

Social media chatbots have a great potential for public health

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A chatbot is a software or an application based on statistical learning, statistical analysis, and pedagogical theories. It aims to simulate a human conversation online. In practice, you text (chat) with a chatbot as you do with a friend.

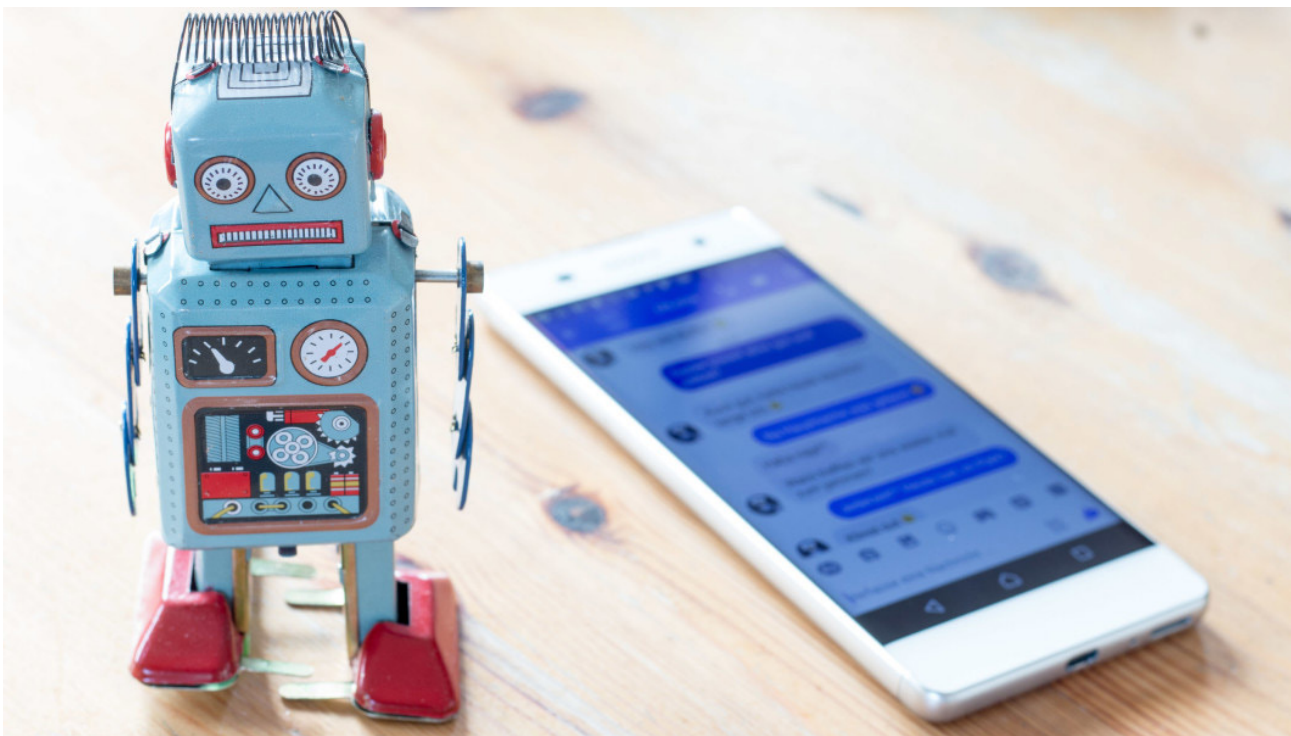
Programmed with questions and answers

Unlike artificial intelligence, which learns from its mistakes and makes “its own decisions”, some chatbots can be controlled by algorithms. It is programmed with every thinkable question and answer you might have on the subject. Chatbots are already being used in the health field, such as the

WHO Health Alert, a chatbot from the World Health Organization on WhatsApp. It provides covid-19 related information.

Dillys Larbi and Elia Gabarron from the Norwegian Centre for E-health Research, together with computer researchers at UiT The Arctic University of Norway and Bern University of Applied Sciences, have summarized the research that has been done on chatbots for public health.

The conclusion is that there is little literature on chatbots and health. This research field is new, especially the use of social media chatbots for health.



A chatbot in social media can send you a message encouraging you to exercise, reports Dillys Larbi and Elia Gabarron from the Norwegian Centre for E-health Research. (Illustration photo: Colourbox)



Widely used in other industries

The researchers found only 15 studies that dealt with chatbots and public health, and only half of them were about encouraging lifestyle changes. So far, few organizations have used chatbots to improve public health.

However, chatbots as a technology is not a new thing. People are already familiar with chatbots when they for instance contact the bank or an airline company. You find them in the customer service section on some organizations' websites, where you often are encouraged to use the chatbot instead of phoning up for help.

But from a public health perspective, it is quite unexplored territory. That is why the researchers state that there is a huge potential here.

Opportunities with health bots

The technology is mainly used as an intervention, for instance, to motivate people to lose weight or stop smoking. There is little research on use to improve general public health.

When a chatbot intervenes in people's health, the goal is to help patients become healthy.

Whereas if a chatbot is to be used to improve public health, the goal is to encourage those who are already healthy with good habits, to stay healthy. It can be as simple as being reminded to maintain good activities like walking.

This being a novel field, there is an opportunity to tailor the technology to be more efficient.

Encouraging messages can only work if people feel they are beneficial to them. This is so new to the world, no one yet knows if people think of it as a good thing.

Reference:

Elia Gabarron et al.: What Do We Know About the Use of Chatbots for Public Health? *Stud Health Technol Infor* 2020;270:796-800.

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