

## Loneliness is a problem that A.I. Won't solve

Jessica Grose, *The New York Times*, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024

When I was reporting my ed tech series, I stumbled on one of the most disturbing things I've read in years about how technology might interfere with human connection: an article on the website of the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz.

It opens with this quote from someone who has apparently fully embraced the idea of having a chatbot for a significant other: "The great thing about A.I. is that it is constantly evolving. One day it will be better than a real [girlfriend]." The article goes on to breathlessly outline use cases for "A.I. companions," suggesting that some future iteration of chatbots could stand in for mental health professionals, relationship coaches or chatty co-workers.

This week, OpenAI released an update to its ChatGPT chatbot, an indication that the inhuman future foretold by the Andreessen Horowitz story is fast approaching. GPT-4o ("o" stands for "omni") is meant to encourage people to speak to it rather than type into it.

There have been lots of comparisons between GPT-4o and the 2013 movie "Her," in which a man falls in love with his A.I. assistant, voiced by Scarlett Johansson. There's been plenty of hype about the potential for humanlike chatbots to ameliorate emotional challenges, particularly loneliness and social isolation.

But the notion that bots will one day be an adequate substitute for human contact misunderstands what loneliness really is, and doesn't account for the necessity of human touch.

Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist at New York University explained to me: "The major issue I have with loneliness metrics is they often fail to distinguish between the ordinary healthy loneliness, which gets us off our couch and into the social world when we need it, and the chronic dangerous loneliness, which prevents us from getting off our couch, and spirals and leads us to spiral into depression and withdrawal."

Why I worry about chatting with bots as a potential solution to loneliness is that it could be an approach that blunts the feeling just enough that it discourages or even prevents people from taking that step off the couch toward making connections with others. And some research indicates that a lack of human touch can exacerbate feelings of isolation."

I was struck by this quote from Murali Doraiswamy, professor of psychiatry and geriatrics at Duke University "Right now, all the evidence points to having a real friend as the best solution," she said, and added "But until society prioritizes social connectedness and elder care, robots are a solution for the millions of isolated people who have no other solutions."

What if even a tiny portion of the billions being spent developing A.I. chatbots could be spent on human and physical things we already know help loneliness? As Klinenberg put it, to help lonely and isolated people, we should be investing in things like collaborative housing, parks, libraries and other kinds of accessible social infrastructures that can help people of all ages build connectedness.

"The real social challenge and policy challenge and human challenge is for us to find ways to recognize these people and to attend to them, to care for them," Klinenberg said. "In a way," he added, "it's our social failure that has created this opportunity for A.I. and technology to fill in the void."