

Evaluating Smartphone Ownership and Usage for Maternal and Child Health in a Ugandan Slum

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Abstract

This research explores smartphone ownership and usage among Ugandan slum-dwelling women, assessing their readiness for mobile health maternal and child health interventions. A mixed-methods approach was employed, including a survey of 200 women and in-depth interviews with 23 participants. Findings reveal significant smartphone usage and a positive disposition towards receiving health information digitally. Women valued the informative nature and convenience of health messages on their phones. Challenges identified include costs and technological literacy. The study underscores the potential of mHealth solutions in low-income settings, highlighting the necessity for accessible and user-friendly technology.

Keywords: *mHealth, Maternal Health, Smartphone Ownership, Slum Settings, Technology Acceptance, User Attitude, Uganda.*

Introduction

In Uganda, maternal and child health outcomes persistently face significant challenges, especially in slum settings where access to quality healthcare services is limited [1]. In light of valuable feedback emphasizing the transformative role of mobile phones, we recognize the potential of mobile phone interventions to enhance maternal and child health outcomes in low-income settings, including slums [2]. These interventions have the capacity to increase access to vital health information, thereby contributing to improved health outcomes. Understanding the acceptability and feasibility of mobile phone interventions is crucial for developing effective and sustainable strategies to improve maternal and child health outcomes in slum settings in Uganda [3]. However, the impact of digital literacy on the acceptance of such mHealth solutions, especially in developing countries, remains a critical factor to consider [4].

The use of participatory design in the development of mobile health interventions has been shown to increase their acceptability and effectiveness. Studies provide insights into how mHealth is being used to improve maternal health in developing countries [5]. A study conducted in Uganda found that involving the target population in the design process of a mobile health intervention for maternal and child health led to increased user satisfaction and engagement [6].

Moreover, training and capacity building for healthcare workers and community health workers has been shown to be effective in improving maternal and child health outcomes. Another study conducted in Uganda found out that training community health workers in maternal and child health led to improved knowledge and practices, and increased uptake of antenatal care and skilled delivery [7]. As well, behavior change communication strategies have been shown to be effective in improving

Received: 30.12.2023

Accepted: 29.01.2024

Published on: 31.01.2024

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maternal and child health outcomes. Furthermore, a study conducted in Uganda found out that a behavior changes communication intervention led to increased knowledge and practices related to maternal and child health [8]. Mobile health clinics have been shown to be an effective way to provide healthcare services to underserved populations. Moreso, another study conducted in Uganda found that mobile health clinics led to increased access to healthcare services and improved health outcomes for women and children [9]. Additionally, public-private partnerships have been shown to be effective in increasing the reach and sustainability of healthcare interventions. A study conducted in Uganda found that a public-private partnership led to increased access to healthcare services and improved health outcomes for women and children [10]. These studies demonstrate the effectiveness of various strategies in increasing the acceptability and effectiveness of mobile phone interventions in maternal and child health messages for slum dwelling women in Uganda. However, it is important to note that context-specific factors such as access to mobile phones and literacy levels can affect the implementation and effectiveness of these interventions. Therefore, it is crucial to tailor these interventions to the specific needs and circumstances of the target population.

The use of smartphones to promote messages about maternal and child health in slum settings in Uganda has been a topic of interest in recent years.

A randomized controlled trial conducted in a slum area of Kampala, Uganda, found that sending SMS reminders to pregnant women significantly increased their attendance at antenatal care clinics. The study involved 352 women and found that those who received SMS reminders were more likely to attend at least four antenatal care visits (79% vs. 64% in the control group). The study concluded that SMS reminders could be a cost-effective way to

improve maternal health outcomes in slum settings [2].

A study conducted in a peri-urban area of Kampala, Uganda, found that delivering maternal and child health education messages via mobile phone was effective in increasing knowledge and changing behavior among women. The study involved 208 women and found that those who received the mobile phone messages had significantly higher knowledge scores and were more likely to breastfeed exclusively than those who did not receive the messages. The study concluded that mobile phone-based interventions could be an effective way to promote maternal and child health in resource-limited settings [2].

A study conducted in the slums of Kampala, Uganda, found that a mobile phone-based referral system was effective in improving access to emergency obstetric care. The study involved 125 health workers and found that those who used the referral system were more likely to refer women to emergency obstetric care and that women who were referred were more likely to receive appropriate care. The study concluded that mobile phone-based referral systems could be an effective way to improve maternal health outcomes in resource-limited settings [3].

The use of smartphones to promote messages about maternal and child health in slum settings in Uganda has shown promising results in improving antenatal care attendance, enhancing maternal and child health education, and improving access to emergency obstetric care [3]. There is therefore potential of mobile phone-based interventions to improve maternal health outcomes in resource-limited settings.

This study addresses a crucial gap in understanding smartphone penetration and user attitudes towards digital health interventions in Ugandan slums.

Despite the growing reliance on mobile technology for health initiatives globally, little is known about the extent to which women in these underprivileged areas have access to and are

willing to utilize smartphones for health-related purposes. This research is essential as the success of mobile health (mHealth) programs heavily depends on the target population's access to technology and their openness to adopt such interventions. By investigating both the extent of smartphone ownership and the attitudes towards using these devices for health purposes, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the feasibility of implementing mHealth solutions in these communities. The findings will not only fill a critical knowledge void but also guide the design and implementation of more effective digital health strategies in similar settings.

The general objective of this study was to evaluate the level of smartphone ownership and usage among women of reproductive age in Ugandan slum settings and to investigate their perceptions regarding the use of smartphone interventions for maternal health. This involved exploring the technological readiness and the attitudinal landscape towards digital health solutions in these communities, thereby providing insights critical for the design and implementation of effective mHealth programs in similar low-income settings. The specific Objectives of the study were to: i) Determine the level of smartphone ownership and usage among women of reproductive age in the slum setting and ii) To investigate the perceived benefits and barriers to using a smartphone intervention for maternal and child health access among women in the slum setting.

The novelty of this study lay in the specific context of the slum setting and the use of smartphone intervention. While previous studies have investigated the acceptability of various interventions for maternal and child health in other settings, this study is the first to focus specifically on the slum setting and the use of smartphones in Uganda.

Research Methodology

Selection of Study Area

The study was conducted in five slums of Kawala, Kiswa, Kisenyi, Kanyanya and

Namuwongo among others in Uganda, where access to maternal and child health services is often limited. These were selected based on their high population density, poor living conditions, and lack of basic amenities such as clean water and sanitation facilities. The study participants were women of reproductive age who reside in these slums.

Sample Size Determination

The target population consisted of women of childbearing age (15 – 49 years) residing in the slum settlements in five slums in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. Nurses and midwives in health centres in the slum settlements responsible for monitoring and reporting on the frequency of visits by the women were also included. The study population included pregnant women in any stage of pregnancy, mothers within the postpartum period (6 – 8 weeks after delivery), and mothers with infants aged 2 months to 1 year residing in slum settlements in Kampala city. These categories were chosen as they represent high-risk groups for pregnancy-related morbidity and mortality and allow for the evaluation of the intervention's impact on vulnerable populations. Our approach was informed by reviews of technological interventions for maternal healthcare in various settings, including rural regions [11]. The study involved 200 participants out of which 23 women participated in the interview sessions and the others filled in questionnaires. convenience sampling was used whereby the participants were enrolled as they attended the health facilities, were used. Purposive sampling was used to identify nurses and midwives from health facilities in the slums based on their availability and willingness to participate. It is noteworthy that the study was conducted across five health centers, comprising 2 Health Centers (HC) III and 3 Health Centers (HC) IV, to ensure comprehensive data collection and representation.

Data Collection

The study used a mixed-methods approach to collect data. To ensure data control, reliability, and validity, rigorous tests of the data instruments were conducted on the survey questionnaire and the interview guide. These measures enabled the researcher to collect the required data effectively and maintain the quality of the study.

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with the study participants. The interview guide was meticulously designed to explore the acceptability of a smartphone intervention for improving maternal and child health access. The guide also delved into the perceived benefits and barriers to the use of smartphones for health purposes. Importantly, the interview guide underwent rigorous reliability and validity checks to ensure that it effectively captured the intended information accurately.

Quantitative data were gathered through a survey questionnaire administered to the study participants. The questionnaire assessed critical factors, including the level of smartphone ownership and patterns of smartphone usage among the participants. Similar to the interview guide, the survey questionnaire was subjected to rigorous reliability and validity assessments to maintain the data's integrity.

Statistical Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed thematically using a deductive approach. The data were transcribed, coded, and organized into categories based on the research objectives and themes that emerged from the data using NVIVO 12. The data were then synthesized to identify patterns and trends related to the acceptability of the smartphone intervention for improving maternal and child health access in a slum setting in Uganda.

Additionally, it's important to note that the collected data from the focus discussion groups were originally conducted in Luganda, which is a local language widely spoken in the slum

settlements. To ensure a comprehensive analysis and understanding, these interactions were later translated into English. This translation allowed the participants to express themselves effectively. Recordings of the interactions were made and later listened to in order to generate key issues and themes raised.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the level of smartphone ownership and usage among the study participants using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive and inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests, were also employed to explore the associations between smartphone ownership and usage and other variables such as age, education level, and income.

Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings was conducted in line with the assertion in [12], as it allows for a deeper examination of certain aspects for comparison and provides more information that might not have been clear by one method of data analysis.

Ethical considerations for the study were rigorously upheld, with meticulous attention to ethical conduct. Approval was obtained from the Clarke International University Research Ethics Committee (REC), and permission to conduct the study was granted by both the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) and the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). Additionally, informed consent was independently secured from each participant, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's aims, their rights, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw. These measures ensured that the research adhered to the highest ethical standards, respecting participant autonomy and maintaining the integrity of the research process.

The study acknowledged potential biases and limitations in its methodology, including the representativeness of the sample and constraints in data collection methods. These acknowledgments were essential to provide a

balanced view of the study's findings and their applicability.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Data for the Study Participants

Figure 1 below shows the age distribution of study participants, providing insights into the age profile of the women involved in the study.

Survey Results: Participant Characteristics

From table 1 above, it is indicated that majority of the respondents fall within the age bracket of 20-24 years constituting 42% implying that they are young mothers that need assistance during this period of pregnancy and the early stages of child birth to reduce on complications. In terms of the education levels, the majority of the respondents 74% had attained secondary education which indicated that they are able to read these health messages on their phones but also were able to understand the questions in the survey questionnaire as well as the interview guide and the focus discussion checklist to give valid responses for this study. The major form of occupation among respondents was home make which constituted

51.5%; 44.5% of the respondents were in a relationship implying that they are bound to get pregnant therefore the smartphone intervention would be a valuable mechanism to access healthcare services and information. Also, these results suggest a community with limited higher education and formal employment opportunities. This context is important for understanding the health needs and access to healthcare information of the population. 38% of the respondents had stayed in these slums for less than 1 year indicating that the number of people increase which is bound to increase the pregnancy levels and child birth. 24.5% of the respondents had only one child and 52.5% of the respondents had produced their 1st child in health centres, while 30% of the respondents had produced child number 2 in health centres, 11% in health centres for child number 3 and 6% had produced child number 4 in health centres. In regard to ownership of smartphones, 99.5% of the respondents owned smartphones, 90.5% of the respondents were pregnant hence the app being so essential for information accessibility while 82.1% of the respondents were comfortable using smartphones implying that more efforts to train these women who own smartphones on how to use them is important.

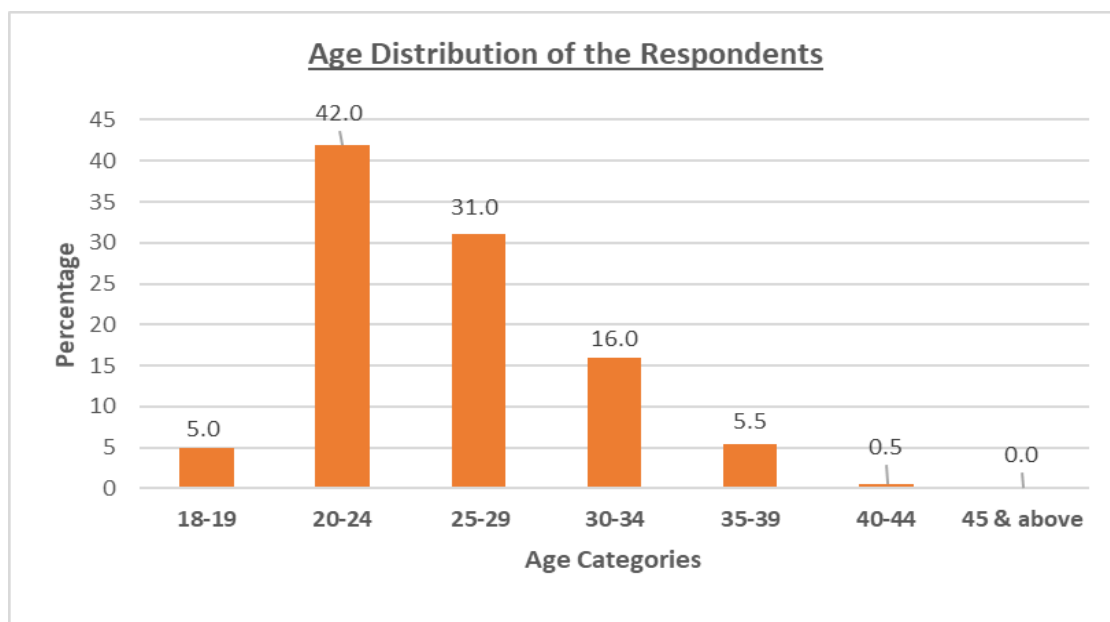


Figure 1. Age Distribution of Study Participants

Table 1 below presents demographic data of the study participants, detailing various aspects like education level, occupation, and marital status.

Figure 2 below shows the number of children that the study participants indicated to have had.

Table 1. Demographic Data for the Study Participants

SN.	Covariate Category	Covariate Detail	Percentage (%)	Frequency
1	Highest Level of Education	No formal	0.5	1
		Primary Education	11.5	23
		Secondary Education	74.0	148
		Vocational/Trade school	0.0	0
		Bachelor's Degree	5.0	10
		Master's degree	0.0	0
		Doctorate	0.0	0
		Others	9.0	18
		Total	100.0	200
2	Primary Occupation	Home Maker/ Domestic unpaid worker	51.5	103
		Self-employed (small scale business)	25.0	50
		Employed in the formal sector (Govt/private)	10.0	20
		Employed in informal sector (Causal/daily wage labor)	7.0	14
		Student	2.5	5
		Unemployed	2.0	4
		Others	2.0	4
		Total	100.0	200
3	Marital Status	Single	0.0	0
		Married	25.5	51
		Widowed	0.0	0
		Divorced	0.5	1
		Separated	3.0	6
		In a relationship	44.5	89
		Cohabiting	26.5	53
		Total	100.0	200
4	Period Spent at Place of Residence	Less than 1 year	38.0	76
		1-2 years	24.0	48
		3-5 years	15.5	31
		6-10 years	11.0	22
		More than 10 years	11.5	23
		Total	100.0	200
5	Status of Pregnancy	Yes	90.5	181
		No	9.5	19
		Total	100.0	200
6	Ownership of Mobile Phones	Yes	99.5	199
		No	0.5	1
		Total	100.0	200

Source: Primary data, 2023

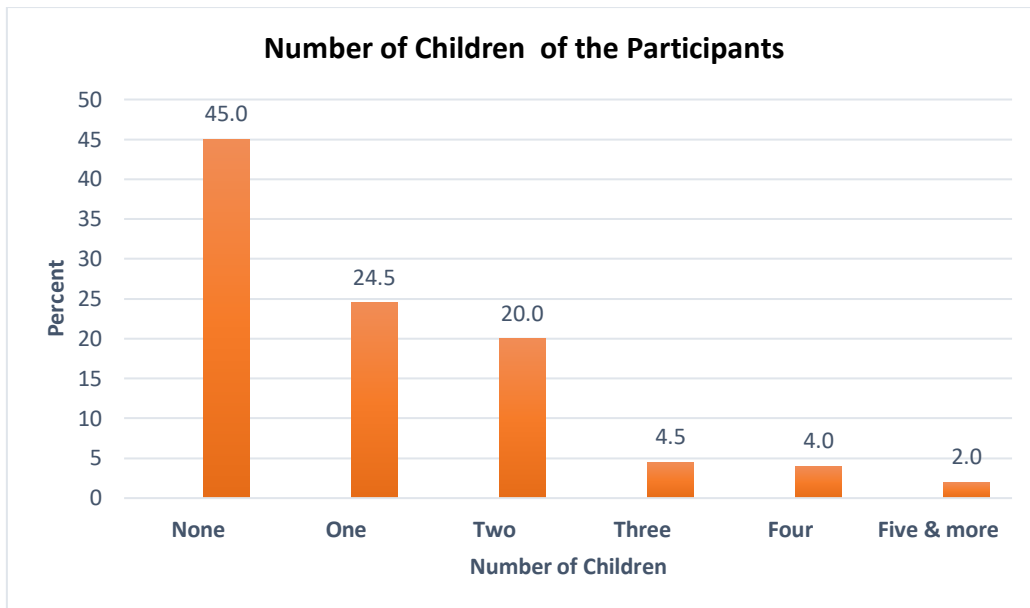


Figure 2. Number of Children of the Participants

Table 2 details the place of delivery of previous children of the participants, offering insights into childbirth practices among the study group.

Table 3 provides an overview of the study participants' comfort levels with using mobile applications.

Table 2. Place of Delivery of the Previous Child

Covariate		Percentage (%)	Frequency
Child One	H/Facility	52.5	105
	Home	2.5	5
	Others	0.0	0
	NA	45.0	90
	Total	100.0	200
Child Two	H/Facility	30.0	60
	Home	0.5	1
	Others	0.0	0
	NA	69.5	139
	Total	100.0	200
Child Three	H/Facility	11.0	22
	Home	0.0	0
	Others	0.0	0
	NA	89.0	178
	Total	100.0	200
Child Four	H/Facility	6.0	12
	Home	0.0	0
	Others	0.0	0
	NA	94.0	188
	Total	100.0	200

Table 3. Comfortability Level with using Mobile Apps

Covariate	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Very comfortable	18.5	37
Comfortable	63.5	127
Neutral	11.0	22
Uncomfortable	6.5	13
Very Uncomfortable	0.5	1
Total	100.0	200

Quantitative Results from Survey:

Percentage of Smartphone Owners and Use their Phones to Access Health Information

This bar chart, titled "Smartphone Use," visually represents a study on smartphone

ownership and its use for accessing health information among participants. The vertical axis shows percentages, while the horizontal axis has three categories: "No" (participants who don't use their smartphone for health information), "Yes" (those who do), and "Total" (overall smartphone ownership).

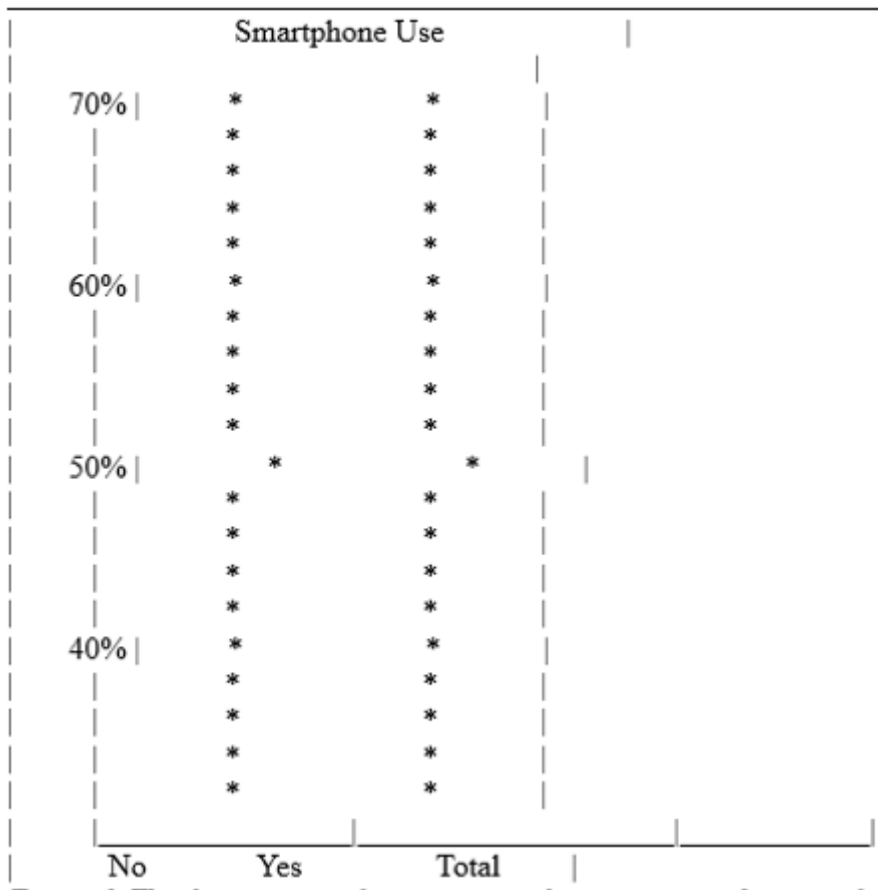


Figure 3. The Frequency and Percentage of Participants who owned a Smartphone and used it for Accessing Health Information

Figure 3 shows the percentage of participants who owned a smartphone and used it for accessing health information. The "No" and

"Yes" bars represent the percentage of participants who did not use their smartphone for health information and those who did,

respectively. The "Total" bar shows the total percentage of participants who owned a smartphone. 70% of participants owned a smartphone, and 50% of all participants used it for accessing health information. This ownership also contributes to their digital empowerment in slum conditions, an aspect crucially explored in recent studies [13].

Percentage of Women in the Study Reported Facing Barriers to Accessing Maternal and Child Health Services

Table 4 below shows the Percentage of Women Facing Barriers to Accessing Maternal and Child Health Services. 5 women (2.5% of the respondents) report finding it somewhat difficult to access these services, 76 women (38%) find it somewhat easy, and 119 women

(59.5%) report finding it very easy to access these services.

The data from the table 4 indicates that a small fraction (2.5%) of the women in the study report difficulties in accessing maternal and child health services, while a significant majority (97.5%) find it relatively easy to access these services. This suggests a promising potential for leveraging smartphone technology as a tool to bridge healthcare access gaps. If supplemented with targeted capacity-building initiatives, such as training in the use of health-related mobile applications or information services, the widespread ease of access to these services could be further enhanced. This approach could be particularly effective in empowering those who currently face barriers, thereby contributing to improved health outcomes in the community.

Table 4. Women Facing Barriers in Accessing Maternal and Child Health Services

	Respondent(n=200)
Somewhat difficult to access	5 (2.5%)
Somewhat easy to access	76(38%)
Very easy to access	119(59.5%)

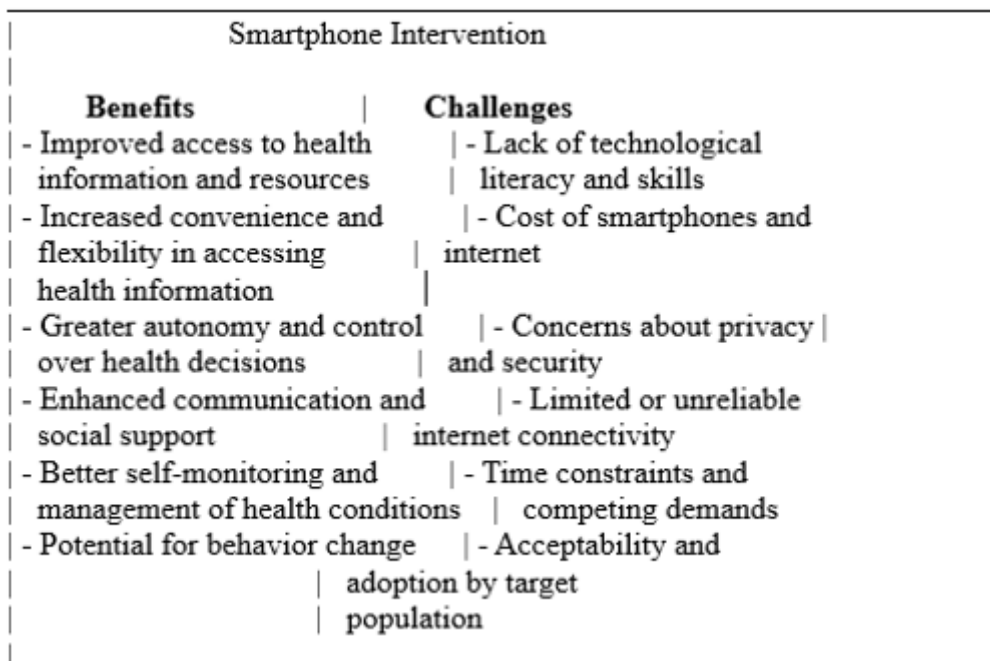


Figure 4. Themes and Subthemes that emerged from the focus group discussions on the Benefits and Challenges of the smartphone Interventions

Benefits and Challenges of the Smartphone Intervention

The thematic map in Figure 4 shows the two main themes that emerged from the focus group discussions: "Benefits" and "Challenges." The Benefits theme is shown on the left-hand side of the map, with subthemes that highlight the various advantages that the participants saw in using a smartphone for accessing health information. The Challenges theme is shown on the right-hand side of the map, with subthemes that illustrate the difficulties and obstacles that participants perceived in using a smartphone for health-related purposes.

One of the participants commented and said;

'With the introduction of this intervention for us the pregnant mothers, we shall be able to have quality time with the nurses and explain our health problems without a rush because of long lines at the health facilities.'

Another participant denoted that;

'Whereas this is a good solution to our health problems and issues during pregnancy and after child birth, its important that privacy and confidentiality when receiving the messages to be taken into consideration.'

Women suggested that the messages be tailored to their individual needs and preferences not general messages to allow the raised issues to be solved.

Despite the benefits electronic health messages bring to the women, the participants specifically raised these concerns with this intervention;

'I am a single mother with a 6 months baby struggling to find what to eat, how can I invest in buying a smart phone? I can use my small phone of UGX. 50,000 to call and receive call, accessing a smartphone for me is really difficult given my condition.'

'I stopped in primary 7 and I studied in a government school implying my English is limited, accessing this information maybe ease but understanding it seems difficult because most of the messages I receive on my phone are in English which I don't bother reading. How

will I understand these messages unless they will be sent in my local language which is Luganda.'

In summary, the study demonstrates that implementing a smartphone intervention for maternal and child health is both feasible and well-received by women in Ugandan slum settings. Mobile phone penetration is high, and there is a strong interest in receiving health messages via smartphones. Healthcare providers also support the intervention, making it a viable solution to improve healthcare access in these areas.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study underscores the persistent challenge of maternal and child health in low-income countries, particularly in slum settings where healthcare access is constrained. To address this challenge, innovative solutions harnessing modern technologies like smartphones are essential. This study specifically explored the acceptability of a smartphone intervention to enhance maternal and child health access among slum-dwelling women in Uganda, specifically in Kamwokya. The findings provide valuable insights into the potential of such interventions to improve health outcomes.

Overall, the study reveals that employing a smartphone intervention to enhance maternal and child health access is highly acceptable and feasible among slum-dwelling women in Uganda. These results align with previous research highlighting the potential of mHealth interventions to improve maternal and child health outcomes in resource-constrained settings [2].

Moreover, the study unveils specific features and content highly valued by slum-dwelling women in the context of maternal and child health. Personalized health messages tailored to their pregnancy stage or child's age were deemed crucial, consistent with prior studies emphasizing the importance of customizing mHealth interventions to meet the needs and preferences of target populations [2].

An additional significant finding emphasizes the role of social support networks in promoting the adoption and sustained use of the smartphone intervention. Women in the study frequently shared health information with peers, reinforcing their own engagement and learning. This aligns with existing research highlighting the impact of social support and peer networks on health behavior change [14;15].

The role of mHealth in bridging educational gaps in women's health in lower-income regions cannot be overlooked [16]. The use of mobile technology in community health monitoring presents both promises and challenges, as highlighted in recent literature [17].

It is essential to acknowledge the study's limitations. Firstly, it was conducted in a single slum setting in Uganda, which may limit its generalizability to other contexts or populations. Secondly, the relatively small sample size might have restricted the detection of nuanced differences in the acceptability and feasibility of the smartphone intervention among different subgroups of women. Lastly, the study did not capture data on actual health outcomes, preventing a comprehensive assessment of the intervention's impact on maternal and child health outcomes.

Our findings align with research on smartphone-based health promotion, effective in tackling maternal mortality in under-resourced settings [18]. The role of mobile phones in health education is particularly significant in women's health in developing nations [19].

The study evaluated the effectiveness of a smartphone intervention in enhancing maternal and child health access for women in Ugandan slums. Findings strongly affirmed the feasibility and acceptability of this smartphone intervention. Women in slum communities showed high mobile phone ownership and keen interest in receiving health messages via smartphones. Support from healthcare providers significantly bolsters the potential success of the intervention.

Given the positive response to smartphone interventions, it is recommended to develop tailored programs that specifically address the maternal and child health needs of women in Ugandan slum settings. These programs should align with the preferences and requirements of the target population. To maximize the impact of the smartphone intervention, it is essential to engage the community and leverage social support networks. Collaborative efforts with local leaders and influencers can enhance community participation and reinforce behavior change. Addressing privacy concerns is paramount. Future interventions should incorporate robust privacy and data security measures to ensure the confidentiality of user information and build trust among participants. To further advance the understanding of the intervention's effectiveness, future studies should include rigorous impact evaluations that measure the actual health outcomes of women and children who engage with the smartphone intervention. This will provide valuable insights into the intervention's contribution to improving maternal and child health in slum settings.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. This research was conducted independently and did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors have no financial relationships that could be broadly relevant to the work.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the participants and healthcare professionals in from Kiswa Health Centre III, Komamboga Health Centre IV, Kawaala Health Centre IV, Kisenyi Health Centre IV and Kisugu Health Centre III, who generously contributed their time and insights to this study. Their valuable input was instrumental in the successful completion of this research. We also extend our

appreciation to our colleagues who provided expertise and feedback that greatly improved the manuscript. Special thanks to the Division Medical Officers from Kawempe, Nakawa, Makindye, Kampala Central and Rubaga Divisions, whose support and guidance were

invaluable. Lastly, we are grateful to Kampala City Council Authority for providing the resources and environment necessary for conducting this study.

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