

MOBILE TELEPHONY AMONG THE ELDERS: FIRST RESULTS OF A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

By means of a qualitative approach we analyze the processes of adoption of mobile telephony within a sample of senior individuals living in the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). First results of an ongoing research allow us to discuss the position mobile devices occupy within their personal system of communication channels and to identify different ways of appropriation and use.

KEYWORDS

Elderly population; Mobile telephony; Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain).

1. INTRODUCTION

The age factor plays differently regarding adoption and uses of mobile telephony. This evidence has been discussed since the first stages of popularization of this technology (see for instance, Ling, 2002 or 2004). As we have argued elsewhere, there is a general trend "toward the general diffusion of mobile communication within the whole population, with age continuing to specify the type of use rather than the use itself" (Castells et al., p. 41).

Seniors must be carefully studied when it comes to understanding the use and appropriation of mobile communication. In this cohort it is important the effective age at which mobile communication has been incorporated: it is not the same to become old already having a mobile in your pocket than being a first-time mobile user in, for instance, your seventies.

Research on mobile communication is mostly focused in teenagers, young people and adults while analyses on the elders are limited. Exceptions are Charness et al. (2009), Conci et al. (2009), Karnowski (2008), Lenhart (2010), Ling (2008) or Mohd (2008).

The aim of this paper is to contribute with empirical evidence to better understand the processes in operation for the acceptance, or rejection, of mobile telephony among senior population. For doing so we develop a qualitative empirical research in the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). The ongoing fieldwork and preliminary results of the research are presented here.

2. ANALITICAL FRAMEWORK

Available evidence points that elderly persons are less inclined to use mobile communication; however, they are "catching up to the levels of mainstream innovation, but largely lag behind in the use of new services integrated into the technology" (Karnowski et al., 2008; p.191). Recent statistics on the use of mobile phones and the use of advanced mobile services from Eurostat confirm this trend (Eurostat, 2010).

Voice calls is the main service for this age group, with very little acceptance of SMS (Ling 2002, 2004, 2008; Lenhart, 2010; Kurniawan et al., 2006). "Initial use is characterized by caution" (Oskman, 2006, p.14), but once the elderly person is used to it, the device is gradually incorporated in all activities of everyday life. However, very often the members of the elderly person's personal network are the proactive part of the communication (Ling, 2008; Mohd et al., 2008). This is true at least in the first stages of adoption, while some differences in the pattern of use have been described for different countries (for instance, see Conci et

al., 2009 Italy; Kurniawan, 2008 for England; or Oksman, 2006 for Finland). From the elderly perspective, use depends on personal willingness as well as on the expectations that others put on them to use mobile features. Nevertheless, reluctance could turn into acceptance if the service meets the needs of the person (Ling, 2008).

In any case, the use of the mobile phone must be understood within the personal system of communication channels of each individual. We define it as the set of communications channels that are used in a regular basis: fixed phone, mobile phone, Internet, face-to-face communication and even letters or telegrams. Each person would identify a different set as being part of her everyday life, being use –not ownership, the key element. This set of channels might be framed by individual attitudes and aptitudes, as well as by personal interests and socially imposed interests or pressures (Fernández-Ardèvol, 2010).

Therefore, in analytical terms a main research question arises: Which is the position that mobile telephony occupies within the personal system of communication channels among the elderly population? The first necessary step to answer this question is to explore the way senior persons use mobile phones with a qualitative approach.

3. EMPIRICAL APPROACH AND FIRST RESULTS

The qualitative fieldwork is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). This method is effective in capturing the links among different aspects of social practices and representations. Selection axes are based on: age, with two wide age cohorts: young seniors (60-74 years old) and elder seniors (75+ years old); gender; housing (own home or retirement home) and instruction level (up to secondary level, secondary level or more). In order to triangulate information, fieldwork includes direct observation of the handset –whenever possible and pertinent– by taking a picture of the mobile phone of the interviewee and observing how she handles the device.

In Catalonia, 93% of the population between 16 and 74 years old living in private households are mobile users; a figure that decreases to 88% in the 55-64 years cohort and is reduced to 75% in the 65-74 cohort (2010 data, source FOBSIC, 2010). These data are provided by household surveys, in which population older than 75 years old and population living in collective households, as retirement homes, are excluded. However, the available information indicates that non-users still constitute a significant group among seniors. For this reason we include non mobile users in our sample population. Besides, their subjective experience will bring relevant information to better understand the relationship of the elder with mobile telephony.

3.1 Surveyed Population

In the initial stage of the research, 22 individuals were interviewed between 31-Oct.-2010 and 14-Jan.-2011. Table 1 gathers the most relevant characteristics of the current sample.

Table 1. Sample composition (22 individuals).

		Own Home	Retirement Home			Own Home	Retirement Home
Gender	Female	6	10	Presence of disabilities	Mobility Cognitive	0	3
	Male	4	2			0	5
Age group	60 – 74 years old	5	3				
	75 years old +	5	9				
Level of studies	Primary or less	7	10	ICT	Mobile owner	7	12
	Secondary or more	3	2		Fixed line owner	10	2
					Internet user	4	0
Total		10	12				

As fieldwork is still ongoing, selection axes are not as balanced as they must be at the end of the research. At this point, there are more old seniors than young seniors (8 vs. 14) and more women than men (16 vs. 6). Most of them have primary studies or less (7). In the sample, 10 seniors used to live in their own home while 12 used to live in a retirement home. The majority of the surveyed individuals are mobile owners (19). Seniors living in their own home always have a landline (10) while in retirement homes the situation is clearly different (only 2 individuals have their own fixed line). Finally, Internet is not commonly used among the interviewees, with just 4 on-line individuals.

3.2 Initial Results

The first analysis of the interviews confirms that voice calls constitutes the most popular service. Besides, all the individuals below 70 years old are daily users of SMS and missed calls (those not intended to be answered), with the exception of a disabled women (64 years old) living in a retirement home. The mobile phone is usually carried by all the individuals or left closed enough to hear incoming calls. However four individuals used to leave the device “safe” at home or in the dwelling’s room. Besides, we can identify two common trends in the sample: first, almost all the individuals show a combined use of mobile and fixed phones; second, a set of “assisted users” can be identified:

- Combined use of mobile and fixe phones: economic and usability rationale

The general strategy is to use the mobile phone to call a mobile line and the fixed phone to call a landline, as stated by different interviewees. The monetary cost of the service is widely taken into account when deciding the communication channel. This is valid in the case of a very conscious consumer (woman, 66) as well as for a highly telephone-consumerist woman (78 years old). In any case, the goal is to maximize communication and minimize monetary costs. In some cases, younger relatives insist on reminding this cost-control strategy.

While at home, the selection of the phone depends on kind of phone line the user is calling to, this general rule can be redefined in the retirement home, as the fixed phone in the personal system of communication tools might be a public phone in the building or a landline in the room. Some individuals living in a retirement home show a different behavior, as they use exclusively the mobile phone in their everyday life communications (2 men and 2 women) and avoid using the landline.

As a cost control strategy, missing calls are commonly used, mainly among the young seniors. This zero-cost communicative behavior is always used with the closest family (spouse and/or children) and can be used with friends of the same age.

Usability reasons support the preference for fixed phones as well, as “it is easier to use it” (woman, 78; original in Catalan). A 96 year-old woman preferred the fixed phone of her room in a retirement home as she only had to ask the reception for the number she wanted to talk; while she kept the mobile phone always turned off as she found the mobile difficult to handle and, therefore, useless. Among the three non-owners in the sample, two of them reported usability concerns for not having a mobile phone.

- Assisted users

In the sample we can indentify basic users (they know few applications and use them, the majority were elder senior), intermediate users (effective, adaptable and autonomous users; the majority were younger users) and expert users (innovative ones that share contents and support other persons; only among younger seniors in the sample). A general rule applies: the younger the person, the higher her level of use.

In addition we are able to identify an even lowest level of use, what we call “assisted users”. All of them are older seniors and/or show a certain level of dependency. These users need the help of another person to use the mobile phone in a regular basis. Indeed, a relative or a caregiver takes care of the configuration and maintenance of the device, while the user tends to deconfigure it without noticing it. In consequence, they do with the mobile phone what they have been told to do -or what they can remember to do. Therefore they do not explore the handset to prevent any damage on it. And they are not autonomous users because they do not feel they can control the device. These users show at least two of these characteristics: they are only able to identify and use the green button (to pick calls up) and the red button (to put calls down); they deal directly the numbers, as their phonebook is empty or they are not able to use it; alternatively, they only call to numbers in the phonebook because they are not able to directly dial any number; SMS or any other service beyond voice communication is not used or even not understood; they leave the handset permanently in a fixed place to keep it safe; they have the handset permanently plugged in; or they do not know how to turn the phone off or how to set it to silent.

4. CONCLUSION

Gathered information on elder mobile users allows us to conclude, first of all, that there is a common combined use of mobile and fixed phones. This strategy might be related to the technology used by the rest of the agents and individuals they tend to communicate with: there is a clear priority to use mobile phones to

call other mobiles and to use fixed phones to call landlines. On the other hand, as the penetration of mobile phones is lower among the elder population, it might be the case that an important part of the personal network of the (older) seniors would reject to call to a mobile phone and/or to use non-voice services. Therefore, besides the usability dimension, the use of a landline could be reinforced by other members of the personal network when mediated communication is needed.

Secondly, we can identify a set of individuals that are likely to always be “assisted users” due to their difficulties to understand and/or apprehend how to manipulate the device. Usability, in this sense, is a main issue to be taken into account.

Results are based in the first interviews developed within the framework of an ongoing research project, so more fieldwork is needed to have a full picture of the situation. For instance, more observations and a more balanced sample in terms of the selection axes are needed, as well as more evidence regarding non mobile owners.

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