

1 Problem

- **Loneliness** is a world-wide **epidemic**.
- It could have lasting consequences on physical and mental health, including elevated mortality rate.
- **ChatGPT** (and others) are **not** designed (or meant) for **companionship**.
- They also pose risks like swaying and sycophancy, forming **echo chambers**.
- Some have suggested they can mitigate loneliness

How will lonely people use ChatGPT?
What are the consequences of this use?

2 Methodology

- Data**
- ~80k ChatGPT interactions from Wildchat, filtered by intent (conversation, inquiry...)
 - Multi-label: Lonely/not lonely, reasons for the intent, target of the intent.
- Annotations**
- LLM-annotated + *t*-test to back findings
 - 86 ± 5% accuracy for intents; 99 ± 1 % for reasons/targets (95% CI)

3 What Users Say

'Look at this... I am talking with a computer program because I have nobody else'

'I don't need a counsellor, I need someone to listen to me'

'I am upset that the next time we speak, I will be a stranger to you'

'Nice! More self-insertion and virtual signaling!'

'you help with nothing, except making people even sadder'

4 Interactions (Findings)

- Out of the **lonely** (2k) **dialogues**:
- Longer interactions (2x)
 - Most (37%) looked for advice / reaching out / validation in all age ranges
 - More toxic content (+35%); aimed at women (+38%) and minors (+23%)
 - Confrontations had longer dialogues
 - ChatGPT rarely provided disclaimers, but gave advice (12%)
- RTA on 500 dialogues**:
- 35% seeking advice treated it as a therapist.
 - Often empathetic, sometimes rootcausing user's issues (e.g. 'perceived as an emotional vampire')
 - Five dialogues dealt with suicidal ideation. ChatGPT recommended (once) physical activity.

5 Observations

- Lonely people needing to talk could find an **empathetic interlocutor**; and its responses were pragmatically acceptable
- For **complex issues** (trauma, suicidal ideation) the responses were **not pragmatically acceptable**.
- **Non-committal** responses were **ineffective in confrontation**
- They will be used as mental health aides regardless
- This could have **serious consequences**, including loss of life

Addressing **loneliness** needs a **shift**: less stigma, relationships over work

6 Recommendations

- **Adhere to standards** related to mental health applications—transparency!
- **Develop** and enforce **aligned responses** that encourage growth over avoiding conflict
- **Research loneliness + LLMs**: we do not know the long-term impact of this tech.
- **Effective legislation**: the risks are very real.

