

“The Crowd Keeps Me in Shape”: Psychology and the Past, Present and Future of Health Social Machines

Authors
Web and Internet Science Group
University of Southampton
Southampton, UK
{a,b,c,d,wh,nrs}@ecs.soton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Health social machines ...

1. INTRODUCTION

Health and well-being are visible indicators of technological progress, as advances in healthcare and medicine are invariably reflected in increases in average lifespan, reduction of disease and suffering, and shortening of time needed to recover from illness and injury. As such, it is natural to ask how and whether the Internet and the Web, two of the most significant inventions in recent human history, have or may have an effect on health and wellbeing.

In this position paper, we examine a specific class of systems enabled by the Web and pervasive Internet-enabled systems, which we call *health social machines*. We define health social machines to encompass a broad class of systems that provide technologically-mediated interaction of large groups of individuals, typically via a website, app, and sensor-based online community. Individuals usually communicate and interact, directly or indirectly, through some mediated or moderation mechanisms, in order to collectively accomplish or address a health-related problem or need. Such problems, as we illustrate through examples we provide later, may be on the scale of an individual's disease or well-being management, to that of contributing evidence and insight to fundamental questions at the frontier of modern medicine.

We first describe the emerging landscape of health-related social machines, identifying sets of classes and characteristics such machines typically exhibit. We then focus on specific challenges faced by these classes in the longer term, and how emerging insights from behavioural economics and technological platforms may address some of these needs.

2. CURRENT HEALTH SOCIAL MACHINES: A BRIEF CLASSIFICATORY ANALYSIS

We first collected examples of popular health social ma-

chines through a iterative process which started with several popular blogs focused on health-technology, the “quantified-self” and “life hacking”, and following links that led to new announcements corresponding to online services and apps. We then clustered the collected candidates using a Grounded Theory approach. This process yielded three, partially overlapping clusters based on the following *major objectives* the machines seemed to support: *behavioural intervention*, *disease management*, and *collective sensemaking* of symptoms, diseases and treatments.

2.1 Behavioural Intervention

The first which we refer to as *behavioural intervention social machines* are systems that seek to help individuals achieve certain health related-goals by altering their daily routine(s) and activities in some way. The majority of systems we found in this category, which, itself is the largest of the three, seem to focus on helping individuals increase their general activity levels to increase fitness. Since these systems generally do not target any particular demographics or those with particular conditions, we consider them general, preventative health machines with a focus on increasing fitness.

A large number, but not all, of such fitness machines either require, or are designed to complement, sensor devices that are intended to simplify regular measurement of various vital statistics of the individual. As such, they are designed to be quick and easy to use, and, even, in some cases, worn directly on the body, for the measurement of physiological signals or activity levels, at high temporal granularity. These on-body activity measurement devices range from simple accelerometer-based devices (such as the FitBit, Nike FuelBand), that can approximately estimate the number of steps/distance the wearer has travelled in a day, to slightly more complex on-body devices (such as the Body-Media CORE) that measure multiple physiological signals in tandem with activity level. Other, non-worn devices include iPhone-enabled blood pressure cuffs (e.g. Withings' Blood Pressure Monitor), internet-connectivity enabled weight/body mass index scales (e.g., Withings' WiFi Scale), and iPhone-enabled heart rate, blood oxygen level measuring devices (e.g., Zensorium Tinke).

2.2 Disease management

A second class of health social machines aim to help individuals cope with various kinds of conditions, including illness, disease, and mental health. While a few of such systems are general and designed to accommodate a wide

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Workshop on the theory and practice of social machines @ WWW2013 2013, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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variety of conditions, most of the machines available today are designed specific to a particular disease or class of diseases, such as diabetes, depression, Alzheimer’s, autism, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Coeliac’s disease, and so forth.

2.3 Collective sensemaking

The final class of social machines, of which we only found one extant exemplar (i.e., PatientsLikeMe), consists of systems that crowd-source the understanding of disease, symptoms and treatments to individuals who have personally experienced them. PatientsLikeMe facilitates the independent report of symptoms that individuals are experiencing, the disease/condition they have been diagnosed with, and the effects of particular treatments on their conditions. The result of this aggregation, at large scale, is a model relating symptoms to diseases to

3. HOW DO SOCIAL MACHINES SUPPORT PEOPLE’S HEALTH TODAY

Disease management machines provide three kinds of support to individuals; first, like the behavioural intervention machines, to deliver actual interventions specific to individuals’ conditions. One of the best examples of such intervention delivery is BigWhiteWall, which delivers mental health services through an online social network through a full-time staff of professional counselors who monitor the site 24 hours a day.

The second role these machines serve is a place to exchange knowledge and insight, serving as both *answer gardens* [?] and *serendipitous knowledge archives* [?]. As answer gardens, these sites let individuals find and post answers to specific questions they have. As knowledge archives, individuals with similar circumstances can post and more easily stumble upon tips that are relevant to their particular situation(s) - which might help them improve their situation (even if they did not know to specifically ask or look for this information to begin with).

Third, these systems provide a mechanism of social emotional support, both in terms of empathy from people who have experienced similar situations in the past, or sympathy, from those who can relate and provide words of encouragement or advice.

Preventative wellness
Device-based: Nike+, FitBit, Withings, BodyMedia, Zeo App-based: RunKeeper, Site-based: Fitocracy, Traineo, Dailyburn, ExtraPounds, SparkPeople
Disease management
ALZConnected (Alzheimer’s patients), Prevent (Prediabetics) BigWhiteWall
Collective sensemaking
PatientsLikeMe

Table 1: Consolidated constructs of social machines.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS AS DESIGN GUIDE

People

4.1 Motivation

4.2 Salience

4.3 Explaining-away

5. APPROACHES

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported under SOCIAM: The Theory and Practice of Social Machines. The SOCIAM Project is funded by the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) under grant number EP/J017728/1 and comprises the Universities of Southampton, Oxford and Edinburgh.