

Aging and Disability

Assistive Technology Access and Use Among Older Adults from Different Canadian Cultural Groups

W.B. Mortenson; N. Chang, C-T Tsai*, C. Yu, B Kardeh, S. Gang, D. Song, J. Perkins, S. Huot, L. Hurd
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Purpose Assistive technology helps people with disabilities participate in daily activities, yet equitable access for immigrants remains a concern [1]. According to the latest Canadian census, 62% of those who immigrated to Canada between 2016 and 2021 were from Asia [2]. It is projected that the Chinese population in Canada will double from 1.7 million in 2016 to 3.1 million by 2041 [3]. Immigrant groups, ethnic minorities, and older adults face technical, social, accessibility, language, and cultural barriers to accessing healthcare services[4]. Therefore, we conducted a study to explore the experiences of accessing and using assistive technology among three groups in Metro Vancouver: 1) first-generation immigrants whose first language was Mandarin or Cantonese (regardless of country of origin), 2) second and subsequent generation Mandarin or Cantonese-speaking immigrants, and 3) Canadian-born citizens of European descent whose first language was English. **Method** We conducted qualitative interviews in English or Chinese as the primary means of data collection. Participants shared their experiences accessing and using assistive technology, and how their social identities (i.e., race, gender, and (dis)ability) shaped these experiences. We analyzed data thematically. **Results and Discussion** Our study included 27 participants, including twelve first-generation Chinese-speaking immigrants, two second and subsequent generation Chinese-speaking immigrants, and 13 native-born English-speaking Canadians. Ten identified as male and 17 identified as female. 13 participants were 50 to 64 years old (aging with disability), and 14 participants were aged 65 or older. All participants completed high school and 23 participants completed post-secondary education. Participants self-reported conditions they lived with, which included spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, hearing loss, and brain injury. Our analysis identified three main themes. 1) "Adjusting to a new self" explored the bidirectional relationship of assistive technology use and identity. 2) "A tug of war" described challenges participants experienced navigating social expectations and relationships. 3) "Encountering roadblocks" examined systemic barriers to assistive technology access and use. The first-generation Chinese-speaking immigrant group often reported negative reactions from family regarding assistive technology use, whereas English-speaking participants experienced support. Chinese-speaking participants described how cultural background may influence their access to family caregivers, impacting their family's perception of the usefulness of assistive technology. All groups highlighted financial barriers to access and coverage gaps in existing funding systems. Our results highlight an ongoing need to address existing barriers to assistive technology use and the additional difficulties non-English speaking people face accessing assistive technology in Canada. Across all cultural groups, more formal and informal social supports are needed to facilitate adjustment to living with a disability. Non-English-speaking immigrants face additional barriers to assistive technology access, because of the need for translation services and resources in non-English languages. Existing funding systems also exclude a sizable portion of the disabled community, thus expanding coverage is needed to ensure equitable access for all. Future research should explore the effectiveness of targeted interventions to address systemic barriers to assistive technology access and investigate differences in assistive technology user experience in people with disabilities of different age groups.

References

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Affiliation: Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, University of British Columbia, Canada

Email: ben.mortenson@gmail.com