Bonding with Bot: User Feedback of a Chatbot for Social Isolation

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Chatbots may be a way to provide support to address loneliness and social isolation in older adults, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study aimed to understand how individuals perceive a chatbot for social isolation. A total of 7,099 adults and older adults in the US and Canada participated in an open study utilizing a chatbot (Tess) for six months. Qualitative feedback was provided by 766 (10.79%) participants. The following five themes were found: positive outcome (277, 30.8%), users did not address the question (262, 29.2%), bonding with the chatbot (240, 26.7%), negative technical aspects (70, 7.8%), and ambiguous outcome (49, 5.5%). These results show that a chatbot for social isolation and loneliness was perceived positively by most participants that provided feedback. More specifically, users were likely to personify the chatbot (e.g., “Cause I feel like I have a new friend!”) and perceive positive personality features such as being non-judgmental, caring, and open to listen. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human traits to non-humans. One theory around anthropomorphism states that people who crave social interaction are more likely to personify nonhuman agents to satisfy a desire for connection. A minor portion of the users reported discomfort from chatting with a machine. Not all users perceived the chatbot equally, thus future researchers should aim to understand who can benefit most from chatbot interventions.