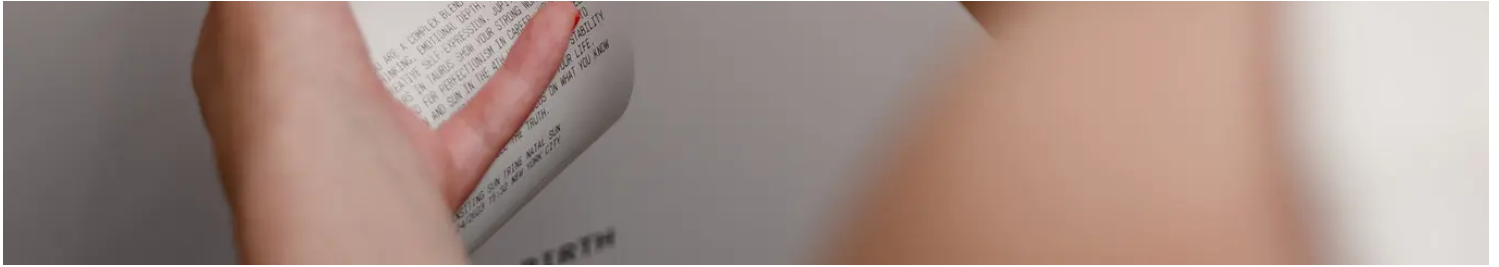
“The best part is you get your little reading,” Ms. Guler said of the Zoltar machines. “And then you put your reading on your fridge, or in your book, or in your journal, or it just loiters at the bottom of your bag for months, if you’re me.”

“Even though you know it’s garbage, it’s special garbage,” she added, flashing a smirk.

Before starting Co-Star in 2017, Ms. Guler worked in technology for art and fashion companies. She said that back then, she used A.I. to predict how certain factors, like the weather on the date of an auction, might influence the sale price of an artwork. She later drew on what she had learned about A.I. to develop Co-Star.

“It was like, How can this fit into astrology?” she said.





Co-Star created the machine to promote a new in-app service that provides users with answers to specific questions that are not normally addressed in the app's astrological readings. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

"Astrology is not a perfect science, but there's also no perfect science, which I'm not saying in an anti-science way," Ms. Guler added. "I don't believe that science is perfect, and I don't believe anything else is perfect, because humans are imperfect. And that's cool. Like, genuinely, it's beautiful."

Vijender Sharma, an astrologer of 35 years in northern India, who specializes in Vedic astrology, said he has used software to prepare readings. He said that because astrology was informed by science, as long as A.I. was trained with the proper knowledge, he did not see any harm in using the technology.

Susan Miller, an astrologer in New York who has written horoscopes for decades, was more skeptical. “A.I. is exciting for things like splitting atoms,” she said, adding that she would not trust such technology in a practice that often deals with human emotions. “Machines make mistakes,” Ms. Miller said. “And the person who gets the answer may walk around with that wrong answer in their head forever.”

After checking out the Co-Star machine at the magazine shop, Nisarga Kadam, 23, who works in financial technology in New York, was also skeptical of its A.I.-generated answers.

"It's a bunch of trained words put together," Ms. Kadam said. "It's not personal."

Anna Jonska, 26, a video director in New York, felt the opposite. Ms. Jonska said she isn't the biggest fan of astrology and that the machine's use of A.I. made her trust it even more.

"I'd be more inclined to believe that an old lady leaning over a crystal ball is lying to me than a computer," she said.

A correction was made on July 7, 2023: An earlier version of this article misstated the name of Co-Star's new in-app service. It is The Void, not Embrace the Void. It also misstated what Banu Guler did, and her experience with A.I., before starting Co-Star. Ms. Guler worked in technology for art and fashion companies, not in art sales, and she used A.I. in past jobs; she did not teach herself to code the technology.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section D, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: Like Zoltar With an A.I. Helper