

# Development of an Interactive Social Tool for Mexican Young Adults to Lower and Prevent Overweight and Obesity

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**Abstract.** In this paper we analyze qualitative factors that are affecting employees from 29 to 35 years old that work in Santa Fe, a corporate sector located in Mexico City, that are leading to overweight and obesity problems. The research phase got as a result that there is a lack of information appropriation towards alimentary matters, mainly caused by their lack of spare time and heavy work loads. Having this in consideration, the proposal is an interactive social tool to aim this lack of information appropriation. Based on User-Centered Design, Information Visualization, Situated and Significant Learning, the tool displays interactive messages on a table, through sensors and video mapping, allowing corporate employees to assimilate information while eating at their work spaces. Methods used in prototyping and testing were helpful to evaluate not only the tool as in its hardware, also the relevance of the messages displayed and the graphic solution chosen to show them (infographics, diagrams, text).

**Keywords:** Media-based social interaction · User-Centered Design · Information visualization · Usability · Health information technologies · Health communication · Obesity · Interdiscipline · Information appropriation

## 1 Introduction

Overweight and obesity are health problems that are affecting life quality of mexicans and national economic development. They are also risk factors to develop chronic non communicable diseases and are responsible of millions of deaths annually. World Health Organization (WHO), defines these terms as an abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that present a risk to health.

In Sect. 2, we analyze the State of the Art related to campaigns to lower and/or prevent overweight and obesity in Mexico and Latin America; also strategies and tools used to aim these problems, such as technologic devices, apps, online programs and even traditional mass media approaches.

The Sect. 3 concerns to the contextual study and the qualitative research. This section explains the process and methodology followed for gathering information, understanding corporate employees needs and coming up with a proposal.

In Sect. 4, we present the prototype and content developing, technical specifications and design considerations.

Next section explains first results of the evaluation phase: Usability and User Experience (UX) testing, with final users. Finally, conclusions and future work.

## 2 Background and Related Work

In 2014, the OCED<sup>1</sup> Health Statistics [10] shown that Mexico was the country with more cases of obesity around the world. In November 2016, Secretaría de Salud, a Mexican Federal Institution of Public Health Care, launched a countrywide epidemiologic warning because of obesity. Most of actual national campaigns are built with massive communication messages that hampers information appropriation from specific groups population.

According to WHO's 2016 Global Report on Urban Health [13], there are some factors related to urbanization that affect and increase overweight and obesity cases: transportation issues (use of motorized vehicles because of distance or geographic inaccessibility); longer commutes and work days; replacement of home made meals by industrialized and street foods.

In a first approach to the problem, we reviewed the State of Art, mainly with Mexican population, but also researches and papers from abroad, that could gave us a glance of how overweight and obesity affected other countries. Also the reviewing of public and federal strategies and a selection of existing tools commonly used<sup>2</sup>.

Most of the researches [1–3, 5, 8] urge Mexican Government to promote effective and efficient strategies to prevent overweight and obesity and to evaluate their results. One of the problems is that every federal prevention campaign that has seen light in Mexico falls into oblivion because of the change of political parties in Government. There is no concern for evaluating past strategies and campaigns.

Statistics from Mexican and International entities show the importance of the problem and its constant growth, but most of the researches are based on quantitative approaches [3, 4, 6, 9] difficulting the understanding of the problem in differents contexts. This generalization of information based on quantitative results, leads to strategies and campaigns based on mass-communication, difficulting messages appropriation from specific groups. Qualitative approaches in research are needed to understand specific groups behaviours and problems to propose functional tools and messages for them.

## 3 Contextual Study and Qualitative Research

We integrated a research team from different disciplines: Information Technologies, Information Design and Communication. We worked with 58 corporate employees from 29 to 35 years old with medium-high socioeconomic status with jobs at a

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<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

<sup>2</sup> Fitness Apps, Weight Watchers and coaching programs, gadgets.

corporative sector from Mexico City, Santa Fe, an urban area that went from being the city's dumping site to one of the most exclusive and wealthy sectors. We selected this geographic and demographic sample because of the raising of the problem in this group, according to Mexican federal inquiries<sup>3</sup>, and the urban factors described by WHO in the background section.

The research methodology was divided in two stages: the research phase and the prototyping phase. In the research phase, we used ethnographic techniques for qualitative information gathering through interviews, surveys, discourse analysis, contextual and participatory observation. After that, we analyzed information to detect which factors were more relevant for corporate employees, where we identified cognitive, affective, physical and social factors involved in alimentary decision making. In spite of the multi-variable problem we were facing, some variables were highlighted by almost all participants.

Results obtained showed which variables were the most important for alimentary decision making, such as time (subordinated to amount of work load and an average of 10–12 h worked daily) and peatonal accessibility to food establishments (made in a delimitation of a block from the office location). Also, times spent for food consumption, usually less than 1 h (not only for eating, as well for finding an establishment, ordering and returning to office). Corporate employees perceive that they have poor/regular knowledge in alimentary matters and they feel they can't learn by themselves because online information is too chaotic and they don't have time to invest in their alimentary education. They consider their close social circles important to achieve behavioral changes, especially the ones that involve food (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Informal street vendors are a popular way to get food in Santa Fe.

<sup>3</sup> Young adults with medium/high income at urban locations, mainly Mexico City, *Health and Nutrition National Inquiry 2012*.

## 4 Prototype

Once, factors and needs were detected, we were able to propose a tool. Our hypothesis is that communicating relevant messages through pertinent design and interactive technologies, could be more valuable for people to appropriate information. Our objective was to develop a tool to help them to learn about alimentary matters so they could prevent or lower overweight and obesity, but keeping in mind their lack of time due to their job responsibilities.

Our proposal focuses in the lack of alimentary information appropriation and the need of collaborative work to achieve goals, like information dissemination through community-guided strategies adapted to their lifestyles, specially in their tight schedules because of their workload and their geographic delimitation.

Through an interactive table with video mapping at their work space, we help corporate employees to learn about alimentary matters, to identify their own alimentary patterns and to relate them with their own everyday situations. Guided by User-Centered Design (UCD), User Experience (UX) and Data Visualization techniques, we worked in an iterative process with users to develop messages according to their needs, interests and their previous knowledge about alimentary information [7, 11]. This last part was really important to consider according to situated and significant learning, so the users can actually appropriate information. It doesn't matter how well messages are presented if people don't have cognitive references to link with the new information.

In terms of implementation, we divided the tool in two sections, the first one is the Electronic Technology, and this includes all the electronic elements that allow the interactivity on the table through wires and sensors. We used Arduino One, as the center of the system because of its open source nature. The arduino board controls all activities and events of our device.

The software that controls the arduino board its activated from a computer attached to the table. The code lives inside the computer in an integrated development environment (IDE) and is loaded into the Arduino board to enable events coded. The interaction is possible through pressure sensors attached inside of 3D printed, custom made tablecloths, and connected to the Arduino, and give the signal that someone put a dish over the table. This action triggers the displaying of the information using the same table as the projecting surface. The sensors connected to the Arduino, allow the communication through MIDI language between the Arduino software and the display technology.

The second section, the Display Technology, is used for information visualization and consists in the usage of a projector device to allow the projection over uncommon surfaces, called video mapping, a technique usually used in arts and entertainment. The projector is set with a vertical orientation to enable the displaying of the information over the table, and creating a multimedia environment, while corporate employees have their meals. The information is controlled and distributed using VDMX5, a specialized software for video and visual arts. This software allows an easy mapping of the table's surface and distributes the graphic elements in a practical way, allowing users to

control and interact with the messages displayed. Any kind of projector can be used, specially if it connects via Bluetooth to avoid more wires.

As part of the prototype, we also designed and constructed the table where the tool was implemented on, so we considered special slots to place hardware and wiring but it is planned to fit in any kind of table (Fig. 2).

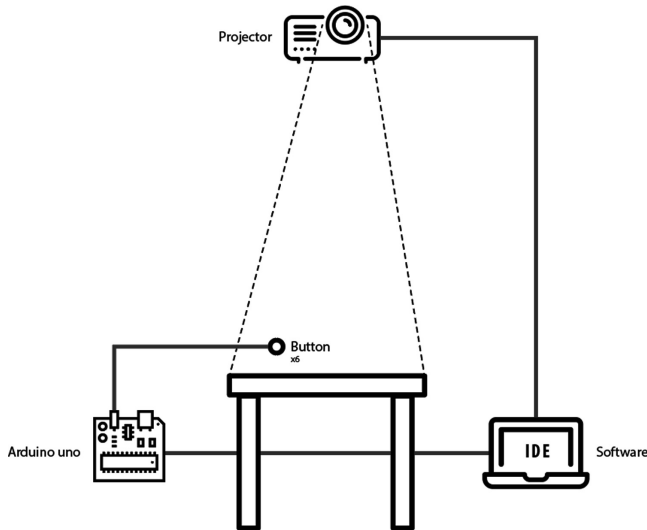


Fig. 2. Connection diagram for implementation.

#### 4.1 Visualization

Based on findings in the research process, we worked with Nutrition specialists to develop a database of messages grouped according to objectives of habits modification: (a) To increase plain water intake, (b) To increase fresh fruits and vegetables intake, (c) To decrease industrialized meals and fast food consumption, (d) To decrease sugar consumption, (e) To increase homemade traditional food preparation, (f) To learn alimentary terms, meanings and portions, (g) To reduce frustration while trying to change alimentary habits.

Using Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques [12] we identified some linguistic characteristics our population shared, such as commonly used vocabulary, slang, emojis, punctuation marks and symbols, such as the hashtag symbol. With this information we gathered a dictionary to establish the way we had to design messages, in order to be meaningful for corporate employees. NLP was also helpful to determine the length of sentences measured in amount of words<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Between 7 and 12 words per sentence.

Seventy two messages were made for the prototyping phase that were displayed in different ways, depending on their purpose: infographics, charts and tables, text, animation and diagrams. Graphic styles of messages were determined based on interests and trends detected on the research phase, giving every message a particular personality. In Table 1 we show some examples of messages proposed. Slang and popular sayings are lost in English translation, but they explain the general idea.

**Table 1.** Examples of messages proposed.

Message in Spanish	Message in English
Intenta un cambio de hábito a la vez. Cuando seas master en ese, incorpora uno nuevo. Puede ser semanal, quincenal o cuando estés listo. #JustDoIt	Try changing one habit at a time. When you master that one, you can try a new one. It can be weekly, every 15 days or whenever you are ready. #JustDoIt
Desayuno Ganador: Menos azúcar, más poder. Échate mejor unos huevitos, unas tostadas con aguacate o frijolititos.	Winner's Breakfast: Less sugar, more power. It is better to eat some eggs, toasts with avocado or beans.
Que tus tortillas sean de maíz para que la fuerza esté contigo. May taquitos be with you.	Your tortillas must be made with corn so the force may be with you. May taquitos be with you.

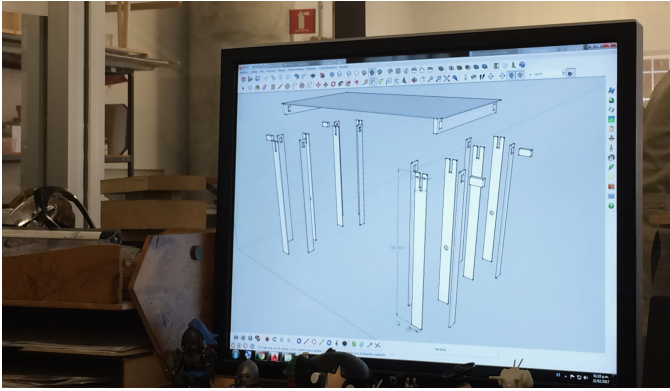
## 5 First Results

To place the tool on a working space where corporate employees do routine activities was perceived as a good decision, mainly because it adapts to their lifestyle. At a first evaluation, people wished they could interact more with messages, not only to select going to the next or previous message. They found messages to be appealing and easy to remember, and probably to learn, through using the tool in a repetitive way. Also, people evaluated messages timing (if they were displayed enough time). Time spent in each message needs to vary depending on how complex information on them is; infographics, for example, needed more time due the amount of elements and abstraction. We have to consider that some users read slower than others. In few seconds, messages in hashtags were easier to remember than longer sentences. Dividing messages in bullets helped for a better idea assimilation.

We also tested the tool in a prototype table made by us and with capacity for two persons, but we intend the tool to be adaptable for any kind of table, specially for more users to enrich interactions between them and to spread what they learned mouth-to-mouth with their immediate circle (Fig. 3).

We need to solve some problems, like avoid using wires to connect the device to a computer and to the projector. There are new devices, such as projectors for smartphones, that could help us with wireless connections.

Individual silicone tablecloths were suggested to contain the pressure sensors because of their material's flexibility and heat resistance.



**Fig. 3.** Table prototyping with Medium-density fibreboard (MDF).

## 6 Conclusion

We conclude that lifestyles focused on professional responsibilities have affected other personal areas, such as health care, mainly in a preventive way. Alimentary decision making is based in consensus, this means, they decide what to eat with their colleagues. This lateral influence is an important factor to consider when trying to enhance alimentary habits or to disseminate information. Spatial appropriation through interaction and teamwork as a community is helpful in learning processes.

At the beginning of the research we thought an app could be a helpful tool, but through the ethnographic exercises we noticed that corporate employees didn't want that, mainly because it required an extra effort from them to use it and also required time from them, so it could really work.

We strongly believe more qualitative studies are needed to solve mass problems by aiming specific population at a time. It is vital for developing effective strategies to know the user in every way: their needs, habits, wishes, feelings.

Our prototype is a first approach to a different kind of strategy, besides the ones used by Government towards health care, not only in the tool by itself, but also in approaching an specific group usually ignored by alimentary campaigns. Everything was developed specially for them to fulfill their particular needs.

In a future work, we want to enhance hardware so it can be easier to merge with the dining spaces, and not to require special features in the furniture. Also to develop a website to gather all information there, so if someone wants to learn more, he or she could access that information anytime and anywhere.

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