BIZCOMMUNITY

How games can be used to combat vaccine misinformation

By Soraiya Verjee

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After the global spread of Covid-19 was the dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy theories about its origins and the motivations behind preventative measures like vaccination. These misplaced beliefs have resulted in substantive, negative real-world outcomes. A study published earlier this year found that when participants viewed articles rife with vaccine misinformation, their willingness to get vaccinated dropped by 6.2 percentage points in the United Kingdom, and 6.4 percentage points in the United States, even though they had previously indicated they would definitely accept a vaccine.

Source: Unsplash

Despite this, significant numbers of British and American adults have now been fully vaccinated against Covid-19, with the United States having one of the swiftest vaccine rollouts in the world. But rates of vaccination have slowed down considerably in recent months, now that most Americans who wanted to get the vaccine have done so.

In South Africa where the vaccine rollout has gathered some momentum, we are still faced with vaccine hesitancy, which has been further fuelled by the viral spreading of misinformation coupled with conspiracy theories.

South Africa and countries that are still in the early stages of vaccinating their population must tackle vaccine hesitancy early on and effectively, not just for the health of their own populations, but for the health of the global population.

Gamification can lessen confusion

Adhering to the World Health Organization (WHO) approved preventative measures is the only way to dramatically reduce the pandemic's impact, so cutting through the confusion to ensure that people across the globe have access to the facts, regardless of their varying opinions, languages and cultural contexts, is crucial. And one way to achieve this is through gamification and serious games.

People learn better when they are engaged with the content, and playing a game provides an immersive and rich experience. Serious games are designed to educate and nudge a change in behaviour and not just entertain. A game is a set of rules, has a goal and offers opportunities for feedback. Critically, games are also played voluntarily and require skill rather than luck. By giving people agency, and a safe space to learn, messages are subtly imparted, and resonate deeply. Gamification then refers to the application of gameplay elements in non-gaming settings. You harness the power of voluntary engagement, a balance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation - skill and fun - to motivate people.

Digital innovation like games and gamification have the dual potential of driving health outcomes and combating misinformation related to Covid-19. But this isn't a novel or new phenomenon.

Innovative gamification techniques

At the end of 2012, there were more than 30,000 digital health apps available in app stores, nearly 250 million downloads were recorded, and revenue earned amounted to more than $11bn. This demonstrates the depth of public interest in using digital applications for managing their own health. These apps are primarily designed so people can monitor things like their own sleep patterns, nutrition, and weight. What makes them successful is their use of innovative gamification techniques like mastery levels, points, badges, and leaderboards to encourage users to make small improvements to their own health.

Gamified health apps not only improve people's knowledge but have the potential to drive changes in attitude and behaviour towards health, encouraging people to take actions in the real world that improve health outcomes. This concept can be applied in a Covid-19 reality in order to encourage people to maintain a healthy lifestyle, ensuring they are better placed to fight off infection in the worst case.

Using games to combat misinformation is also not a new concept. With the coining of the term "fake news" linked to the 2017 US presidential election, journalists had to think outside the box to tackle the viral problem. They worked with game designers to develop a number of app-based and browser games aimed at educating the public. Some games used traditional gamification principles like quizzes and surveys, leaderboards and points for correct answers, while others, like Factitious, leveraged the Tinder swipe, which is a gamification function. The speed of swiping left or right on whether you think a news article is real or not creates an addictive opportunity for people to engage.

None of the articles or headlines featured on Factitious are made up. They're all published online somewhere. So if players want to do well, they can read the article content before swiping. This results in a behavioural change for people: checking an article they come across on Twitter or Facebook to ensure it's factual, rather than just sharing it without thinking. In the browser-based game's first three days, people played through 1.6 million articles and the average score for people who swiped through the game's 15 articles was 82% correct. With the Covid-19 crisis creating another epidemic of fake news and misinformation, Factitious developed a pandemic edition of the game to help people decipher truth from fiction.

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Gamification has the ability to drive health outcomes, improve knowledge, change attitudes and combat misinformation, and it can do it in a way that cuts across culture and literacy levels, and scales cost-effectively.

A game could be developed to demonstrate and visualise the impact of the spread of Covid-19, and the power of vaccines and other preventative measures like social distancing and improved personal health.

Once game developers understand the requisite learning outcomes, a game can be designed that challenges players to keep their neighbours and themselves safe from the virus. Players can try and fail in a safe space, receiving feedback on whether they've made the right choices. After trying and failing and trying again, players will come to understand the underlying facts about why preventative measures must be followed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Soraiya Verjee is a business development director at Sea Monster.