

M.M. BEKKER, Y. LU, R. TIEBEN. *Requirements for communication technology to support social interaction of older adults. Gerontechnology 2010;9(2):193; doi:10.4017/gt.2010.09.02.230.00*

**Purpose** Social interaction has a positive influence on older adults' sense of wellbeing<sup>1</sup>. Many new technologies exist to support social communication, such as telephone, skype and sms messaging. We conducted a case study to investigate the status quo of communication between elderly and their separate living children. The main objective was to understand the contemporary communication experience of elderly people, i.e. what communication technologies are used, what types of messages are conveyed and what are the thoughts and experiences around this. With such insight, we aim to create design insights, recommendations and proposals for improvement of current communication for elderly people. **Method** We used a mixed-method approach to gather both subjective and objective data related to communication between elderly people with their separate living children. We combined the voice diary method during use, with an Affective Benefits and Costs for Communication questionnaire and an interview after use. Test participants consisted of parents (age 50-75 years) and their children. Four parents-children pairs participated in the test, which took one week for each pair. **Results & Discussion** Four communication media were used most frequently: telephone, voicemail, SMS messaging and email. Compared to other media, telephone calls are most preferred by elderly people as they separate, 'synchronous (contact)' and 'asynchronous (message)' strong. Elderly people 'stick' to the 'phone-rituals', even though they use new media: e.g. sms messages are used as acknowledgement/short conversations, yet a phone call is needed to discuss details/confirm acceptance/etc. Contacts made are about staying up-to-date, telling about one's own life, planning meetings, and other social and practical exchanges. Four types of contacts can be distinguished: social, emotional, practical and special occasion (e.g. a birthday). Aspects stated to be valued about the communication are: receiving unexpected messages, being called for social reasons instead of for practical questions and the ability to have a dialogue when both sides are comfortable and focused. Some insights from the user study are similar to those found in other studies<sup>2</sup>, such as the need for privacy and experienced obligations. However, our results provided some more detailed insights: for example, users described their need to be able to do other tasks while on the phone, combining privacy and practical issues. Furthermore, elderly sometimes distrust voicemails and messages: they kept calling and sending until receiving an answer, because they were unsure whether the message was received properly. A third example is the difference in opinion between older adults and their children on synchronous and asynchronous communication: both parties like the acknowledgment a quick text message gives, but older adults feel they have not had any real contact with their children (ignoring the text messaging) while their adult children are happy that they had an efficient contact, without the need for more chit-chat. Communications technologies that also take into account subtle requirements, such as synchronicity and unexpected messages that lead to social dialogue are needed, to design successful future communication experiences for older adults.

## References

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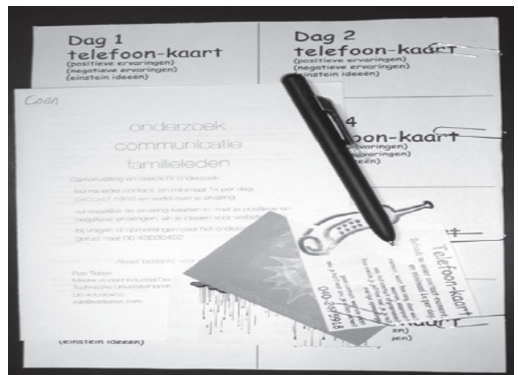


Figure 1. The "Affective Benefits and Costs for Communication questionnaire"