

An illustration depicting a person lying in bed, looking at a laptop. A large, semi-transparent green overlay resembling a fitness app interface is positioned over the person. The overlay includes a circular progress indicator at the top, and three rectangular buttons at the bottom labeled 'DINNER', 'MEDICINE', and 'WEIGHT'. The person is wearing a pink shirt and blue pants. A small potted plant sits on a bedside table. In the background, a framed picture of a person is visible on the wall.

## Every Step You Take: India's Fitness Apps Are Exploiting Users And Workers

Tech companies promised young Indians prestige and money, but many find themselves working in digital sweatshops with low pay and no benefits.

SAMIA SINGH



## 1.

Earlier this year, an “artificial intelligence” chatbot and a human nutritionist doled out advice to 106 clients who had subscribed to a personalised fitness app developed by GOQii, an Indian health-tech company based in California.

Each of these clients had, with varying diligence, worn activity trackers on their wrists, taken photographs of everything they had eaten using the GOQii app, and uploaded these images to GOQii’s servers.

So when the nutritionist — who we’ll call Contractor to protect her identity (and reflect her employment status) as she has signed a non-disclosure agreement with GOQii —logged into her dashboard, she was presented with a granular picture of the lives of her “players”. That’s GOQii’s preferred term for subscribers who had paid about Rs 2,000 (around \$28) per quarter for the privilege of receiving daily praise, remonstrations or motivation to stick to their health plans.

“Good steps yesterday. missed deep breathing yesterday?” Contractor wrote to a man who was supposed to do five minutes of deep breathing each day.

“Great steps yesterday,” she said to a man who had walked more than 15,000 steps the previous day. These messages, reviewed by *HuffPost India*, would show up as an app notification on the user’s phone.

“Got back the Internet connection?” she asked a 42-year-old woman who couldn’t update her health stats because her Internet was down.

An errant player got a message of encouragement.

“Great steps yesterday!” she texted. “Had junk yesterday?”

“I didn’t have junk but took small quantity of mutton biryani with onion soaked in curd,” the player replied.

“The day before yesterday you had cake as well please try to maintain this once in a week.”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“Good,” Contractor said.

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Each interaction was logged by the system and used to improve GOQii’s AI chatbot’s skills and determine the monthly incentives of the nutritionist. Together, their task was to ensure that GOQii’s players engaged with the app and continued to upload their data — weight, eating habits, medical histories, daily exercise routines — to the company’s servers.

Much of this data was packaged and transferred further to data-brokers including [Facebook](#), data processing companies like CleverTap, owned by WizRocket, or health insurance companies such as Max Bupa Health Insurance, and Swiss Re, a reinsurance company.

GOQii isn’t the only company doing so; its competitor, HealthyifyMe, has similar practices. The granularity of intimate information that Indian fitness apps collect has startled privacy experts who analyzed these apps for *HuffPost India*.

As the day wore on, Contractor mechanically cut and pasted many of her interactions from client to client, making it hard to tell her apart from the AI chatbot, which kept up its own peppy conversation with a set of laggardly clients:

*“Hi <first name>, anything I can help you with?”* the AI texted.

*“do you like me to help you with some easy to make dinner recipes?”*

*“hi what’s your plan for today”*



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## 2.

There was once an expectation that a young, middle-class Indian with a college degree would get a metro-city job that would set her on the path to a steady income, a meaningful career, a house, a car and private schooling for the kids. Mundane tasks would be automated away and young professionals would have the freedom to think, innovate, and do what policymakers like to call “knowledge-based” work.

This has turned out to be true only for a tiny elite.

Instead, a significant number of college grads find themselves trapped on the virtual shop-floors of the data economy, stuck to their laptops and smartphones, performing a series of repetitive tasks in what appears to be the digital iteration of an assembly line. Where workers once assembled in shifts in cavernous factories, their 21st century counterparts find themselves slouched in their bedrooms, on short-term contracts with minimal benefits, providing time-zone-matched services to stressed clients struggling to make time for health, leisure or hobbies.

Fitness apps like GOQii and competitors like HealthifyMe epitomise this strange new world, where both work and leisure are refracted through the data economy: the human being, as app-user, generates continuous streams of data, that the human being, as data-worker, processes and monetises.

Contractor reflects this trend. Her father and brothers are old-fashioned doctors and they sparked her interest in healthcare. She has a Bachelors and a post-graduate diploma in nutrition and is studying for a Masters degree by correspondence. She hopes the degree will help her become a regional head coach at GOQii.

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For now, though, she isn't even a full-time employee. She is on the lowest rung of the company's hierarchy, earning a variable salary as a contractor nutritionist.

In August 2019, GOQii, a subscription-only service, was installed on roughly 430,000 phones in India with a daily open rate of 9.29%, suggesting approximately 40,000 people used it daily, according to analytics firm SimilarWeb. HealthifyMe — the biggest player in this space in India — was on 1.9 million phones with 98,000 daily users, according to SimilarWeb. HealthifyMe offered a different set of metrics: 11 million plus lifetime registered users, with 250,000 daily active users. In comparison, Fitbit, the world's most popular fitness app, had 5.3 million installs in its primary market of the United States, while MyFitnessPal, a calorie counter similar to HealthifyMe, had 3.6 million installs.

Both companies automatically transfer personal data (an advertising unique id and device information) to third parties, including Facebook as well as mobile analytics companies Branch and AppsFlyer, when a first-time user opens the app. Until August, both apps requested permission from the user only after the initial data transfer. HealthifyMe said that it has since amended this belated permission request.



GOQii earned Rs 11.4 crore (around \$1.6 million) in revenue in 2017-2018 and HealthifyMe, Rs 23.6 crore, according to the companies' regulatory filings accessed by the research firm Tracxn. Neither company turned a profit.

These companies promote “wellness”, a new economy buzzword, by pushing users to adopt healthy habits, monitored by coaches who send users tips, diet advice and a daily dose of motivation.

At the core of all these services is an ocean of data drawn from both users and coaches: data to tweak the user's health regime; data to “monetise” by sharing with third parties; data to train AI and improve worker efficiency.

While the data collection practices of technology companies in the United States and Europe are finally being scrutinised by regulators, India is yet to enact a data protection law. Instead, companies have deflected criticism by supporting Indian Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s controversial drive to restrict the storage of data extracted from Indians within the nation's borders. Modi has made “[Digital India](#)” – a campaign to bring all Indians online – as well as fitness and yoga a part of his public persona.

On August 29, Modi called for a “Fit India Movement”, urging Indians to make fitness a part of their lifestyle. On the same day, [GOQii launched a #FitIndia special edition wearable tracker](#) promoted by Bollywood actor [Akshay Kumar](#), known for his [proximity](#) to the Modi regime. (Kumar, the [Economic Times](#) reported, has invested an undisclosed sum in GOQii.)

Days later, GOQii founder Vishal Gondal's LinkedIn account [shared](#) a letter from Prime Minister Modi lauding GOQii for signing on to #FitIndia.

“Thanks Shri @NarendraModi We are happy & excited to support your vision of Preventive Healthcare,” Gondal wrote. “Together we will encourage 130 Cr Indians become healthier & happier & become the force of good @GOQii & @akshaykumar pledge our support #FitIndiaMovement #BeTheForce.”



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### 3.

At 9:30 am, Contractor was in her apartment, where she lives with her in-laws and husband, a sales executive at a newspaper, and their excitable Lhasa apso dog. More precisely, she was on her bed in her 100-square foot bedroom, where she works most of the day in her pajamas.

Contractor likes her job. She is happy to be working in her room rather than helping her mother-in-law with domestic chores. And she finds it more relaxed than HealthifyMe, where she spent 1.5 months. “They drove me mad,” she recalled.

Other HealthifyMe nutritionists and Glassdoor reviewers also described a stressful work environment with long hours. Some women said they developed a number of health conditions.

“We preached health, but we were the most unhealthy people,” one former employee said. “It’s no fun like that, why would you want to live like that?”

Over the next four hours, Contractor made five phone calls, showered and had lunch cooked by her mother-in-law: a medley of curries of spinach, potato, brinjal, paneer, and lauki with a portion of rice.

By 1 pm, she was back in her room, on her soft, inviting bed, in front of her laptop. Her GOQii dashboard said she had messaged only 12 of 52 players assigned to her that day. The AI would handle 54 clients. Contractor pounded her laptop with determination.

“Glad to see the steps,” she messaged one of her clients. “How about making it 8000 steps today?”

The next player on the list had not uploaded any data onto the app, which posed a problem. The dashboard assigns all players a rating, where the most active ones are labeled “wow”, as in, wow, their engagement blows your mind. The others are rated high, medium, low and passive.

If one of Contractor’s players turns passive, she can no longer message him. Her performance metrics would plunge, as would her salary. GOQii also tracks how quickly she responds to messages (usually within 15 minutes), the star rating given by her players (4.5 stars), and how often players respond to her overtures.

That last metric, called Engagement Percentage, is important because engaged clients are happy clients and more likely to renew their subscription. If the Engagement Percentage exceeds 25%, Contractor can earn maximum incentives of Rs 1,500 every time a client renews. Contractor was at 14% that day and said it was difficult to hit the incentives target.

She called the non-responsive player on the phone and fired off questions as a reporter for *HuffPost India* listened:

Hello? This is your GOQii coach. Did you open your application?

Did you resume your habits, such as drinking lemon cinnamon water? Or steps? Are you doing anything?

When will you start? You will become passive. Just open your app once. Or else your profile will go passive. OK? Even if you don’t use the band, open the app once.



Contractor's dashboard reminded her of her player's medical history.

If you are taking anything that is off, I can let you know. Because your diabetes is, HbA was 7, remember? We need to control that!

She ended her call and turned to the next player on the list.

The AI had texted him yesterday: *"Do you feel like you can stick to your habits today?"*

Today, it was the human's turn. Contractor was decidedly less judgmental, "How much water did you had yesterday? what did you had in lunch today?"



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#### 4.

At 4:30 pm, Contractor called a player who had non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. The person had signed up for [GutFit](#), a GOQii programme where doctors offer patients a complimentary three-month subscription as part of treatment— which includes medication — for irritable bowel syndrome, fatty liver disease and acid reflux.

Unbeknownst to patients, Abbott Laboratories, an American pharmaceutical and medical devices company, pays for the subscription offered by the doctor.

As part of the deal, Abbott receives aggregated, anonymized data from GOQii about the number of patients enrolled, engagement on phone calls and chats, and whether patient outcomes, such as weight and sleep, are improving, an Abbott spokesperson said.

The spokesperson confirmed that most GutFit patients are unaware of Abbott's involvement, particularly because while patients sign GOQii's terms and conditions, there is no separate consent form regarding the data flow to Abbott.

The Abbott spokesperson said no disclaimer was necessary as the company receives aggregated data rather than "personal data".

"GutFit was designed to meet applicable laws and regulatory requirements, including those related to privacy and data protection," the Abbott spokesperson said.

GOQii founder Vishal Gondal told *HuffPost India* that the company was working on a "detailed case study" with Abbott, a claim Abbott denied.

"We are not doing any clinical study with GOQii," the Abbott spokesperson said.

Contractor wanted to inculcate a few "habits" for her player, including drinking water before meals, reducing portion sizes and eating tulsi leaves, which are believed to reduce acidity. Such habits are part of GOQii's 'personalised' fitness programme.

"I'll give you a new habit — small frequent meals, which is to eat small meals throughout the day," she said on the phone as she pulled up a screen on her dashboard, selected the "small, frequent meals" template from a drop-down menu, and hit send.

"I'm sending you this to maintain your metabolic rate so your brain signifies that the digestion, metabolism is happening and there is fat loss and acidity problem will decrease," she continued. "Dinnertime is early in small frequent meals, if you feel hungry after that, drink a bit of yoghurt."

Such tips may help some users, and continuous feedback and monitoring by a human nutritionist can motivate some to stay on track. But as far as the personalised plans go,

interviews with nutritionists, users and health experts suggest most apps provide generic advice with minor modifications for each client. There are [few credible clinical studies](#) that show mobile health apps work.

“In theory, it looks great. But I think it was not specific advice,” said Mihir Kajanchi, a former GOQii player who installed the app in 2016 and used it for 18 months. “It was very generic stuff, which I believed they found out on Google.”

Kajanchi had a sedentary and stressful job in the financial industry in Mumbai and had put on weight. He used a GOQii fitness tracker for two months until he lost the charger. He continued with the coaching service because he found it convenient, but in sum, he didn’t benefit from the service, he said.

“If I had to rate my experience, I’d give 3 stars out of 5,” he said.

The science on nutrition has moved far ahead. Scientists have found that standardized diet charts don’t work for people with specific health goals — and could even cause harm. A spike in blood glucose levels after a meal, for instance, is a major risk factor for diabetes, but people’s glucose levels spike in different ways.

In a landmark study [published](#) in *Cell* in 2015, Eran Segal, a computational biologist, and his colleagues at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel tracked glucose spikes after a meal in 800 people and found that gut bacteria, genetics and other factors play a significant role in how people process food.

“There are recommendations that are generally good, like don’t overeat and don’t eat junk food,” Segal said. Beyond that, things get tricky. “Like whole-grain rice may severely spike your personal blood glucose levels, whereas it may not for me. So, [eating brown rice] may be a general recommendation which actually may be very bad for some people.”

In a sign of the times, Segal’s team is looking to parley these insights into a personalised diet company. They are developing an advanced machine-learning algorithm to assess a person’s gut flora and other factors to create a personal diet chart.

It is yet to be seen if Segal’s approach will work in the long run, but unlike India’s health apps, they are testing their product in a randomized clinical trial. Preliminary results suggest the personalized diets are effective in about half of their trial participants.

“I think anybody claiming to have some dietary intervention that provides benefits, people should also show its efficacy to the highest possible standards,” Segal said.

Tushar Vashisht, the co-founder of HealthifyMe, which provides diet charts for users, said his company does not need to prove the interventions work.

“We are not in the market with a new drug or a new form or diet or any new solution that requires clinical trials,” he wrote in an email. “There have been numerous studies, including clinical trials, on the benefits of a good diet, and good workout habits. At HealthifyMe we are taking an existing acceptable solution of eating healthy, and exercising well and providing it in an easy to implement manner.”

“We have not made any independent clinical claims,” wrote GOQii’s founder Vishal Gondal in an email. “Demonstrable benefits are for each user to monitor & report should they wish to share it to public.”

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## 5.

If Contractor performs on average as she did that month, she could earn about Rs 2.4 lakh a year, or about Rs 20,000 (\$280) per month. An annual GOQii renewal currently costs Rs 3,500, meaning Contractor would have to get at least 68 renewals a year just to bring in her salary’s worth in revenue.

This, of course, does not include the costs of running a tech business: significantly higher salaries for tech talent, server and infrastructure costs, financing costs, office spaces, advertising, the list is endless.

Some might consider Contractor low-cost labour, but she isn’t low-cost enough to turn these companies into profitable enterprises. In 2018, GOQii’s India subsidiary (the holding

company is registered in Delaware, USA) spent about Rs 4 crore on salaries for contractual coaches like Contractor — 40% of GOQii's revenue from subscriptions that year — according to its audited financial statements.

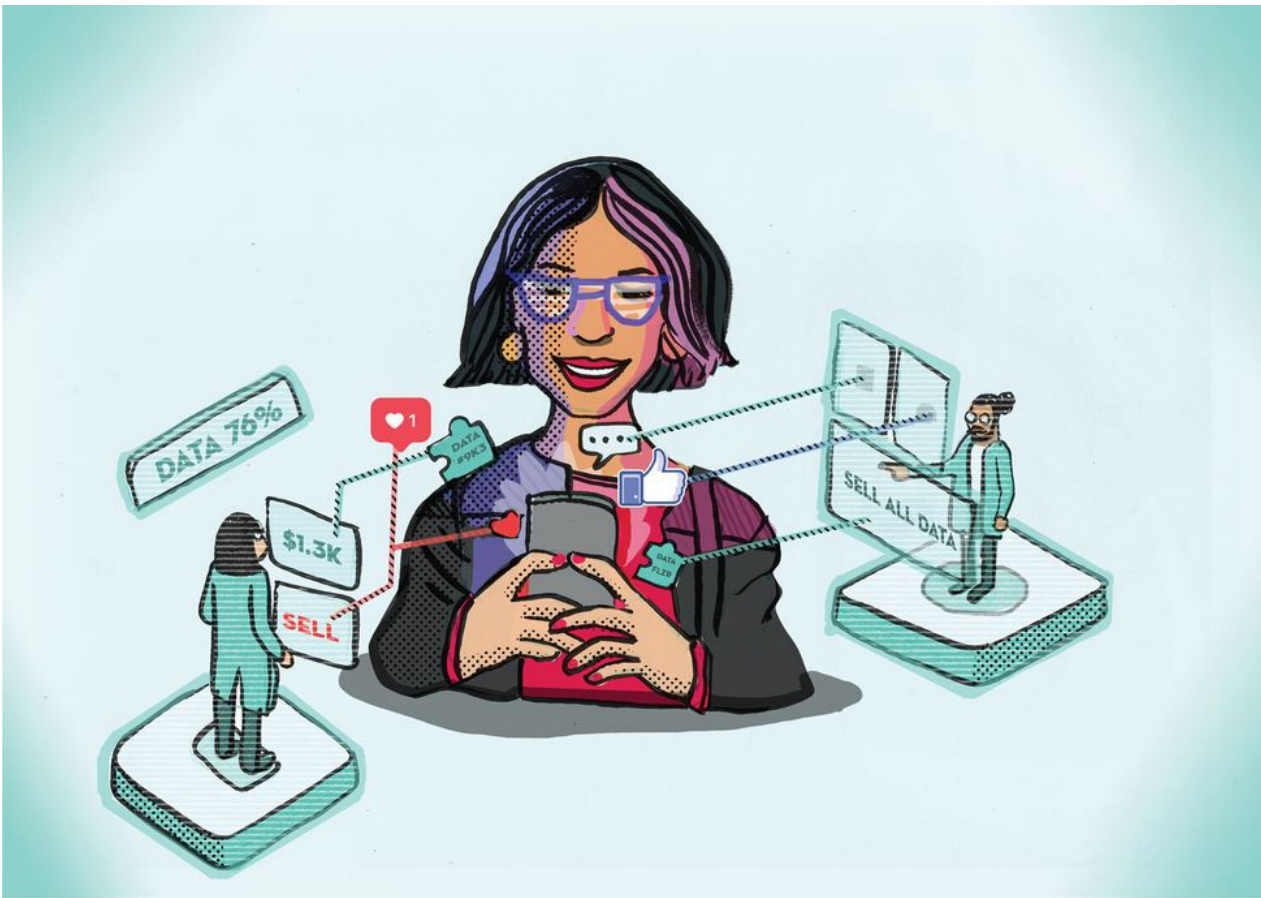
If companies like GOQii and HealthifyMe are to be profitable, they need to minimise employee costs. To this end, they are automating large parts of the coaching, even as they promote “personalisation” to sell their services.

In 2017, HealthifyMe unveiled Jarvis, an AI that monitors all data, chat logs, phone calls between coaches and users. Jarvis generates messages, which nutritionists can edit and send to users. This increases worker efficiency. Jarvis auto-completes 75% of a nutritionist's job, Vashisht said in a phone interview earlier this year.

In 2019, HealthifyMe unveiled Ria, an AI chatbot that doles out diet plans and nutrition advice for Rs 299 (about \$4) a month. Ria is so good that when given a choice between a human coach and the bot, users message the latter 54% of the time, Vashisht said.

HealthifyMe nutritionists did not know they were training Jarvis until Vashisht unveiled the AI at an all-staff retreat in 2017. “Other companies might have to spend millions of dollars getting humans to train AI, but here, the training is baked into the business model,” he told his employees. Jarvis would empower each nutritionist to handle more than 1000 clients at a time, he said. The nutritionists, who had unwittingly become bot-trainers, applauded.

“There is no AI in the next couple of decades that is going to replace humans,” Vashisht told *HuffPost India*. Rather, the AI will augment the nutritionist's role, allowing her to focus on more creative tasks, he said.



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## 6.

In 2018, GOQii spent about Rs 9 crore on importing “advanced” fitness trackers, according to financial documents. This investment — about twice what they pay for coaches like Contractor— gestures to the company’s long-term business strategy: data collection.

“If you have a play in [tech], if you don’t have a fundamental way of acquiring primary data and making use of it, it won’t be as large a play,” said Shripati Acharya, a venture capitalist at Prime Venture Partners in Bangalore who specializes in health technology.

Fitness apps are not alone in coveting data, which forms the backbone of most startups. Apps and trackers can Hoover up intimate data such as gender, age, location based on IP address, WiFi networks and GPS, what the users ate, how much water they drank, their steps, body temperature, heart rate, health conditions ranging from acne to fatty liver disease, medications and even their state of mind gleaned from interactions with the coaches. The data is stored in perpetuity, unless the user requests deletion.



“Almost a billion foods and exercises have been tracked on our platform and 10 billion steps,” Vashisht of HealthifyMe said in a phone interview earlier this year. “And nearly 50 million messages have been exchanged between our 500 coaches and our hundreds of thousands of paying customers.”

In this tech context, one of the health coach’s responsibilities is to keep the user data flowing.

The global health data market was worth \$11.5 billion in 2016 and is expected to grow to \$68.8 billion by 2025, according to Statista, Inc., a data firm based in New York. Although GOQii and HealthifyMe are yet to earn significant revenues from data-related operations, both acknowledge they will foray beyond coaching subscriptions to get on a path to profitability.

They are quietly, but rapidly, gathering a goldmine of data coveted by drug companies, banks and, most obviously, health insurance firms.

In 2017, GOQii altered its memorandum of association, a legal document that serves as the constitution of a company, to broaden its range of commercial activities to include “all of any kinds of life, health and general insurance”.

That year, it partnered with Max Bupa Health Insurance and Swiss Re, a reinsurer, to extract insights from user data to help them better understand the risk profiles of Indian consumers. This “would reduce the cost of claims” and “allow insurers to better price their products for consumers,” the press release stated.

Under the Max Bupa GoActive scheme, consumers receive a GOQii subscription. GOQii assigns them “health scores”, which are passed on to Max Bupa to calculate discounts for those with healthy habits.

The fine print on the scheme states that GOQii may share personal user data with Max Bupa, which the latter will treat “with confidentiality.” Max Bupa did not respond to a request for comment despite emails, messages and a phone conversation.

“In case of MaxBupa only post the user’s permission Health Score is shared with MaxBupa which is used to offer the policyholder financial benefits,” GOQii’s Gondal confirmed.

Other than personal user data, tech companies also deal in anonymised, aggregated data — sanitised records stripped of identifying information, such as name, age, and even IP address and grouped together. In true anonymisation, it is not possible to re-identify the individual.

In the case of Swiss Re and Abbott, GOQii shares “anonymised data” of a “limited user set,” Gondal said. In fact, data is anonymised whenever it is shared with a third party, Gondal wrote.

But he did not respond to *HuffPost India*’s questions about the anonymisation process his company uses.

“The argument is often, ‘well, [the data that gets shared is] anonymous,’ but we know that it is trivial to identify an individual if you really want to,” said Frederike Kaltheuner, corporate exploitation programme lead at Privacy International, based in London. “You have a health app in an emerging market that shares data with insurance companies, that’s a complete nightmare.”

As mentioned earlier in the piece, GOQii also shares aggregated, anonymised data with Abbott, the pharmaceutical company.



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## 7.

Once a company has a big enough data set, it can begin profiling and grading its consumers for business purposes. This is the bedrock of the data economy. It can use seemingly innocuous information such as a person's locality to assess their socioeconomic, ethnic or even religious background. All these could, in turn, be linked to health scores using artificial intelligence, which can spot patterns in data that humans cannot, said Charlotte Tschider, a professor of law at DePaul University based in Chicago.

"This is the risk with artificial intelligence," Tschider said. "It's not as simple as the type of data we have in the past collected, there are so many other data elements and types that can be collected that nevertheless indicates sensitive information."

At HealthifyMe, for example, Jarvis the AI noticed that users of a certain age who live in a particular area tend to be at risk of heart disease. Based on the insight, the marketing team targeted ads at relevant Facebook users on World Heart Day, according to former employees.

“We have done lookalike targeting on Facebook and Google based on people who have been very active on our app. By doing this, we end up showing the ads to users who are likely to find our app useful,” said HealthifyMe’s Shenoy. “We have done geo-targeting of users at country level and top city level, but nothing lower.”

Lookalike targeting does not involve sharing any user specific data gathered by HealthifyMe, Shenoy said, adding that the company had not shared user details like age, body mass index, height or weight, with any social media platform.

At GOQii, the AI observes each user’s response to nudges delivered either by the app or the human. It then delivers the right type of nudges to push the user toward the desired behaviour, Gondal said in a phone interview in April. Players who follow through, as validated by their data, earn discounts in the e-store and are celebrated on GOQii’s social network.

At a company event in 2018, Gondal was unapologetic about the special status enjoyed in the GOQii-verse by “healthy” users.

“Healthy people doing healthy behaviors are eligible for the discount,” he said at the event. “And if you are not healthier, sorry you may have to pay the full price or go to any other place.”

## 8.

*HuffPost India* asked Kaltheuner of Privacy International to analyse the GOQii and HealthifyMe apps.

Both apps, she found, request data-access permissions that Android, Google’s widely adopted phone operating system, classifies as “normal” and “dangerous” — such as accessing a user’s camera, reading call logs, sending messages and viewing and reading calendar events and details. In addition, the GOQii app also asks for a sensitive kind of system access that Google deemed a “special” permission request.

Both companies automatically transfer personal data (an advertising unique id and device information) to third parties, including Facebook as well as mobile analytics companies

Branch and AppsFlyer, when a first-time user opens the app. They request permission from the user only after the initial data transfer.

The apps contain a Facebook code, known as a Software Development Kit or SDK, that notifies the social network when the person is using the app.

“At least 40% of apps share some data with Facebook, which means that Facebook has a pretty good idea how popular certain apps are, how frequently they are being used, when they are being used.” Kaltheneur said. This gives Facebook granular insight into how a person uses their phone.

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Even if a user doesn’t have a Facebook account, the network still gets the information, which it claims it only retains temporarily.

A Facebook spokesperson said that app developers must “be clear with their users” about the information they share with Facebook, and must have a lawful basis for the disclosure and use of data. Facebook is trying to educate businesses about their obligations, the spokesperson said.

“Additionally, we have systems in place to detect and delete certain types of data such as Social Security Numbers, passwords, and other personal data, such as email or phone number,” the Facebook spokesperson said.

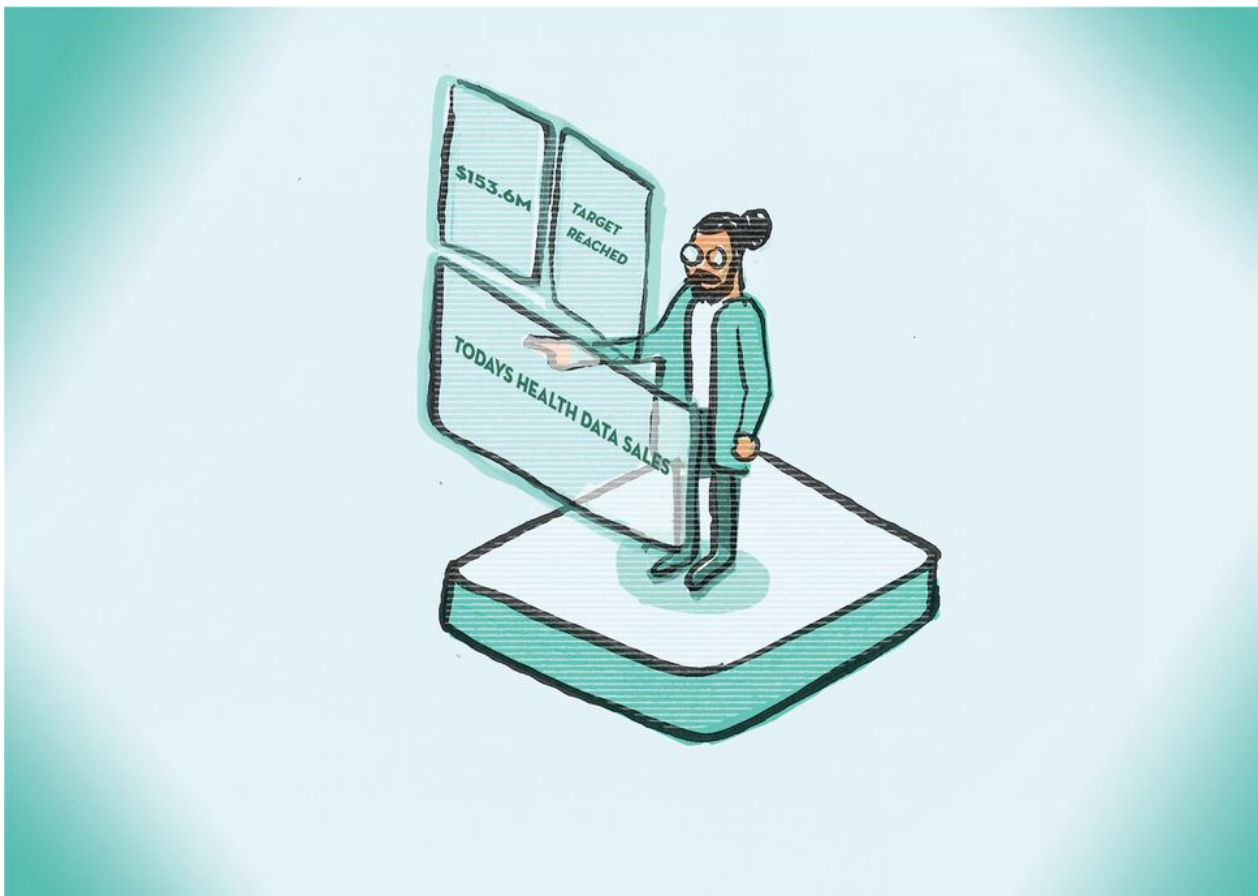
Users are powerless to stem this data flow, and most are unaware of it. In fact, the fine print of GOQii’s privacy policy states that even if the user’s system sends a “Do Not Track” request, GOQii will continue to track and collect data.

After a user signs HealthifyMe’s privacy policy, the app sends their age, email, gender, unique id, lifestyle, meal preferences, medical conditions, body mass index, location,

weight, food searches, and meal logs to a third-party analytics firm called WizRocket Inc, the parent company of Clever Tap, based in San Francisco and Mumbai. This information is not anonymous.

WizRocket helps HealthifyMe better understand their customers, target sales and customise the app to existing users. WizRocket's [privacy policy](#) states that it does not "review, share, distribute or reference" user data.

But until *HuffPost India* wrote to WizRocket in August this year, there was a loophole stating that it may share anonymised, aggregated data with third parties or the public. Almitra Karnik of WizRocket acknowledged the loophole in correspondence with *HuffPost India* and the company has since amended its policy.



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## 9.

GOQii's Gondal was unapologetic to the point of obfuscation about his company's data collection practices.



When *HuffPost India* asked him why his app requests what Google categorises as a “special permission”, Gondal denied such a thing existed.

“Do not misrepresent the situation,” he wrote in an email. “The truth is Google has 2 kinds of permissions: normal permissions, and dangerous permissions.” Gondal is wrong, as [this Android developer page](#) makes evident.

Gondal also denied that his app sends any data to Facebook, even after being sent a screenshot to that effect by Kaltheneur.

“We can confirm that we don’t share any data from our end with Facebook,” Gondal told *HuffPost India*. “If you believe Facebook API is doing this on its own, it will be best to talk to Facebook for further information, and not do a totally one-sided story.”

When asked why GOQii does not respect Do Not Track requests, Gondal wrote, “GOQii is a mobile-only app and therefore Do not track request is not relevant. It will be best if you can consult a proper technical person before you write any such stories.”

Once more Gondal is wrong. [Do Not Track requests are also applicable for mobile web browsers](#).

Jyoti Panday, a security researcher at the Telecom Center of Excellence at Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, examined GOQii and HealthifyMe’s privacy policies for *HuffPost India*.

“The language is written in a way to preserve the right of the company to continue to profit from [your data] even after you stop using [the app],” Panday said. She described the language as shrouded and vague.

In the absence of a robust data protection regime, Panday explained, companies take blanket permissions up front so they do not have ask for fresh permissions when they find new ways to deploy the data.

“Companies’ privacy policies are the default law of the land,” Panday said.

When *Huffpost India* asked Gondal for a response, he said, “our terms and conditions and privacy policies are drafted by the competent lawyers and consultants and any school kid

would be able to comprehend.”

GOQii’s data collection dragnet is justified as it is a “super app”, Gondal said. It is Fitbit, WhatsApp, MyFitnessPal, Amazon, Netflix, PokemonGo, MiBand, Virgin Pulse, Strava, Noom, Oscar rolled into one, he said.

“The permissions required for using the app is in line with what is required for the optimal functioning of all our hardware and services,” he said.

HealthifyMe’s founders, Tushar Vashist and Sachin Shenoy were more upfront.

“It is only after signup that we collect personal data, which includes email, height, weight etc,” Vashisht of HealthifyMe said. “If any user has disagreement, they have a choice to not proceed forward and not share any information with us.”

Shenoy said that at present, the company has not formed partnerships with third-parties, but they “reserve the right to share aggregated, anonymous, depersonalised data to build more efficient systems for private and government enterprises.”

Ultimately, Vashist said, all apps — including media companies like *HuffPost India* —gather user data in varying degrees.

“At *HuffPost* we believe in being transparent with users, and empowering them with meaningful controls over their data. All our users have control over what we can and can’t do with their data,” a *HuffPost India* spokesperson said. “Our [Privacy Dashboard](#) provides granular settings for user data and personalized advertising. Users can also download a full CSV of all the targeting segments in which they are included. For more details, please refer to [HuffPost’s Community Code of Conduct](#).”

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By the time her day ended, Contractor was bored. She had fulfilled her messaging quota by copy-pasting between windows. The AI would handle the rest.

Soon her husband would return from work, her dog would demand attention, the evening would fade into night. Outside, beyond her cocoon-like bedroom, her anxious players would log their exercise, pop their Gut Fit pills, photograph their meals, and upload their datasets for GOQii servers. She would check messages once before bed.

And in the morning, as soon as she woke up, she would log into her dashboard and message her players afresh.

“Good steps yesterday” she would tell a player.

“Great Steps,” she would tell another.

“Had any junk?” she would ask a third.

[Gayathri Vaidyanathan](#) is a writer who explores the gap between humans and the natural world.

Samia Singh is a graphic designer and artist based in Punjab, India. Her work can be [found here](#).

*This story has been updated to include alternative download metrics provided by HealthifyMe. It also states that HealthifyMe has amended its app to request user permission before sending data to third parties.*



**Gayathri Vaidyanathan**  
Reporter

[Suggest a correction](#)

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