The AI Doctor Is In: A Survey of Task-Oriented Dialogue Systems for Healthcare Applications

Anonymous ACL submission

Abstract

Task-oriented dialogue systems in healthcare are increasingly common and have been characterized by diverse architectures and objectives. Although they have been surveyed in the medical community from a non-technical perspective, a systematic review from a rigorous computational perspective remains noticeably absent. This has resulted in limited knowledge of important implementation and replicability details, slowing the pace of innovation. To fill this gap, we investigated an initial pool of 4070 papers from well-known computer science, natural language processing, and artificial intelligence venues, identifying 70 papers discussing the system-level implementation of task-oriented dialogue systems for healthcare applications. We comprehensively reviewed these papers, and present our key findings including identified gaps and corresponding recommendations.

1 Introduction

Dialogue systems\(^1\) have a daily presence in many individuals’ lives, acting as virtual assistants (Hoy, 2018), customer service agents (Xu et al., 2017), or even companions (Zhou et al., 2020). While some systems are designed to conduct unstructured conversations in open domains (chatbots), others (task-oriented dialogue systems) help users to complete tasks in a specific domain (Jurafsky and Martin, 2009; Qin et al., 2019). Task-oriented dialogue systems can potentially play an important role in health and medical care (Laranjo et al., 2018), and they have been adopted by growing numbers of patients, caregivers, and clinicians (Kearns et al., 2019). Nonetheless, there remains a translational gap (Newman-Griffis et al., 2021) between cutting-edge, foundational work in dialogue systems and prototypical or deployed dialogue agents in healthcare settings. This limits the proliferation of scientific progress to real-world systems, constraining the potential benefits of fundamental research.

We move towards closing this gap by conducting a comprehensive, scientifically rigorous analysis of task-oriented healthcare dialogue systems. Our underlying objectives are to (a) explore how these systems have been employed to date, and (b) map out their characteristics, shortcomings, and subsequent opportunities for follow-up work. Importantly, we seek to address the limitations of prior systematic reviews by extensively investigating the included systems from a computational perspective. Our primary contributions are as follows. (1) We systematically search through 4070 papers from well-known technical venues and identify 70 papers fitting our inclusion criteria.\(^2\) (2) We analyze these systems based on many factors, including system objective, language, architecture, modality, device type, and evaluation paradigm, among others. (3) We identify common limitations across systems, including an incomplete exploration of architecture, replicability concerns, ethical and privacy issues, and minimal investigation of usability or engagement. We offer practical suggestions for addressing these as an on-ramp for future work.

In the long term, we hope that the gaps and opportunities identified in this survey can stimulate more rapid advancements in the design of task-oriented healthcare dialogue systems. We also hope that the survey provides a useful starting point and synthesis of prior work for NLP researchers and practitioners entering this critical yet surprisingly under-studied application domain.

2 Related Work

Dialogue systems in healthcare have been the focus of several recent surveys conducted by the medical

\(^1\)We follow an inclusive definition of dialogue systems, encompassing any intelligent systems designed to converse with humans via natural language.

\(^2\)A full listing of these papers is provided in the appendix.
and clinical communities (Vaidyam et al., 2019; Laranjo et al., 2018; Kearns et al., 2019). These surveys have investigated the real-world utilization of deployed systems, rather than examining their design and implementation from a technical perspective. In contrast, studies examining these systems through the lens of AI and NLP research and practice have been limited. Zhang et al. (2020) and Chen et al. (2017) presented surveys of recent advances in general-domain task-oriented dialogue systems. Although they provide an excellent holistic portrait of the subfield, they do not delve into aspects of particular interest in healthcare settings (e.g., system objectives doubling as clinical goals), limiting their usefulness for this audience.

Vaidyam et al. (2019), Laranjo et al. (2018), and Kearns et al. (2019) conducted systematic reviews of dialogue systems deployed in mental health (Vaidyam et al., 2019) or general healthcare (Laranjo et al., 2018; Kearns et al., 2019) settings. Vaidyam et al. (2019) examined 10 articles, and Laranjo et al. (2018) and Kearns et al. (2019) examined 17 and 46 articles, respectively. All surveys were written for a medical audience and focused on healthcare issues and impact, covering few articles from AI, NLP, or general computer science venues.

Montenegro et al. (2019) and Tudor Car et al. (2020) recently reviewed 40 and 47 articles, respectively, covering conversational agents in the healthcare domain. These two surveys are the closest to ours, but differ in important ways. First, our focus is on a specific class of conversational agents: task-oriented dialogue systems. The surveys by Montenegro et al. (2019) and Tudor Car et al. (2020) used a wider search breadth and investigated conversations within the overall dialogue system architecture, the dialogue management architecture, the system evaluation methods, and the dataset(s) used when developing and/or evaluating the system.

### 3 Search Criteria and Screening

We designed search criteria in concert with our goal of filling a translational information gap between fundamental dialogue systems research and applied systems in the healthcare domain. To do so, we retrieved articles from well-respected computer science, AI, and NLP databases and screened them for focus on task-oriented dialogue systems designed for healthcare settings. Our target databases were: (1) ACM, (2) IEEE, (3) the ACL Anthology, and (4) the AAAI Digital Library. ACM and IEEE are large databases of papers from prestigious conferences and journals across many CS fields, including but not limited to robotics, human-computer interaction, data mining, and multimedia systems. The ACL Anthology is the premier database of publications within NLP, hosting papers from major conferences and topic-specific venues (e.g., SIGDIAL, organized by the Special Interest Group on Discourse and Dialogue). The AAAI Digital Library hosts papers not only from the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence, but also from other AI conferences, AI Magazine, and the Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research. We applied the following inclusion criteria when identifying papers:

- The main focus must be on the technical design or implementation of a task-oriented dialogue system.
- The system must be designed for healthcare applications.
- The article must not be dedicated to one specific module of the system’s architecture (e.g., the natural language understanding component of a health-related dialogue system).

Although a narrower scope—e.g., developing improved methods for slot-filling—is common when publishing in the dialogue systems community,

| Screening Process | ACM | IEEE | ACL | AAAI | Total |
|-------------------|-----|------|-----|------|-------|
| Initial Search    | 1050| 1400 | 1020| 600  | 4070  |
| Title Screening   | 151 | 273  | 106 | 55   | 585   |
| Abstract Screening| 32  | 45   | 26  | 8    | 110   |
| Final Screening   | 21  | 31   | 16  | 2    | 70    |

Table 1: The number of papers included from each database in each step of the paper screening process.

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3 https://dl.acm.org/  
4 https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/  
5 https://www.aclweb.org/anthology/  
6 https://aaai.org/Library/library/library.php
these papers tend to place more emphasis on technical design irrespective of application context, offering less coverage of the system-level characteristics that are the target of this survey. We followed four steps in our screening process. First (Initial Search), we applied a predefined search query to the databases to populate our initial list of papers. To generate the query, we used the keywords “task-oriented,” “dialogue system,” “conversational agent,” “health,” and “healthcare,” and synonyms and abbreviations of these keywords. We shortlisted papers using these keywords individually as well as in combination with one another.

Next (Title Screening), we performed a preliminary screening through the initial list of papers by reading the titles, keeping those that satisfied the inclusion criteria. Then (Abstract Screening), we went through the list of papers remaining after the title screening and read the abstracts, keeping those that satisfied the inclusion criteria. Lastly (Final Screening), we read the body of the papers remaining after the abstract screening and kept those that satisfied the inclusion criteria.

These funnel filtering processes were conducted by a computer science graduate student (a fluent L2 English speaker) using predefined search and screening guidelines. Questions or uncertainties regarding a paper’s compliance with inclusion criteria were forwarded along to the senior project lead (a computer science professor and fluent L1 English speaker with expertise in NLP) and final consensus was reached via discussion among the two parties. We detail the number of papers remaining after each screening step in Table 1.

In total, 70 papers (21 from ACM, 31 from IEEE, 16 from ACL, and 2 from AAAI1) satisfied the inclusion criteria. We survey papers meeting our inclusion criteria according to a wide range of parameters, and present our findings in the following subsections, grouped into thematic categories: ontology (§4), system architecture (§5), system design (§6), dataset (§7), and system evaluation (§8).

4 Ontology

We map each paper to its domain of research (§4.1), system objective (§4.2), target audience (§4.3), and language (§4.4), and present our findings.

1Papers about task-oriented dialogue systems published at AAAI often focus on one specific component of the system from a technical perspective, rather than proposing a conversational agent as a whole. Therefore, only two papers from the AAAI Digital Library satisfied the inclusion criteria.

Figure 1: Research domains and corresponding subcategories for the included papers. Parentheses indicate the number of papers belonging to the (sub)category.

4.1 Domain of Research

Task-oriented dialogue systems can potentially impact many facets of healthcare in society (Bickmore and Giorgino, 2004). We define a domain of research as the healthcare area in which the system operates. We identify both broad domains and more specific subcategories thereof based on the systems surveyed, outlined in Figure 1. Broad domain categories include mental health, physical health, health information, patient assistance, physician assistance, cognitive or developmental health, and other (comprising subcategories not easily classifiable to one of the broader domains).

Systems in the mental health domain supported individuals with mental or psychological health conditions, and systems in the cognitive or developmental health domain were a close analogue for individuals with conditions impacting memory, executive, or other cognitive function. Systems in the physical health domain were targeted towards individuals with specific physical health concerns, including infectious (e.g., Covid-19), non-infectious (e.g., cancer), and temporary (e.g., pregnancy) conditions. Systems providing health information performed general-purpose actions such as offering advice or suggesting disease diagnoses. Finally, systems performing patient assistance or physician assistance supported specific patient- or physician-focused healthcare tasks. Dialogue systems designed for mental health, physical health, and health information were the most prevalent, covering 51 of the 70 included papers.
4.2 System Objective

Task-oriented dialogue systems define value relative to the goals of a target task. We define the system objective as the healthcare task for which a system is designed. Some system objectives may be closely aligned with a single domain, whereas others may occur in many different domains (e.g., monitoring mental, physical, or cognitive conditions). Thus, although the domain of research and system objective may frequently correlate, there is not by necessity a direct association.

Included systems were categorized as being designed to: diagnose a health condition (e.g., by predicting whether the user suffers from cognitive decline); monitor user states (e.g., by tracking their diets or periodically checking their mood); intervene by addressing users’ health concerns or improving their states (e.g., by teaching children how to map facial expressions to emotions); counsel users without providing any direct intervention (e.g., by listening to users’ concerns and empathizing with them); or assist users by providing information or guidance (e.g., by answering questions from users who are filling out forms). Many systems were also categorized as multi-objective, meaning that they were designed for more than one of those goals.

Table 2 shows the number of systems having each objective. Many systems (25/70) were designed for more than one target objective. Among multi-objective systems, those that were designed for both diagnosis and assistance had the highest frequency (7/25); we provide additional details regarding these systems in Table 8 of the appendix.

Separately, we also considered the role of engagement as an objective of each system. We define this as a goal of engaging target users in interaction, irrespective of underlying health goals. Engagement may be of particular interest in health-care settings since it can be critical in encouraging adoption or adherence with respect to healthcare outcomes (Montenegro et al., 2019). Surprisingly, almost 60% of the papers (41 of the 70 surveyed) did not mention any goals pertaining to engaging users in more interactions.

4.3 Target Audience

The final consumers of healthcare systems often fall into three groups: patients, caregivers, and clinicians. Table 3 shows the number of systems surveyed that focus on each category. We find that out of 70 task-oriented dialogue systems, 59 are designed specifically for patients.

4.4 Language

Most general-domain dialogue systems research has been conducted in English and other high-resource languages (Artetxe et al., 2020). Expanding language diversity may extend the benefits of health-related dialogue systems more globally. As shown in Figure 2, among the systems included in our review a majority (56%) are designed for English speakers. Encouragingly, several of the included systems did focus on lower-resource languages, including Telugu (Duggenpudi et al., 2019), Bengali (Rahman et al., 2019), and Setswana (Grover et al., 2009).

5 System Architecture

We investigate both the general architecture of the system (§5.1), and if applicable, the dialogue management architecture specifically (§5.2).

5.1 General Architecture

Task-oriented dialogue systems are generally designed using pipeline or end-to-end architectures. Pipeline architectures typically consist of separate components for natural language understanding, dialogue state tracking, dialogue policy, and natural language generation. The ensemble of the dialogue state tracker and dialogue policy is the dialogue.
Figure 2: Language diversity across the surveyed systems. A small percentage (10%) of papers do not specify the system’s language.

Table 4: Distribution of papers describing systems with pipeline or end-to-end architectures, or that do not specify the architecture.

| System Architecture | # Papers |
|---------------------|----------|
| Pipeline            | 58       |
| End-to-End          | 2        |
| Not Specified       | 10       |

Table 5: Distribution of dialogue management architectures across the surveyed papers. This table does not include papers describing end-to-end architectures ($n = 2$) or for which system architecture was not specified ($n = 10$).

| Dialogue Management Architecture | # Papers |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| Rule-based                       | 17       |
| Intent-based                     | 20       |
| Hybrid Architecture              | 21       |
| Corpus-based                     | 0        |

5.2 Dialogue Management Architecture

Unlike other pipeline components that impact user experience and engagement but not fundamental decision-making, the dialogue manager is central to overall functionality (Zhao et al., 2019); thus, we afford it special attention. In rule-based approaches, the system interacts with users based on a predefined set of rules, with success conditioned upon coverage of all relevant cases (Siangchin and Samanchuen, 2019). Intent-based approaches seek to extract the user’s intention from the dialogue, and then perform the relevant action (Jurafsky and Martin, 2009). In hybrid dialogue management architectures, the system leverages a combination of rule-based and intent-based approaches, and finally corpus-based approaches mine the dialogues of human-human conversations and produce responses using retrieval methods or generative methods (Jurafsky and Martin, 2009). As shown in Table 5, among papers reporting on dialogue management architecture, we observe a fairly even mix of rule-based, intent-based, and hybrid architectures.

6 System Design

6.1 Modality

Modality, the channel through which information is exchanged between a computer and a human (Karray et al., 2008), can play an important role in dialogue quality and user satisfaction (Bilici et al., 2000). Unimodal systems use a single modality for information exchange, whereas multimodal systems use multiple modalities (Karray et al., 2008). Systems reviewed in this survey operated using one or more of several modalities. In text-based or spoken interaction, users interact with the system by typing or speaking, respectively. In interaction via graphical user interface (GUI), users interact with the system through the use of visual elements.

In general, multimodal dialogue systems can be flexible and robust, but especially challenging to implement in the medical domain (Sonntag et al., 2009). We find that 49 papers describe unimodal systems and 21 describe multimodal systems. Table 6 provides more details regarding their distribution across modalities.

6.2 Device

Dialogue systems may facilitate interaction using a variety of devices (Arora et al., 2013), ranging from telephones (Garvey and Sankaranarayanan, 2012) to computers (McTear, 2010) to any other technology that allows interaction (e.g., VR-based avatars (Brinkman et al., 2012b; McTear, 2010)). We categorized the included systems as mobile, telephone,
Table 6: Distribution of modality type across the unimodal (49 total, left) and multimodal (21 total, right) systems surveyed.

| Category       | # Papers | Category       | # Papers |
|----------------|----------|----------------|----------|
| Text           | 23       | Spoken + Text  | 14       |
| Spoken         | 25       | Spoken + GUI   | 4        |
| GUI            | 1        | Text + GUI     | 3        |

Figure 3: Distribution of device type across the surveyed papers.

desktop/laptop, in-car, PDA, robot, virtual environment, or virtual reality (including virtual agents and avatars) systems, considering systems as multi-device if they leveraged multiple devices for interaction. As shown in Figure 3, we found that multi-device and mobile-based dialogue systems were most popular. Table 9 in the appendix provides additional details regarding multi-device systems.

7 Dataset

Data is crucial for effective system development (Serban et al., 2015), but many datasets for training dialogue systems are smaller than those used for other NLP tasks (Lowe et al., 2017). This is even more pronounced in the healthcare domain, in part due to the risk of data misuse by others or the lack of data sharing incentives (Lee and Yoon, 2017).

We reviewed each paper for information regarding the data used during system development, focusing on dataset size, availability, and privacy-preserving measures. Only 20 papers provide details about the data used (two papers provided a link to the dataset, and the remaining 18 discussed the dataset size). Unfortunately, the remaining papers did not provide rationale for their lack of data or other replicability information. Our assumption is that often the data contained sensitive information, preventing authors from releasing specific details, but only 19 of the 70 included papers provided information about data-related privacy or ethical considerations. Only 10 mentioned Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for their dataset and/or task, despite IRB (or equivalent) review being a crucial step towards ensuring that research is conducted ethically and in such a way that protects human subjects to the extent possible (Amdur and Biddle, 1997).

Table 7: Distribution of evaluation methods across the surveyed papers.

| Evaluation Type                          | # Papers |
|------------------------------------------|----------|
| Human Evaluation                         | 28       |
| Automated Evaluation                     | 7        |
| Human & Automated Evaluation             | 9        |
| Not Specified                            | 26       |

8 System Evaluation

We examined the means through which systems were evaluated both qualitatively and quantitatively (Deriu et al., 2019; Hastie, 2012). We defined human evaluation, often implemented in prior work through questionnaires (Wang et al., 2020; Grover et al., 2009; Holmes et al., 2019) or direct feedback from real-world users (Deriu et al., 2019), as an evaluation that relies on subjective, first-hand, human user experience. In contrast, automated evaluation provides an objective, quantitative measurement of one or more dimensions of the system from a mathematical perspective (Finch and Choi, 2020). Some metrics used for automated evaluation of the reviewed systems include measures of task performance (Ali et al., 2020) and completion rates (Holmes et al., 2019), response correctness (Rosruen and Samanchuen, 2018), and response time (Grover et al., 2009).

In Table 7, we observe that nearly half of the papers conducted human evaluations; however, a large percentage (37%) also did not discuss evaluation at all. We further analyzed papers conducting human evaluations and found that they included an average of 26 (mode = 12) participants. More details regarding the human and automated evaluations are provided in Tables 10, 11, and 12 of the appendix. In a follow-up analysis of system usability, defined as the degree to which users are able to engage with a system safely, effectively, efficiently,
and enjoyably (Lee et al., 2019), we observed that 33 papers explicitly evaluated the usability of their system.

9 Discussion

We identify common limitations across many surveyed systems, accompanied by recommendations for addressing them in future work.

9.1 Incomplete Exploration of System Design

We observed little system-level architectural diversity across the surveyed systems, with most (83%) having a pipeline architecture. This architectural homogeneity limits our understanding of good design practice within this domain. Recent studies demonstrate that end-to-end architectures for task-oriented dialogue systems could compete with pipeline architectures given sufficient high-quality data (Hosseini-Asl et al., 2020; Ham et al., 2020; Bordes et al., 2017; Wen et al., 2016). However, the external knowledge sources often leveraged in end-to-end systems are notoriously complex in many healthcare sub-domains (Campillos-Llanos et al., 2020). Additionally, for healthcare applications interpretability is highly desired (Ham et al., 2020), but explanations are often obfuscated in end-to-end systems (Ham et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2016). Finally, users of these systems may seek guidance on sensitive topics, which can exacerbate privacy concerns (Xu et al., 2021). Any system trained on large, weakly curated datasets may also learn unpleasant behaviors and amplify biases in the training data, in turn producing harmful consequences (Dinan et al., 2021). We recommend further experimentation with architectural design, in parallel with work towards developing high-quality healthcare dialogue datasets, which to date remain scarce (Farzana et al., 2020).

We noticed that a considerable number of the systems (33%) allowed only text-based interaction. However, it is well-established that individuals from certain demographic groups are more comfortable conversing with dialogue systems via speech (Tudor Car et al., 2020). Text-based systems may also be more likely to violate privacy considerations (Tudor Car et al., 2020). Thus, we recommend that researchers engage in further exploration of multimodal or spoken dialogue systems when applicable and appropriate.

Many of the surveyed systems were also implemented on mobile phones. Although an advantage of mobile-based systems is that they are readily available using a technology familiar to most users, Lee et al. (2018) found that users significantly reduced their usage over time when engaging long-term with mobile health applications. Tudor Car et al. (2020) suggest that one way to overcome this limitation in mobile-based systems is by directly embedding them in applications or platforms with which users already engage habitually (e.g., Facebook Messenger). This more ambient dissemination approach may facilitate easier and more lasting integration of system use in individuals’ daily lives.

Finally, we identified that most systems (84%) target only patients, with research on systems targeted towards clinicians and caregivers remaining limited. We recommend further exploration of systems targeted towards these critical audiences. This may offer broad, high-impact support in understanding, diagnosing, and treating patients’ health issues (Valizadeh et al., 2021; Kaelin et al., 2021).

9.2 Replicability Concerns

Data accessibility restrictions reduce the capacity of public health research (Strongman et al., 2019), and these limitations may be partially responsible for the imbalance of pipeline versus end-to-end architectures (§9.1). Only a small percentage of papers surveyed (29%) ventured to discuss the quantity or characteristics of the data used during system development in any way. A lack of data transparency hinders scientific progress and severely impedes replicability. We call upon researchers to publish data when permissible by governing protocol, and descriptive statistics to the extent allowable when circumstances prevent data release. We also view the development of high-quality, publicly available datasets as an important frontier in translational dialogue systems research (§9.1).

Many of the surveyed papers also lack important implementation details, such as evaluation methods (34%). This prevents the research community from replicating developed systems and generalizing study findings more broadly (Walker et al., 2018). Well-established guidelines exist and are being increasingly enforced within the NLP community to prevent reproducibility issues (Dodge et al., 2019). The disregard of reproducibility best practices observed with many healthcare dialogue systems may be partially attributed to the most common target venues for this work, which may place less emphasis on replication. This validates a cen-
9.3 Potential Ethical and Privacy Issues

Real-world medical data facilitates the development of high-quality healthcare applications (Bertino et al., 2005), but protecting the rights and privacy of contributors to the data is critical for ensuring ethical research conduct (Institute of Medicine, 2009), as is proper treatment of copyright protections. We screened all included papers for coverage of privacy and ethical concerns, and observed that only 27% of the surveyed papers considered participant or patient privacy in the design of their system. Moreover, only 14% of the surveyed papers documented any evidence of Institutional Review Board (or IRB-equivalent) approval.

Research involving healthcare dialogue systems is unquestionably human-centered, and as such the absence of ethical oversight in the design of such systems is a grave concern. Although technical researchers entering this space may be unfamiliar with human subjects research and protocol, we urge all dialogue systems researchers to submit their experimental design and protocol for review by an appropriate external review board. We also ask that researchers consider the potential harms from use or misuse of their systems, following guidelines established by the ACM Code of Ethics.8

9.4 Room for Increased Language Diversity

We observed that most systems (56%) targeted English speakers. Developing multilingual dialogue systems or systems for speakers of low-resource languages brings up various challenges (López-Cózar Delgado and Araki, 2005), but solving this problem could have tremendous benefit for individuals in non-English speaking communities with minimal or unreliable healthcare access. The systems developed by Duggenpudi et al. (2019), Rahman et al. (2019), and Grover et al. (2009) provide case examples for how such systems may be implemented. We also note that while troubling, a 56% share of systems targeted towards English speakers is consistent with linguistic homogeneity in the field in general, and actually slightly lower relative to many other NLP tasks (Mielke, 2016; Bender, 2009). Healthcare dialogue systems may on some level offer a case example for how applications originally designed for high-resource (i.e., English-language) settings can be adapted and re-engineered to provide better coverage of the diverse, real-world potential user base.

9.5 Minimal Investigation of Usability or User Engagement

Finally, more than 50% (37/70) of the included papers did not evaluate system usability or general user experience. Usability testing can improve productivity and safeguard against errors (Rogers et al., 2005), both of which are critical in healthcare tasks. Therefore, we urge the research community to consider and assess usability when designing for this domain. The systems among those surveyed that do this already (e.g., those developed by Wang et al. (2020), Lee et al. (2020b), Wei et al. (2018), or Demasi et al. (2020)) provide case examples for how it might be done.

Almost 60% of the surveyed systems were not explicitly designed to engage users, despite this being a common objective in the general domain (Ghazarian et al., 2019). Healthcare dialogue systems may stand to benefit particularly well from such measures, since patient engagement is predictive of adoption and adherence to healthcare outcomes (Montenegro et al., 2019). To increase user satisfaction and system performance, we recommend that the research community more purposefully consider engagement when designing their healthcare-oriented dialogue systems.

10 Conclusion

In this work, we conducted a systematic technical survey of task-oriented dialogue systems in the healthcare domain, narrowing the translational gap between basic and applied dialogue systems research. We comprehensively searched through 4070 papers in computer science, NLP, and AI databases, finding 70 papers that satisfied our inclusion criteria. We analyzed these papers based on numerous technical factors, and present evidence-based recommendations stemming from our findings. It is our hope that interested researchers find the information provided to be a unique and helpful resource for developing task-oriented dialogue systems for healthcare applications.
11 Ethical Considerations

Beyond the concrete changes suggested during the discussion, it is important to consider the broader ethical implications of task-oriented dialogue systems in healthcare settings. Although the goal of such systems may not be to replace human healthcare providers, it is likely that deployed systems would support clinicians, defraying workload for overburdened individuals. In doing so, these systems may have significant impact on healthcare decision-making. Machines are imperfect, and thus a possible harm is that these systems may misinterpret user input or make incorrect predictions—a mistake that in high-stakes healthcare settings could prove detrimental or even dangerous. Researchers and developers should be cognizant of possible harms stemming from the use and misuse of task-oriented dialogue systems for healthcare settings, and should implement both automated (e.g., strict thresholds for diagnostic suggestions) and human (e.g., training to ensure staff awareness of potential system fallibilities) safeguards.

Moreover, a potential benefit of these systems is their potential to meaningfully and beneficially extend healthcare access to underserved populations. As such, it is important to ensure that automated systems do not fall prey to the same biases often observed among human healthcare providers (FitzGerald and Hurst, 2017). Systems trained to perform healthcare tasks using datasets that are not representative of the target population may exhibit poorer performance with users who already experience marginalization or are otherwise vulnerable, impeding or even reversing benefits. We call upon researchers to examine, debias, and curate their training data such that task-oriented dialogue systems for healthcare applications elevate, rather than diminish, outcomes for the historically underserved users which they are best poised to benefit.

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## A Multi-Objective Systems

| Multi-Objective System | # Papers |
|------------------------|---------|
| Diagnosis + Assistance | 7       |
| Diagnosis + Intervention | 2       |
| Diagnosis + Monitoring | 1       |
| Diagnosis + Counseling | 1       |
| Intervention + Monitoring | 2       |
| Intervention + Assistance | 1       |
| Assistance + Counseling | 2       |
| Intervention + Monitoring + Diagnosis | 2 |
| Intervention + Monitoring + Assistance | 2 |
| Intervention + Monitoring + Counseling | 1 |
| Diagnosis + Monitoring + Counseling | 1 |
| Diagnosis + Assistance + Intervention | 2 |
| Diagnosis + Intervention + Monitoring + Assistance | 1 |

| Table 8: Distribution of varying combinations of multiple system objectives across the surveyed papers. |

| Multi-Objective System | # Papers |
|------------------------|---------|
| Diagnosis + Assistance | 7       |
| Diagnosis + Intervention | 2       |
| Diagnosis + Monitoring | 1       |
| Diagnosis + Counseling | 1       |
| Intervention + Monitoring | 2       |
| Intervention + Assistance | 1       |
| Assistance + Counseling | 2       |
| Intervention + Monitoring + Diagnosis | 2 |
| Intervention + Monitoring + Assistance | 2 |
| Intervention + Monitoring + Counseling | 1 |
| Diagnosis + Monitoring + Counseling | 1 |
| Diagnosis + Assistance + Intervention | 2 |
| Diagnosis + Intervention + Monitoring + Assistance | 1 |

Conversational agents seek to generate dialogues that have value to their end-users. We categorized included articles as having one or more of the following objectives: diagnosis, monitoring, intervention, counseling, or assistance. We found that 25
out of 70 surveyed systems were designed for more than one target objective, and provide additional details describing these multi-objective systems in Table 8.

B Multi-Device Systems

| Multi-Device Category       | # Papers |
|-----------------------------|----------|
| Desktop/Laptop + Mobile-based | 8        |
| Desktop/Laptop + VE         | 5        |
| Desktop/Laptop + Robot      | 2        |
| Mobile-based + PDA systems  | 2        |
| Desktop/Laptop + GUI        | 1        |
| Desktop/Laptop + PDA systems| 1        |
| Mobile-based + VE           | 1        |

Table 9: Details regarding the distribution of multi-device systems across the surveyed papers (20 total).

| User Population       | # Papers |
|-----------------------|----------|
| Lab Experiments       | 15       |
| Field Experiments     | 17       |
| Crowdsourcing         | 1        |
| Not Specified         | 4        |

Table 10: Distribution of user populations across the surveyed papers that conducted a human evaluation.

| Human Evaluation Type  | # Papers |
|------------------------|----------|
| Interact with the System| 8        |
| Rate a Dialogue        | 1        |
| Both                   | 28       |

Table 11: Distribution of evaluation types across the surveyed papers that conducted a human evaluation.

Many of the surveyed systems functioned using multiple device types. Table 9 shows the distribution of included devices across all multi-device systems. We found that the most common multi-device pairing was systems operating using computers and mobile devices.

C Additional Evaluation Details

From among the surveyed systems that conducted system and/or human evaluations, we further examined the types of evaluations conducted. Table 12 details the various types of system evaluations conducted across the surveyed systems. We found that the most common assessment item in system evaluations was the system’s overall task performance.

| Type of System Evaluation | # Papers |
|---------------------------|----------|
| Task Completion           | 4        |
| Task Performance          | 9        |
| Response Correctness      | 5        |
| Naturalness               | 2        |
| Response Time             | 3        |
| Routing Time              | 1        |

Table 12: Type of system evaluation across the surveyed papers.

11 presents broad categories of the types of human evaluations conducted. We found that most human evaluations were conducted in a laboratory or field setting, and often included opportunities for participants to both interact with the system directly, and rate the quality of the dialogue. Table 12 details the various types of system evaluations conducted across the surveyed systems. We found that the most common assessment item in system evaluations was the system’s overall task performance.

D Included Papers

In this systematic review, we investigated 4070 papers involving dialogue systems for healthcare applications, identifying 70 papers that satisfied our defined inclusion criteria. We comprehensively analyzed these papers on the basis of numerous technical factors. We provide aggregated statistics for each of these categories in the main body of the paper. In Table 13 beginning on the following page, we provide a listing of each included paper and its categorization across all included classes. Full references for each included paper can be found in the bibliography.
| Paper                   | DS Arch. | DM Arch. | Mod.    | Device          | Sys. Obj. | Engagement                      | Dom. of Research | Target Aud. | Lang.     | Eval. Method      | Dataset Size |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|---------|-----------------|-----------|---------------------------------|------------------|------------|-----------|------------------|---------------|
| Papangelis et al. (2013)| Pipeline | Intent-based | Multi-Modal | Desk /Lap | Monitoring, Intervention, Diagnosis | Yes             | PTSD       | Patients | English | Not Specified     | Not Specified |
| Brinkman et al. (2012a) | Pipeline | Rule-based | Speech | Virtual Environment | Monitoring, Diagnosis | No             | Social Phobia | Clinicians | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Ali et al. (2020)       | Pipeline | Intent-based | Speech | Desk /Lap | Monitoring, Assistance, Intervention | Yes             | Autism Spectrum Disorder | Patients | English | Human Evaluation | 46 videos |
| Tsiakas et al. (2015)   | Pipeline | Intent-based | Multi-Modal | Desk /Lap, Virtual Environment | Diagnosis, Assistance | Yes             | Anxiety Disorders, Depression, PTSD | Patients | English | Human Evaluation | 90 speech segments |
| Wang et al. (2020)      | Pipeline | Hybrid | Speech | PDA | Intervention | Yes             | Social Phobia | Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Balasuriya et al. (2018)| Pipeline | Hybrid | Speech, GUI | PDA | Monitoring | Yes             | Intellectual Disability | Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Chuan and Morgan (2021) | Pipeline | Intent-based | Speech | Desk /Lap | Assistance | No             | Clinical Application | Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Grover et al. (2009)    | Pipeline | Rule-based | Speech | Telephone | Assistance | No             | HIV Clinicians | Setswana | Human & Automated Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Petric et al. (2017)    | Pipeline | Intent-based | Speech | Robot | Diagnosis | No             | Autism Spectrum Disorder | Clinicians | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Javed et al. (2018)     | Not Specified | Not Specified | Speech, GUI | Robot | Monitoring | Yes             | Autism Spectrum Disorder | Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Study                  | Pipeline Type | Interface       | Device | Intervention | Target Group          | Evaluation | Language | Jobs                 |
|------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------|--------------|------------------------|------------|----------|----------------------|
| Di Nuovo et al. (2020) | Pipeline Hybrid | Speech Robot | PDA, Mobile | Monitoring | Autism Spectrum Disorder, Patients, Caregivers | Human Evaluation | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Quiroz et al. (2020)   | Pipeline Hybrid | Speech Robot | PDA, Mobile | Monitoring | Depression, Anxiety, Patients, English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Maharjan et al. (2019) | Pipeline Hybrid | Speech Robot | PDA, Mobile | Monitoring | Mental Health, Patients, English | Not Specified | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Ahn et al. (2020)      | Pipeline Hybrid | Speech Robot | Mobile | Intervention, Assisting | Online sexual exploitation, PTSD | Patients, Korean | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Kamita et al. (2020)   | Pipeline Hybrid | Speech Robot | Mobile | Intervention | Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, stress reduction | Patients, Japanese | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Lee et al. (2020b)     | Pipeline Hybrid | Speech Robot | Mobile | Monitoring | Health-related Self-disclosure, Patients, English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Moghadasi et al. (2020)| Pipeline Hybrid | Text Robot | Desk/Lap, Mobile | Assistance, Counseling | Opioid Addiction, Patients, English | Not Specified | 20,494 records |
| De Nieva et al. (2020) | Pipeline Hybrid | Text Robot | Mobile | Monitoring, Intervention, Counseling | Anxiety, Depression, Patients, English | Human & Automated Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Lee et al. (2020a)     | Pipeline Hybrid | Text Robot | Mobile | Monitoring | Health-related Self-disclosure, Patients, English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Daher et al. (2020)    | Pipeline & Rule-based GUI | Not Specified | Monitoring | No | Empathy for medical Assistance, Patients, English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Holmes et al. (2019)   | Pipeline Hybrid | Multi-Modal | Mobile | Assistance | Weight Loss, Patients, English | Human & Automated Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Authors            | Pipeline Type | Interface       | Modality        | Diagnosis | Intervention            | Yes/No | Patients Type       | Language | Dataset/Records |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------------------|--------|---------------------|----------|------------------|
| Oh et al. (2017)   | Pipeline      | Intent-based    | Multi-Modal     | Mobile    | Yes                     |        | Psychiatric Counseling | Patients | Korean           | 49,846,477 records |
| Dino et al. (2019) | Pipeline      | Rule-based      | Speech Robot    | Intervention | Yes | Depression Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Patel et al. (2019)| Pipeline      | Not Specified   | Not Specified   | Not Specified | Diagnosisis | No | Stress, Depression Patients | English | Not Specified | 7,652 records, ISEAR dataset |
| Sharma et al. (2018)| Pipeline      | Not Specified   | Text Mobile     | Diagnosisis, Intervention, Assistance | No | Depression Patients | Not Specified | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Belfin et al. (2019)| Pipeline      | Intent-based    | Multi-Modal     | Desk/Lap, Mobile | Assistance | No | Cancer Patients | English | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Yorita et al. (2020)| Pipeline      | Rule-based      | Multi-Modal     | Mobile | Diagnosisis, Counseling | No | Stress Management Clinics | English | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Kargar and Mahoor (2017)| Pipeline | Rule-based | Speech Robot | Intervention | Yes | Depression Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Hwang et al. (2020) | Pipeline      | Rule-based      | Not Specified   | Diagnosisis, Intervention | No | Medical Assistance | Patients | Korean | Not Specified |
| Srivastava and Singh (2020) | Pipeline | Rule-based | Text Not Specified | Diagnosisis, Assistance | Yes | Disease Diagnosis Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Mathew et al. (2019) | Pipeline      | Rule-based      | Text Mobile     | Diagnosisis, Assistance | Yes | Disease Diagnosis Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Athota et al. (2020) | Pipeline      | Rule-based      | Multi-Modal     | Mobile | Diagnosisis, Assistance | No | Disease Diagnosis Patients | English | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Sadavarte and Bodanese (2019) | Pipeline | Hybrid PDA | Multi-Modal | Assistance | No | Pregnancy Patients | English | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Lee et al. (2017)  | Pipeline      | Hybrid          | Text Mobile     | Counseling | Yes | Psychiatric Counseling | Patients | Korean | Not Specified |
| Authors                | Pipeline Type          | Hybrid/Mobile       | Text/Not Specified | Not Specified | Speech/Robot | Not Specified | Disease/Diagnosis          | Caregivers/No Specified | Assistance/Not Specified | Medical Assistance | Patients | Automated Evaluation | No Specified Records |
|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Rahman et al. (2019)   | Pipeline Hybrid Text   | Not Specified       | Diagno-sis         | No            | Medical      | Patients      | Bengali                  |                         |                        | 4,961            |          |                      |                      |
| Yabuki and Sumi (2018) | Not Specified          | Not Specified       | Speech Robot       | Intervention  | Autism       | Caregivers    | English                 | Not Specified           | Not Specified          |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Su et al. (2018)       | Pipeline Intent-based  | Speech Not Specified | Diagno-sis, Assist | No            | Disease      | Patients      | Chinese                 |                         |                        |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Shoji et al. (2020)    | Pipeline Desk/Lap, PDA | Speech Not Specified | Diagno-sis         | No            | Pneumonia    | Patients      | Not Specified           | Automated Evaluation    | Not Specified          |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Polignano et al. (2020)| Pipeline Hybrid Mobile | Multi-Modal Mobile  | Diagno-sis, Inter- | No            | Medical      | Patients      | Italian                 | Human & Automated Evaluation | 1,865,700            |                      |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Ali et al. (2021)      | Pipeline Hybrid Speech | Desk/Lap, Virtual   | Intervention       | No            | Cancer       | Clinicians    | English                 | Automated Evaluation    | 382                    |transcripts of conversations |          |          |                      |                      |
| Aarabi (2013)          | Pipeline Intent-based  | Text Not Specified  | Diagno-sis         | No            | Cardiology   | Patients      | English                 | Not Specified           |                        |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Loisel et al. (2007)   | Pipeline Hybrid Text   | Not Specified       | Assistance         | No            | Medical      | Patients      | French                  | Not Specified           |                        |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Rosruen and Samanchuen (2018) | Pipeline Hybrid Multi-Modal Desk/Lap, Mobile | Assistance | No | Medical Assistance | Patients | Chinese | Automated Evaluation | Not Specified |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Sonntag and Moller (2010) | Pipeline Intent-based Multi-Modal Desk/Lap | Assistance | Yes | Radiology Clinicians | Not Specified | Human & Automated Evaluation | Not Specified |                      |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Kadariya et al. (2019) | Pipeline Hybrid Mobile | Multi-Modal Mobile  | Monitoring, Inter- | Yes | Asthma       | Patients      | English                 | Human & Automated Evaluation | Not Specified          |                    |          |                      |                      |
| Authors & Year | Pipeline | Hybrid/Multi-Modal | Text/Speech | Mobile | Assistance | Interventions | Medical Assistance | Clinicians | Language | Human & Automated Evaluation | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
|---------------|----------|--------------------|-------------|--------|------------|---------------|------------------|-----------|---------|----------------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Siangchin and Samanchuen (2019) | Pipeline | Hybrid Text | Mobile | Assistance | Medical Assistance | Clinicians | Chinese | Not Specified | |
| Erazo et al. (2020) | Pipeline | Rule-based Text | Desk/Lap Mobile | Diagnosis Assistance | COVID-19 Patients | Not Specified | Human Evaluation | Not Specified | |
| Huang et al. (2018) | Pipeline | Hybrid Multi-Modal | Mobile | Monitoring Intervention | Yes | Weight Loss Patients | English,Chinese | Not Specified | Not Specified | |
| Chen et al. (2013) | Pipeline | Rule-based Speech | Desk/Lap Mobile | Assistance | Medical Assistance | Patients, Caregivers | Chinese | Human Evaluation | MAT 400 dataset | |
| Araki et al. (2011) | Pipeline | Intent-based Multi-Modal | Desk/Lap | Intervention | No | Visually Impaired Patients | Japanese | Human Evaluation | Not Specified | |
| She et al. (2018) | Pipeline | Intent-based Text | Robot | Intervention | Yes | Autism Spectrum Disorder Patients | English | Automated Evaluation | Tager-Flusberg,Nadig ASD English, and Rollins Corpus | |
| Yabuki and Sumi (2018) | Pipeline | Intent-based Text | Speech Robot | Intervention | Yes | Autism Spectrum Disorder Caregivers Japanese Autism Spectrum Disorder Caregivers Japanese | Not Specified | Self-Constructed dataset | |
| Wei et al. (2018) | Pipeline | Intent-based Text | Not Specified | Diagnosis | No | Medical Assistance Clinicians Chinese | Automated Evaluation | Self-Constructed dataset | |
| Fadhil and AbuRa’ed (2019) | Pipeline | Intent-based Multi-Modal | Mobile | Monitoring Assistance Intervention | No | Medical Assistance Patients Arabic | Human Evaluation | Not Specified | |
| Demasi et al. (2020) | Pipeline | Intent-based Text | Not Specified | Counseling | No | Mental Health Patients English | Human Evaluation | Self-Constructed dataset | |
| Waterschoot et al. (2020) | Pipeline | Intent-based Speech | Not Specified | Monitoring | No | Mental Health Patients Dutch | Not Specified | Self-Constructed dataset | |
| Authors            | Type: Pipeline | Method:             | Domain:                   | Model:             | Platform:       | Assistance:       | Interven- | Evaluation:       | Human & Automo- | Dataset:        |
|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Danda et al. (2016)| Hybrid Speech  | Desk/Lap, Mobile    | Diagnosing, Intervention, Assistance | No                 | Medical Assistance | Patients, Indian  | No         | CMU arctic dataset|
| Duggenpudi et al. (2019)| Rule-based Text | Not Specified | Assistance | No | Medical Assistance | Patients, Telugu | No | Human Evaluation | Self-Constructed dataset |
| Prange et al. (2017) | Rule-based Multi-Modal Mobile | Not Specified | Assistance | No | Medical Assistance | Clinicians, Not Specified | No | Not Specified | 475 records |
| Campillos Llanos et al. (2015) | Intent-based Multi-Modal | Not Specified | Intervention | No | Medical Assistance | Clinicians, French | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Welch et al. (2020) | Intent-based Text | Not Specified | Counseling, Assistance | Yes | Mental Health | Patients, Not Specified | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Ljunglöf et al. (2009) | Intent-based Speech | Desk/Lap, Robot | Intervention | No | Communication Disorders | Patients, Swedish | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Ljunglöf et al. (2011) | Intent-based Speech | Desk/Lap, Robot | Intervention | Yes | Communication Disorders | Patients, Swedish | Human Evaluation | Not Specified |
| Brixey et al. (2017) | Hybrid Text | Desk/Lap, Mobile | Assistance | No | HIV | Patients, English | Human Evaluation | Self-Constructed dataset |
| Morbini et al. (2014) | Rule-based Speech | Desk/Lap, Virtual Environment | Counseling | Yes | Mental Health | Patients, English | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| DeVault et al. (2013) | Not Specified | Not Specified | Speech | Diagnostics | No | Mental Health | Clinicians, English | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Inoue et al. (2016) | Rule-based Multi-Modal Mobile | Counseling | Yes | Mental Health | Patients, Not Specified | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Morbini et al. (2012) | Intent-based Text | Desk/Lap, Mobile | Counseling | Yes | PTSD | Patients, English | Not Specified | Not Specified |
| Xu et al. (2019) | End-to-End Text | Not Specified | Diagnostics | No | Disease Diagnostics | Patients, Chinese | Human & Automated Evaluation | Self-Constructed dataset |
| Green et al. (2004) | Pipeline Rule-based Speech Desk/Lap Intervention No Dementia Caregivers English Human Evaluation Not Specified |