Alleviating Hallucinations in Large Language Models with Skepticism Modeling

Anonymous ACL submission

Abstract

Hallucinations is a major challenge for large language models (LLMs), preventing adoption 002 in diverse fields. Uncertainty estimation could be used for alleviating the damages of hallucinations. The skeptical emotion of human could 006 be useful for enhancing the ability of self estimation. Inspirited by this observation, we propose a new approach called Skepticism Modeling (SM), which is formalized by combining the information of tokens and probabilities for self estimation. We construct the doubt emo-012 tion aware data, perform continual pre-training, and then fine-tune the LLMs, improve their ability of self estimation. Experimental results demonstrate this new approach effectively enhances a model's ability to estimate their uncertainty, and validate its generalization ability of 017 018 other tasks by out-of-domain experiments.

1 Introduction

The generative nature of large language models (LLMs) bring the challenge of hallucination 021 (Huang et al., 2023; Bai et al., 2024), namely their tendency to generate plausible-sounding but factually incorrect or nonsensical information. Hallucination hinders LLM's widespread adoption, particularly in domains that demand high levels of accuracy and expertise, like healthcare, legal sector 027 and financial industry (Ji et al., 2023a; Zhang et al., 2023). Uncertainty estimation could be used for mitigating the damages of hallucinations (Huang et al., 2023). Previous studies directly used the model log-probabilities to estimate uncertainty, or used the tokens information to teach the model to express uncertainty (Huang et al., 2023). We 034 propose a novel method that use both information for training, enhance the ability of self estimation, which is called Skepticism Modeling (SM). 037



Figure 1: Paradigm of Skepticism Modeling of LLM. The emojis represent self-skepticism level of the previous token. The strange phrases will arouse suspicion.

> The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another [Treatise, 1.4.7.8]

David Hume

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Skepticism which means an attitude of doubt, plays a crucial role in human cognition, influencing information processing and decision-making. For instance, when people are asked "How many eyes does the finger have?" or "The capital of pigeon is ?", they will have skeptical emotion, which could be useful for identifying wrong question. When people are unfamiliar with a Mathematics question, skeptical emotion could also help them estimate the uncertainty of their own answer. The emotionas-information theory (Schwarz and Clore, 1983) suggests that the skeptical feeling can lead to a more careful information examination. Studies have shown that skepticism is a core component of critical thinking (Facione, 1990) and important for meta-cognitive experiences (Koriat and Levy-Sadot, 1999). In fact, deep skepticism allows humans to question their own judgement, resisting the intense contemplation of the manifold contradictions and imperfections inherent in human belief and reasoning. As articulated by famously philosopher David Hume (Hume, 1978). Therefore, it is reasonable to implement LLM with skepticism

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ability, which motivates this work.

In this paper, we propose an innovative paradigm to augment LLM with skepticism thinking ability. Firstly, we model the skepticism feeling as discrete tokens. Starting from a pre-trained LLM, we transform the skepticism token from the softmax probability associated with each preceding text token. We then redefine the sequence with each original text token followed by such a skepticism token. LLM learn such augmented text sequence by continual pre-training (CPT). We then conduct the supervise finetuning (SFT) stage, given question-answer samples with an extra rethinking question-answer pair similar with R-tuning (Zhang et al., 2024a). In the inference stage, the model can combine text tokens and softmax probability to enhance the ability of self estimation and alleviate the damages of hallucinations. Project code and model checkpoints can be found in https://anonymous.4open.science/r/SM-1E76.

In summary, our contributions are:

- We design a new modeling paradigm to make LLM have skepticism think, similar with humanity. By two stages' training, our LLM can self-evaluate its skepticism measures and provide more reasonable answer.
- We conduct substantial experiments to indicate our SM approach can achieve state-ofthe-art (SOTA) performance in several QA benchmarks, with out-of-domain generalization abilities.
- We observe our SM approach have substantial robustness even given some unreasonable and implausible questions.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The connection with previous works is first discussed in Section 2. The SM methodology is stated in Section 3. Experiment results are summarized in Section 4. Finally Section 5 concludes this paper.

2 Related Works

2.1 Hallucination Detection

Many approaches in hallucination detection base on internal states (Azaria and Mitchell, 2023; Huang et al., 2023; Ling et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Su et al., 2024). By analyzing the minimal token probability within key concepts, Varshney et al. assess the uncertainty of the model towards these concepts (Varshney et al., 2023). Our SM method also use token probability, however, we combine both token probability and token information to estimate uncertainty. Inspired by cognitive neuroscience, Zou et al. explore an approach to AI transparency named representation engineering (RepE), which provide traction on many problems including hallucination (Zou et al., 2023). 109

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Finetuning LLMs can be useful for uncertainty estimation. Lin et al. train LLM to directly output verbalized probability with CalibratedMath, which is a suite of elementary mathematics problems. LLM's empirical accuracy on each type of question was used as the label (Lin et al., 2022). Our SM method also need to finetune the LLMs, but their method does not use token probability information, we combine both token probability and token information to finetune the LLMs. kadavath et al. add an additional value head to the LLMs, and finetuned the models to predict the probability that they can answer a question correctly (Kadavath et al., 2022). They only use question to train the model, we use both question and answer. And our SM method does not need to change the model structure.

Several studies probe the uncertainty of LLMs through their behavior (Huang et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2023; Hou et al., 2024; Yehuda et al., 2024). For instance, Manakul et al. propose SelfCheck-GPT, a sample-based approach to detect hallucination via evaluating the consistency of multiple responses to the same prompt from a language model (Manakul et al., 2023). Motivated by truth-seeking mechanisms in law, Cohen et al. employ an "examiner" LM (EXAMINER). They leverage prompt to generate questions which are related with initial claim from LLMs, and discover factual inconsistencies among different answers (Cohen et al., 2023). Considering the reality that a single concept can be formulated in numerous ways, Farquhar et al. use semantic entropy to detect hallucinations by calculating uncertainty at the level of semantics rather than particular word sequences (Farquhar et al., 2024).

2.2 Hallucination Mitigation

Many methods have been proposed for hallucinations mitigation in LLM (Ji et al., 2023b; Dhuliawala et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024b,c) . No matter whether LLMs knows the knowledge or not, traditional fine-tuning approaches force LLMs to complete a sentence. If the question is beyond the inherent knowledge of LLMs, LLMs will try to fabricate plausible-sounding but mistaken facts. Motivated by this, Zhang et al. propose a method called Refusal-Aware Instruction Tuning (R-Tuning), constructs a refusal-aware dataset by comparing the prediction and label, and then finetune LLMs to admit their uncertainty about the answer or refuse questions beyond its internal knowledge (Zhang et al., 2024a). Based on R-Tuning, our SM method combine token and token probability information to finetune LLMs.

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RL finetuning can also mitigate hallucination (Roit et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023), However, when face unfamiliar inputs, reward models may suffer from hallucinations. To tackle this challenge, Kang et al. propose a conservative reward models approach to avoid overestimate rewards for unfamiliar inputs. And then they use this approach to teach LLMs to generate reliable long-form responses on long text generation tasks (Kang et al., 2024).

Elaraby et al. explore teacher-student and knowledge injection methods to mitigate hallucinations in LLMs (Elaraby et al., 2023). Guan et al. presents Knowledge Graph-based Retrofitting (KGR), an approach that use knowledge graph to retrofit the initial responses of LLMs (Guan et al., 2024). Our SM method does not need external knowledge base.

3 Skepticism Modeling

In this section, we first introduce our Skepticism Modeling (SM) method, which integrates skeptical tokens into the vocabulary and includes three stages: continual pre-training, supervised finetuning and inference. Detailed framework of SM is visualized in Figure 2.

3.1 Modeling and Tokenization of Skepticism

Each skeptical emotion token corresponds to the generative probability about the previous generated token in the text. We first augment the tokenizer vocabulary with special tokens, $[< s_0 >, < s_1 >$,..., $< s_9 >]$, indicating discretion of different skepticism levels. From " $< s_0 >$ " to " $< s_9 >$ ", the skeptical emotion level is increasing which means the generative probability about the previous generated token is decreasing. To make the rule for converting the softmax probability to the skepticism token, we refer to the likelihood corresponding to adverbs indicating affirmation and doubt in natural language. For example, adverb "certainly" often indicates a probability greater than 0.8. We then use a special token " $< s_0 >$ " to represent "certainly", if

the softmax probability is more than 0.8, the skepticism token will be " $< s_0 >$ ", which means the lowest skeptical level. Adverb "probably" usually indicates a probability between 0.6 and 0.8, We then use a special token " $< s_1 >$ " to represent "probably", if the softmax probability is between 0.6 and 0.8, the skepticism token will be " $< s_1 >$ ". We reformulate our tokenization with each normal text token followed by such a "skepticism token" (Figure 1). 209

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Given a pretraining dataset, first we perform a forward pass of raw text corpus from a pretrained LLM, to obtain the token logits. Then we record the softmax probability for each token in the original corpus, discretize it and convert it into the ground truth skeptical token.

3.2 Continual Pre-Training

In this work, we conduct Continual Pre-Training (CPT) with model load from a pretrained LLM. By denoting the softmax probability of normal token as p, the softmax probability of skeptical token as s, and the previous inferenced probability is \hat{l} , our CPT loss can be expressed as

$$\mathcal{L}_{CPT} = -\frac{1}{T} \sum_{i=1}^{T} \log(p_i) \tag{1}$$

where T is the sequence length, i is the token position of either normal tokens or skeptical tokens.

3.3 Supervised Finetuning

During the Supervised finetuning(SFT) stage, we create our the refusal-aware data, in a similar process with R-tuning (Zhang et al., 2024a). Given a question-answer (QA) pair from SFT data, we first inference our CPT-version model, to obtain the probability of the original answer and determine our skepticism based on that result. We then augment the QA pair with another question "Are you sure you accurately answered the question based on your internal knowledge?" and the corresponding answer "I am sure/unsure." which is determined by the probability threshold. The probability thresholds perform a critical role which helps the LLM further align with the skeptical thinking.

We then perform the general Study by viewing p and s tokens as a uniform sequence. The SFT loss is

$$\mathcal{L}_{SFT} = -\frac{1}{T} \sum_{i=1}^{T_i} \log \left[Pr(y_{i+1} | \mathbf{x}_i, y_{1...t}, \phi) \right]$$
(2) 253

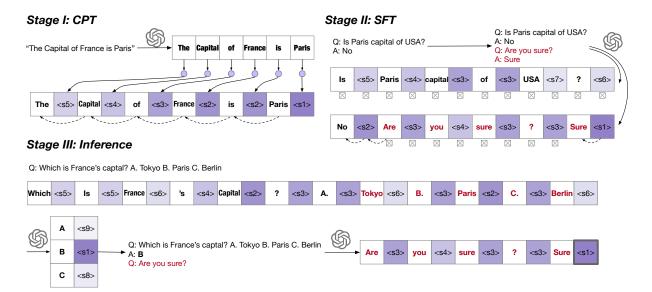


Figure 2: Detailed framework of SM. Stage I: first learn the plausibility of tokens from pretrained LLM, then continual pretraining on the corpus with vocabulary augmented with skepticism tokens. Stage II: augment the QA pair with the question 'Are you sure/unsure', inference the continual pretrained LLM to answer this augmented question, and finally finetune on these two QA pairs. Stage III: first inference on the finetuned LLM, get the most plausible answer, then concatenate with the augmented question, and inference the second time to obtain the skepticism probability.

where x is the question tokens, y is the answer tokens and T is the number of tokens in the response.

3.4 Inference

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In the inference stage, we integrate skeptical tokens to the query and generate the response by our SFT version model. After that, we augment with the prompt "Are you sure you accurately answered the question based on your internal knowledge?" (Zhang et al., 2024a) then perform the second generation to obtain the final confidence.

Note that we employ the "sure" or "unsure" token as the indicator of uncertainty for the answer (Zhang et al., 2024a). The reason is when facing the open-domain question-answering task rather than multi-choice task, the answer contains multiple tokens instead of one choice token, which makes the uncertainty estimation complicated.

4 Experiments

In this section, we first introduce the training and evaluation datasets and tasks, then the comparable baselines, the evaluation methodologies, and the formal experiment results. We finally provide some typical cases to highlight our approach's ability.

4.1 Datasets

Table 1 list the sources and statistics of datasets used in our CPT and SFT stages.

4.1.1 CPT:

Datasets used in the CPT stage include Gutenberg books and wiki, which are from Dolma; as well as Opensubtitle, arxiv abstract and pubmed abstract, which are from Pile.

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- **Dolma** (Soldaini et al., 2024): an open corpus of 3 trillion tokens for language model pretraining research. It encompass 5 billion documents range of sources from the web, scientific literature, code, public domain books, social media, and encyclopedias. With all the pretrained data and data curation toolkit opensourced, it faciliatates the transparency and reproducibility of further research based on Dolma.
- Pile (Gao et al., 2020): a substantial corpus of English text, totaling 825 GiB. It composes 22 diverse and high-quality subsets, many of which are derived from academic or professional sources, such as PubMed Central, ArXiv, GitHub, and the US Patent and Trademark Office, among others. The construction of this dataset aims to address the growing need for data diversity in language modeling process.

4.1.2 SFT:

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Datasets used in the SFT stage are natually classified into the following two categories:

- Multiple-Choice: Given a question with several choices, the model aims to chooses one correct option. We include MMLU (Hendrycks et al., 2020), WiCE (Kamoi et al., 2023), and FEVER (Thorne et al., 2018) in our experiments.
- *Question-Answering*: Given an open-domain question, the model directly generate its answer. Such type of datasets include **ParaRel** (Elazar et al., 2021) and **HotpotQA** (Yang et al., 2018).

For ease of performance comparison, we download the dataset from R-tuning (Zhang et al., 2024a) and keep the same in-domain and out-of-domain settings. For brevity, in the following context we use ID and OOD to denote in-domain and out-ofdomain, respectively. We conduct sampling checks to determine if the dataset contains privacy and offensive information.

4.2 Baselines and tasks

We consider the following baselines:

- R-tuning: an instruction tuning approach that teaches large language models to identify and refrain from answering questions beyond their parametric knowledge, thereby mitigating the issue of hallucination and enhancing their ability to express uncertainty (Zhang et al., 2024a).
- VanillaFT: the vanilla approach which learns from the corpus in the conventional paradigm of LLM.

Similar with (Zhang et al., 2024a), two types of experiments, single-task and multi-task, can be analyzed. The single-task experiment studies the performance on the individual dataset, while multitask experiment evaluates model generalization performance by training on mixture of datasets. Due to page limitations, here we only list results of multi-choice datasets. One can refer to Appendix to check results of Question-Answering datasets.

4.3 Evaluation

349Models are measured with three metrics: accuracy,350Average Precision (AP) score and Area Under the351ROC Curve (AUC).

The accuracy is calculated as follows:

$$accuracy = \frac{correctly answered questions}{all questions}.$$
 (3)

In the self-evaluation experiment, we first prompt the model to output an answer and then prompt it to provide its uncertainty. And we use AP score to evaluate the performance for uncertainty estimation.

The AP score is a way to summarize the precision-recall curve into a single value representing the average of all precisions. which is calculated as follows:

$$AP = \sum_{k=0}^{n-1} (R(k+1) - R(k)) \times P(k) \quad (4)$$

where n is the number of data, k is the number of data we select for the current threshold. P and R denote precision and recall. An ideal model predicts the correct answers with high confidence and the hallucinated wrong answers with relatively low confidence, leading to a high AP score.

AUC (Area Under the ROC Curve) is the area under the ROC (Receiver Operating Characteristic) curve used to measure the performance of a classifier. The closer the AUC value is to 1, the better the classifier performance; On the contrary, the closer the AUC value is to 0, the worse the classifier performance. We also use the ROC-AUC score to measure the performance for self-estimation. ROC depicts the performance of the classifier at different thresholds by taking the true positive rate (TPR) and the false positive rate (FPR) as the horizontal and vertical coordinates.

$$\Gamma PR = \frac{TP}{TP + FN}$$
(5)

$$FPR = \frac{FP}{FP + TN}$$
(6)

TP (True Positive) represents the number of correctly recognized positive cases. For example, when answer match label, the model output 'sure'. FN (False Negative) represents the number of incorrectly recognized positive cases as negative cases. FP (False Positive) represents the number of incorrectly identified negative examples as positive, while TN (True Negative) represents the number of correctly identified negative examples. 354

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Stage	Datasets	Size	Format
	gutenberg books	18G	Raw-Text
	wiki	16G	Raw-Text
CPT	opensubtitle	0.5G	Raw-Text
	arxiv abstract	4G	Raw-Text
	pubmed abstract	1G	Raw-Text
	MMLU (ID)	2439	Multiple-Choice
	MMLU (OOD)	9155	Multiple-Choice
	WiCE (Train)	3470	Multiple-Choice
	WiCE (Test)	958	Multiple-Choice
CET	FEVER (Train)	9999	Multiple-Choice
SFT	FEVER (Test)	9999	Multiple-Choice
	ParaRel (ID)	5584	Question-Answering
	ParaRel (OOD)	13974	Question-Answering
	HotpotQA (Train)	10000	Question-Answering
	HotpotQA (Test)	7405	Question-Answering

Table 1: Details of Training Datasets. Sizes of CPT datasets is the file gigasizes, while sizes of SFT datasets are number of samples. SFT datasets are obtained from R-tuning (Zhang et al., 2024a)

Experiment	Stage	Parameters	Value
		learning rate	5e-7
	CPT	weight decay	0.01
Single-Task		batch size	1024
Single Tush		learning rate	1e-6
	SFT	weight decay	0.01
		batch size	128
	СРТ	learning rate	5e-7
		weight decay	0.01
Multi-Task		batch size	1024
The full	SFT	learning rate	1e-6
		weight decay	0.01
		batch size	128

Table 2: Hyper-parameters of experiments.

4.4 Implementation

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We choose Qwen2-7B (Qwen Team, 2024) as the base models in our experiments, which licensed under the Apache License, Version 2.0. We use accelerator ¹ and deepspeed ² to conduct pretraining and instruction tuning, setting epoch to 1. All the experiments are implemented on Nvidia A100-80GB GPUs. Table 2 lists the hyperparameters of experiments.

4.5 Single-task Results

Table 3 lists the results of single-task experiments. The SM method demonstrates superior performance across most of the benchmarks, with seldom exceptions. Especially, SM is good at selfevaluation from the AP and AUC results, and also help the answering ACC from modeling of skepticism. Performance of SM is also robust since we consider both choice problems such as MMLU, WiCE, Fever, and question-answering tasks such as Parallel and HotpotQA. We also check the detailed results overn the ID and OOD domains for MMLU and Parallel. 403

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Table 3 also lists results on the open-domain question-answering datasets, including Parallel and HotpotQA. Still, SM shows superiority comparing with two baselines, indicating that SM is able to build the skepticism on different scenarios and is robust to different test formats.

4.6 Multi-task Experiments

Table 4 lists the choice-problem results of multitask experiments, also in terms of AP, AUC and ACC scores. Similar with the single task experiments, SM are also mostly the best, comparing with VanillaFT and R-tuning, except one or two exceptions. This result indicates that SM has good generalization and scaling abilities. By training with more datasets in different domains, one can expect that SM can align with their knowledge and emerge even better skepticism thinking.

¹https://github.com/microsoft/DeepSpeed/blob/ master/deepspeed/accelerator

²https://github.com/microsoft/DeepSpeed

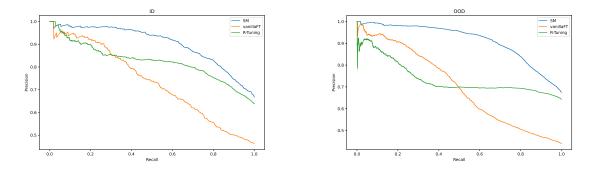


Figure 3: Multi-task Experimental Precision-Recall curves on MMLU, with ID and OOD domains.

Dataset	Domain	Metric	VanillaFT	R-tuning	SM
		AP	37.04	86.89	88.83
	ID	AUC	56.40	70.91	73.12
MMLU		ACC	68.63	69.37	69.00
		AP	37.71	85.78	88.18
	OOD	AUC	58.94	68.93	72.33
		ACC	69.10	68.92	69.11
		AP	67.14	89.43	85.79
WiCE	FULL	AUC	46.88	80.15	77.17
		ACC	29.59	78.12	67.35
		AP	47.59	90.08	96.99
Fever	FULL	AUC	63.28	73.37	78.55
		ACC	56.75	73.34	91.64
		AP	59.25	92.16	86.52
	ID	AUC	26.82	30.92	64.95
Parallel		ACC	24.02	29.33	59.40
		AP	57.08	87.72	64.95
	OOD	AUC	29.56	17.38	45.97
		ACC	19.31	11.47	37.96
		AP	61.55	68.63	63.95
HotpotQA	FULL	AUC	29.56	17.38	45.97
		ACC	19.31	11.47	37.96

Table 3: Single-task experiments of SM, R-tuning and VanillaFT on MMLU, WiCE, Fever, Parallel and HotpotQA datasets with AP, AUC and ACC scores (%). MMLU and Parallel are classified into ID and OOD domains, which denote in-domain and out-of-domain settings, respectively.

We also conduct multi-task experiments and exhibit the Precision-Recall curves on MMLU, with ID and OOD domains, respectively. As indicated by Figure 3, a higher AP score means better performance. This result indicates our model perform well in multi-task setting and show good generalization ability.

4.7 Abalation Study

To verify the effectiveness of each module, here theare also implement the following ablation approaches and compare with SM:

• SM-noR: our SM method without the replay mechanism. The "replay mechanism" here is different with replay mechanism in continual learning. It means to keep the inference ability for vanilla data, tenth training data are not

Dataset	Domain	Metric	VanillaFT	R-tuning	SM
		AP	36.12	87.45	87.02
	ID	AUC	57.37	73.73	71.06
		ACC	69.13	66.54	66.83
MMLU		AP	37.99	86.70	86.88
	OOD	AUC	59.08	69.66	71.10
		ACC	69.19	66.84	68.84
		AP	31.12	63.14	67.62
WiCE	FULL	AUC	42.6	45.38	48.07
		ACC	36.32	32.88	28.07
		AP	59.94	87.43	91.10
Fever	FULL	AUC	46.41	77.61	76.60
		ACC	35.83	74.38	75.96

Table 4: Multi-task experiments of SM, R-tuning and VanillaFT on MMLU, WiCE and Fever datasets with AP, AUC and ACC scores (%). MMLU results are classified into ID and OOD domains, which denote in-domain and out-of-domain settings, respectively.

Dataset	Domain	Metric	SM-noR	SM-noT	SM
MMLU		AP	66.99	70.24	69.55
	ID	AUC	64.21	67.21	65.33
		ACC	56.46	63.84	59.32
		AP	61.59	68.75	74.11
	000	AUC	53.50	57.56	64.12
	OOD	ACC	61.07	62.21	64.89

Table 5: Ablation results of SM on MMLU, comparing with SM-noR and SM-noT.

processed with transition rule when we do the skepticism modeling.

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• SM-noT: our SM method without the skepticism threshold.

Table 5 lists the ablation results. Result on the MMLU dataset reveals the full SM method's superiority over its variants, SM-noR and SM-noT, across various metrics. These results emphasize the effectiveness of the complete SM framework in uncertainty estimation, especially when generalizing to new domains.

4.8 Sensitivity Study

Since the skepticism threshold is a critical parameter in our approach, here we further conduct its sen-

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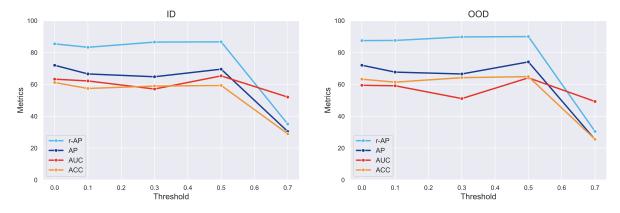


Figure 4: Sensitivity plots of MMLU metrics as functions of skepticism thresholds. Left: the ID domain; Right: the OOD domain.

sitivity analysis, as indicated in Figure 4. The sensitivity plots illustrate the performance of the MMLU metrics as functions of skepticism thresholds for both ID and OOD domains. A lower threshold may 466 lead to more conservative predictions (higher skepticism), while a higher threshold results in more liberal predictions (lower skepticism). The peak of each curve indicates the threshold that yields the optimal metric score. Based on this analysis, We determined that the threshold of 0.5 strikes an optimal balance, offering the best trade-off between sensitivity and specificity for our model's skeptical estimation.

5 Conclusion

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In this paper, we introduced a novel self-evaluation and self-justification method for large language models (LLMs) termed SM, by integrating the skepticism tokens and learning from reasoning process to enhance model's skeptical thinking ability. Our approach empowers LLMs to acknowledge their epistemic boundaries by responding with "I am unsure" when faced with questions beyond their knowledge boundary. This not only mitigates the risk of LLM hallucination but also fosters a more reliable interaction pattern with human users. Through extensive quantitative analysis, we demonstrated the superiority of our method across various data formats, domains and tasks, comparing with the vanilla fine-tuning method and R-tuning.

6 Limitations

The skepticism token models the self-skepticism level of the previous normal token. If the vocabulary size is small (less than 32000), the granularity of the tokenization results tends to be small, with many tokens representing individual letters, which is not conducive to the effectiveness of our method. The larger the vocabulary size, the greater the granularity of tokenization, and the easier it is for our method to take effect. And we do not provide strong justification for the choice of 10 skepticism levels, fewer or more levels setting could be better choices.

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7 **Ethics Statement**

In this study, we have thoroughly evaluated the ethical implications of our research and anticipate no significant ethical concerns. All experiments have been conducted using publicly available datasets and pretrained model, mitigating potential ethical issues. Additionally, we have strictly adhered to all terms and conditions associated with the use of these datasets and pretrained model.

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