

MAKING HEALTHY FOOD CONTENT FUN: THE POWER OF GAMIFICATION

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Burger or salad? Pizza or soup? You might be more tempted by the first option than the second, as many of us are! And yet we are all aware that eating healthy food is better for our health... But when, on top of that, the social networks get involved, constantly putting images of high-fat, high-calorie food in front of our eyes, preferring the healthy options becomes increasingly difficult. What's more, the algorithms behind these networks keep suggesting more and more of this content, further increasing engagement with it, i.e. interaction and reactions to it. This constant confrontation is not insignificant, as it risks, through repetition, having a direct impact on our food choices, leading to health and weight problems. This is all the truer because of the very nature of so-called healthier food, which generates delayed gratification, unlike higher-calorie food, which gives instant gratification. On the one hand, this makes it more difficult to promote, and on the other, it also means that engagement has to be maintained over time. This raises a major question: how can we change this dynamic, so that the engagement to healthy food and all the positive consequences associated with is a long-term one?

That's what this research is all about. To achieve this, the authors propose the use of a very specific mechanism, gamification, i.e. the use of game mechanisms in a non-game context. Gamification activates mechanisms to stimulate engagement, more specifically through the use of a particular process: the challenge.

What is a challenge? In fact, it involves overcoming a series of small obstacles to complete tasks, the completion of which enables the user to obtain a reward. More specifically, challenges that break down an overall objective into smaller ones are proving to be the most effective. Achieving these challenges generates motivation, which at the same time stimulates the user's commitment to the object at stake. They are even particularly well suited to food-based content.

But to this recipe we need to add another essential ingredient: pleasure. This is a critical determinant of engagement. It makes it possible to transfer the positive emotions felt when carrying out challenges to the object of those challenges, in this case healthy food.

The researchers wanted to show that using the challenges generates pleasure when using the digital platform, which leads to greater and repeated engagement with it. With one caveat, however: the mood experienced by the individual when playing the games moderates this relationship. To prove these relationships, the researchers carried out two immersive studies using real-life applications and scenarios. These studies show that the challenge does have an influence on engagement with healthy food content, through the pleasure generated by the game mechanisms. However, this is only valid if the user's moral state is positive.

A complementary exploratory study carried out as part of this research highlights the importance of another key element: the 'individuals' state of change'. Change is in fact a gradual process, contingent on a readiness to change. In other words, for a person to change, (s)he has to be consciously ready to do so. It even appears that it is on people who are at the action stage of this process that the challenges will be most effective. At the same time, the state of change has a truly critical role to play in the adoption and long-term use of health applications.

The gamified challenge therefore makes it possible to have a positive association with healthy eating, an association that is all the more obvious when pleasure is experienced in carrying out the challenges. This pleasure contributes to positive engagement with healthy food. This study opens the way to a better understanding of the commitment process, making it possible to promote content that helps people achieve a healthier lifestyle. As such, it provides additional levers for action not only for designers of health applications, but also for all those involved in promoting a healthier lifestyle.

What do these results mean in practical terms for designers of health applications? Will they enable them to boost their effectiveness? Firstly, it shows the importance of incorporating gamified challenges into applications. In this way, the designers will be able to increase the pleasure felt by the user, but above all to provoke a transfer of this positive mental association towards healthy food. Secondly, this shows that it is necessary to personalise these applications, adapting them to the stage of the change process that the user is at. Achieving this correspondence is essential for designers, as it will enable them to increase the effectiveness of the application.

It is ultimately for public health issues that the findings of this research are essential. According to the WHO, cases of overweight and obesity have tripled in the last forty years. Nearly 2 billion adults are at least overweight, a third of them obese. Given that overweight and obesity not only have a major impact on the health and well-being of the people concerned, but also affect the environment and the economy, it is essential to find ways of combating them, by developing tools that are accessible, but above all effective, for everyone. Encouraging a commitment to healthy eating on digital platforms is a small step in this direction.