Designing interactive storytelling to reduce obesity stigma

Vegt, N.J.H.; Visch, V.T.; van Boeijen, A.G.C.

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perhaps most importantly, this study highlights how being categorised as 'at-risk' resulted in some participants feeling stigmatised, segregated from society and 'othered' by the conscious or unconscious assumption that people with obesity pose a risk to the general population during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Designing interactive storytelling to reduce obesity stigma

Vegt, N.; Visch, V.; Van Boeijen, A.
Delft University of Technology

People with obesity can experience vicious circles of stigmatization in which stigmatic experiences negatively impact their weight, thereby feeding motivations for more stigmatization. These experiences are caused by structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors, such as thin bodies in advertisements, comments from one's social circle, and a low self-esteem. The interaction between these negative experiences complicates stigma reduction and weight loss efforts.

Storytelling has the potential to change the expression of stigmas and make people aware of the explicit and implicit beliefs causing stigmatization. We introduce 'interactive storytelling spaces' as a new concept that can be used to evoke stigma reducing storytelling. Within such a space, participants can tell stories and listen and respond to stories from others. Facebook is an example of a digital storytelling space; community centres are an offline example. The advantage of storytelling spaces is that they can be designed in such a way that the participants can empathise with others and are stimulated to discuss and question specific topics.

To demonstrate this new approach, we developed a storytelling space by means of a game for community centres that aims to reduce the stigmatization of people with obesity. The game consists of a gameboard and a mobile application. The app verbally guides the players through the storytelling space by narrated stories and discussion tasks. The story in the game revolves around two fictional characters: a stigma victim and a stigma perpetrator. Participants choose which role they want to play. During the game, the players are confronted with stigmatizing situations that people with obesity encounter. To affirm the experiences of stigma victims, all events within the game have been collected and adapted from conversations with community centre visitors, people with obesity, and obesity specialists.

A major tool for guiding the conversation within a storytelling space is the variation in narrative freedom. This entails the freedom that participants have to interpret, interact with, and create stories. The game has three levels of narrative freedom: 1) the players choose between response options, 2) the players generate a personal response, 3) the players jointly agree on a response. The story in the game is likewise designed: in part one both characters encounter different obesity-related situations, in part two the characters meet each other, in part three they fall in love and proceed together. The varying narrative freedom guides the players in stepwise formulating their thoughts and the game narrative points to the importance of talking to each other.

Test sessions at community centres in low income areas in the Netherlands show that the game creates an open atmosphere between the players. This stimulates a positive conversation and role-playing about prejudices and stigmatizing behaviour. Players explicitly share their personal beliefs, so that prejudices can be nuanced. At the same time, players empathize with other perspectives and learn about causes and effects of obesity stigma on a structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal level.
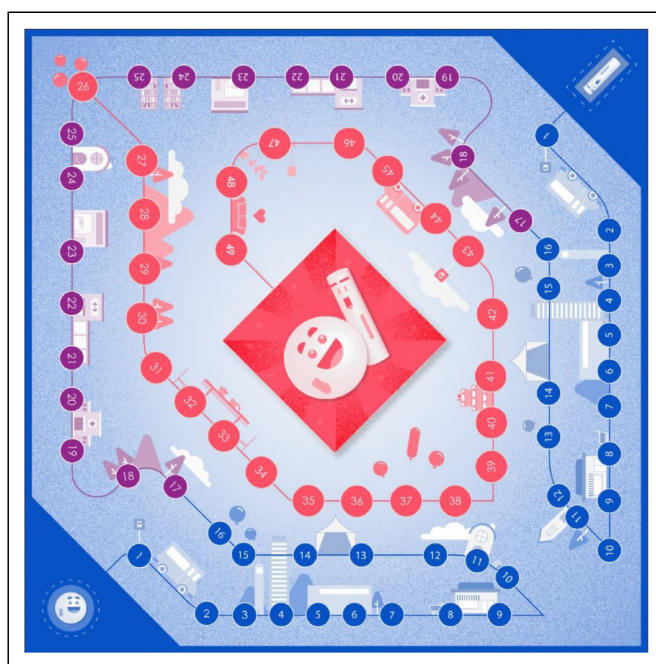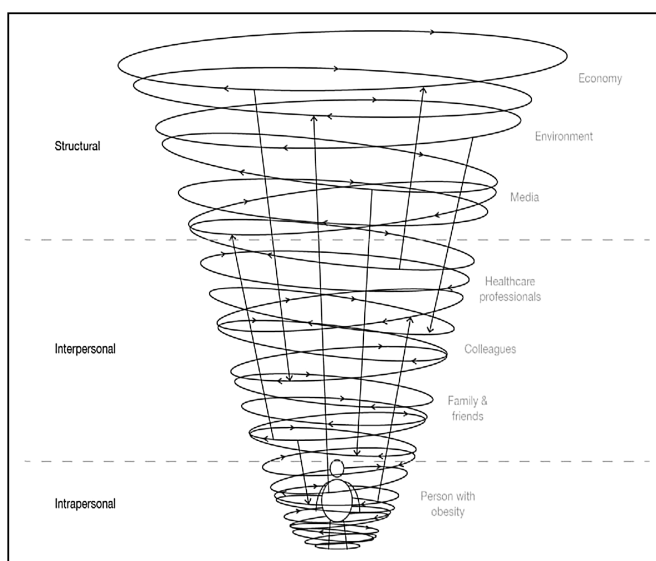

Fig. 1. Game App.

Fig. 2. Game Board.

Fig. 3. Vicious circles of obesity stigma.