

Indirect Strategies Might Be a Better Way to Address Data Privacy Issues



Willingness to download health applications could be increased by addressing data privacy concerns indirectly. In Mexico, a survey experiment explored different priming prompts and their effect on willingness to download a diagnostic and tracing app.



The survey experiment revealed that mentioning government efforts on data privacy can backfire.



Surprisingly, reminding people of social media's usefulness did not affect people's willingness to download the apps.

CONTEXT

Diagnostic and contact tracing apps are a needed weapon to contain contagion during a pandemic, but individuals have been hesitant to download and use the apps, largely due to privacy concerns. These fears have also affected policy-makers' decisions.

A common approach is to take action to mitigate the potential risks to the individual and to reassure the public that the risks are low. However intuitive, the strategy of explicitly addressing the public's worst fears may be counterproductive insofar as it fails to credibly allay those fears and instead focuses attention on them. This study tests the impact of different messages on the willingness to adopt diagnostic and contact tracing apps.

PROJECT

The study took the form of an online survey experiment that was conducted in 2020 with more than 23,000 participants from the two Mexican states of Sonora and Guanajuato. The survey was embedded within a larger survey dedicated to COVID-19. It consisted of four groups, one control and three treatment arms, to which individuals were randomly assigned before stating their willingness to adopt a diagnostic app and contact tracing app. One of the vignettes emphasized the government's efforts to ensure data privacy, which has been one of the most common strategies to encourage app adoption.

Key Concept

PRIMING



Priming is a phenomenon in which exposure to one stimulus influences how a person responds to a subsequent, related stimulus. These stimuli are often conceptually related words or images.

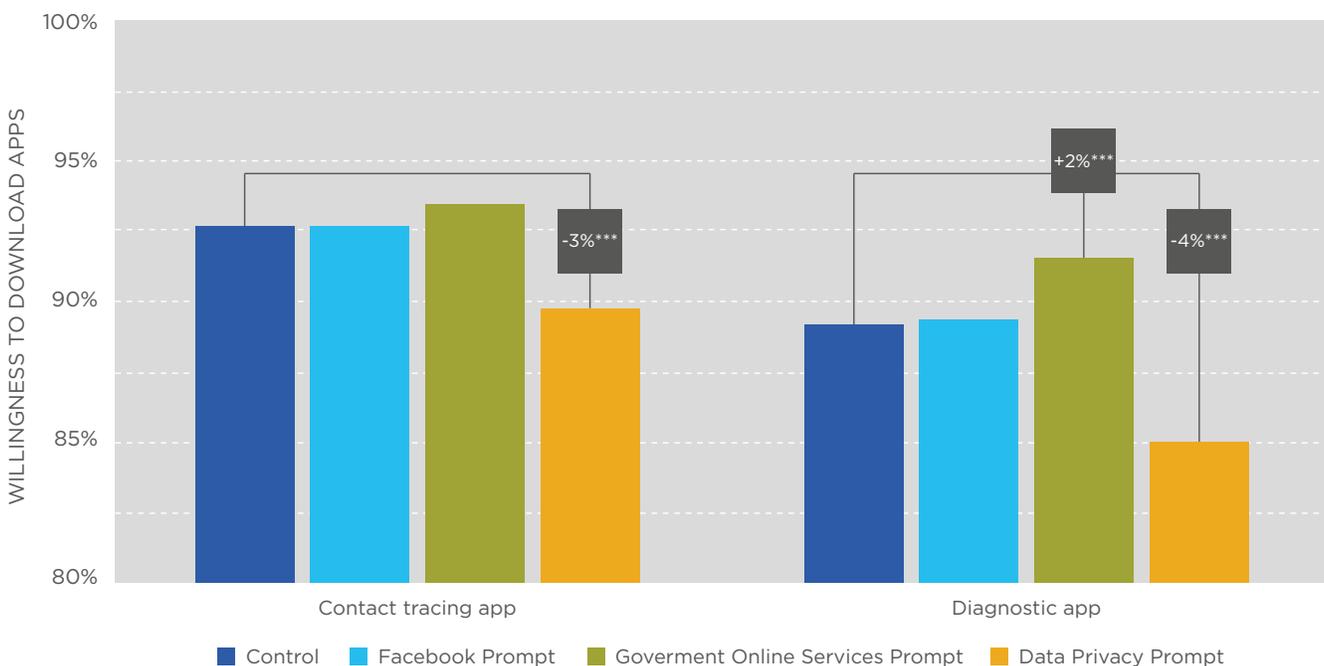
RESULTS

1. Results indicate that traditional approaches that explicitly address data protection efforts might backfire.
2. Individuals assigned to the treatment that referred to government efforts to ensure data privacy were four percentage points less likely to download the diagnostic app and three percentage points less likely to download the contact tracing app.
3. Individuals who were successfully primed for conditions that referred to the convenience of offline services indicated two percent higher willingness to download both apps than those who were not.
4. Results of a robustness test with another sample replicated the main study.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. An effective app promotion policy must understand individuals' reservations and be wary of unintended reactions to narrative reassurances.
2. Mentioning privacy concerns generates a "knee-jerk" reaction against the download of the app.
3. This study indicates that a strategy that indirectly addresses the issue of data privacy by outlining benefits of apps in other contexts might be more promising than a direct approach.
4. Avoiding mention of privacy concerns but focusing instead on the benefits of online government services increased the rate of stated willingness to download the apps. This positive effect may be due to the fact that this treatment highlights the government's positive record.

Figure 1. Results indicate that addressing data privacy issues directly in communications might backfire



*, **, and *** denote statistical significance at the 10, 5 and 1 percent level, respectively.

Key Concept



AVAILABILITY HEURISTIC

Individuals judge the probability of a future event occurring based on the ease with which an occurrence of such an event comes to mind.

Key Concept



FRAMING EFFECT

The tendency to draw different conclusions depending on how the information is presented.

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FULL STUDY

[Martínez Villarreal, D., C. Parilli, A. M. Rojas Méndez, C. Scartascini, and A. Simpson. 2021. "Do You Have COVID-19? How to Increase the Use of Diagnostic and Contact-Tracing Apps."](#)

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