

Application Fields and Innovative Technology

Interaction with ElliQ, an AI-Driven Social Companion Robot among Older People S. Y. Kang, J.K. Kim, K. Pelish. *Gerontechnology* 25(s)

Purpose There is a need for new technology to be introduced and delivered differently to older adults, especially living in rural areas. To combat social isolation, a local office for Aging has been distributing social companion robot, ElliQ to older adults free of charge. However, no research study or systematic evaluation has assessed its impact or benefit for older adults. Social isolation affects more than 20% of community-dwelling older adults, posing significant public health risks. Additionally, more than 40% of U.S. adults over 60 report loneliness, which is closely linked to social isolation [1]. Although social isolation may stem from personal preference, it can be detrimental to the person's physical and mental health. Older adults in rural areas are particularly vulnerable due to geographical isolation and limited resources. Loneliness is a major public health challenge among older adults, considered as harmful as smoking [2, 3], and older Americans are more likely to live alone compared to their counterparts in other countries [4]. **Methods** The PI used two different recruitment methods. The PI reached out to recipients of ElliQ from the local Office for Aging. The local Office of Aging confirmed with individuals who have received the ElliQ whether they were willing to have their contact information shared with the PI. If they agreed, the Office of Aging provided the contact information of these individuals to the PI. The PI was able to interview 9 participants for 45 to 60 minutes using a semi-structured interview guide, participants were asked to describe their experience with their ElliQ and to share their concerns about accessibility to ElliQ. The audio recording(s) were used to conduct data analysis in order to identify common themes across participants' responses. For participating in the short survey and the interview, the PI provided a \$20 gift card. **Results and Discussion** Among the 9 participants, 2 people returned ElliQ and 7 people kept it. This study identified several themes expressed by participants. First impressions such as excitement and positive perception of AI technology played an important role in their acceptance use of ElliQ. ElliQ was helpful for relieving loneliness but not in improving physical health. However, two participants returned it due to some drawbacks, such as concerns about the invasion of privacy. In order to optimize the benefits of ElliQ for any individuals who may feel lonely, the ongoing communication among the local agency providers and the recipients as well as the manufacturer of ElliQ. This project's findings will be shared with local and state agencies to help them deliver their existing services more effectively and efficiently. More broadly, this study's findings will be helpful for identifying important topics related to robotic pets among community-dwelling older people. This knowledge will assist in designing emerging technology for older adults.

References

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