Use of Smartphones by Older Adults in Singapore

N. Pang, X. Zhang, S. Vu, S. Foo.

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Purpose

The unprecedented penetration of smartphones in Singapore offers potential cost-effective and sustainable solutions for people to stay connected with their families, friends and communities. However, due to financial constraints and limited technology literacy, older adults are usually left out in tapping the benefits of such communication technologies. To reduce isolation and open their world to new experiences, Singtel, a local telecommunication company, has initiated a project called Silverline, calling for the donation of used iPhones and chargers to needy older adults. Our on-going study seeks to explore the extent and in what ways smartphones impact older adults' quality of life, as well as the unique and/or significant factors in their appropriation and reinvention of smartphones.

Method

Till the end of 2013, 27 used iPhones had been collected and gifted to older adults living alone, and we had conducted semi-structured interviews with 9 recipients (6 males, 3 females, aging from 63 to 82 years old) (Figure 1). The interview questionnaire was divided into 2 sections: Section A solicited data on respondents' profile such as gender, age, race, as well as life satisfaction and self-care ability; Section B used a modified version of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)\(^1\),\(^2\), including questions assessing the older adults' perceptions of smartphones' usefulness and ease of use, their internal and external control, voluntariness of use, as well as intention for future use. Whilst the questionnaire was made up of structured questions, they were also accompanied by open-ended questions which were later extracted and coded to ensure that responses were not confined to the limits of existing theoretical frameworks. The interviews, ranging between 1-2 hours, were conducted in their preferred languages and audio-recorded.

Results & Discussion

Although living alone, all our interviewees demonstrated an ability to live independently and expressed moderate to high satisfaction towards their current life. Generally, they had a positive attitude towards smartphones, especially its usefulness and playfulness, to the extent of some expressing that they were not willing for it to be taken away from them. Besides making phone calls to their families and friends, iPhones were more used to take pictures and play games – the main reason being its ability to overcome loneliness and boredom. Only one older adult was active on social networking site (Facebook) to keep in touch with his families overseas. Findings were also gathered with regards to the problems encountered by older adults due to their declined physical, cognitive and perceptual abilities: difficulties to find certain applications or needed information (e.g. sms, contact) quickly on the phone, the ability to update/download new apps from the online store, or to use the phone to take a clear picture. Nevertheless, those problems were easily overcome by persistence or seeking help from others (e.g. families, friends, neighbours). For older adults, the social context of use is thus ar-
gued to be one of the most significant in driving the adoption and appropriation of smartphones. Some interviewees also viewed the smartphone as a status symbol, as they perceived that those with smartphones are younger, and have good income. Unsurprisingly, Cost is a major hurdle for their adoption of smartphone.

![Figure 1: Interviewees Playing with iPhones](image)

**References**