

REVIEW

Contribution of mobile health technologies to public health in rural areas: Accessibility and education methods

Gönül Gökçay¹ D Ali Uğurlu² D Eda Ersarı Şen³ D Arzuv Hudaykulyyeva⁴ D

Abstract

In today's rapidly advancing world, mobile health services have become influential in various aspects of our lives. It is anticipated that mobile applications, especially in rural areas, can play a significant role in the delivery of healthcare services. In this context, it is essential to examine the applications of mobile health services in rural areas and the education methods employed in these applications. The main objective of this study is to explore the contributions of mobile health services applications in rural areas to public health and to examine the education methods used in these services in light of current literature. The focus of this study is on how mobile health applications can be utilized in rural areas, the impact of this usage on public health, and the effectiveness of the education methods employed. The research was conducted through searches using key terms such as "mobile health" and "public health nursing" or "mobile health technologies" and "nursing" or "telehealth" on important academic databases like Google Scholar, PubMed free fulltext, Science Direct, Ebscohost, Sage, Scopus, and CINAHL. The information obtained from literature searches was analyzed to understand the impact of mobile health applications on public health in rural areas and the education methods employed. The study results indicate that the use of mobile health applications in rural areas can contribute significantly to public health. Advantages such as rapid diagnosis and treatment, effective monitoring of chronic diseases, and quick access to emergency services stand out among the potential impacts of mobile health applications. Mobile health applications can contribute significantly to public health in rural areas and increase their usage, particularly in primary healthcare services.

Keywords: Mobile applications, rural areas, public health, nursing

Citation: Gökçay G, Uğurlu A, Ersarı Şen E, Hudaykulyyeva A. Contribution of mobile health technologies to public health in rural areas: Accessibility and education methods. Health Sci Q. 2024;4(2):127-36. https://doi.org/10.26900/hsq.2280



Department of Public Health Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Kafkas University. Kars / Türkiye

² Health Research and Application Center, Kafkas University. Kars / Türkiye

³ Zübeyde Hanım Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School. İzmit Kocaeli / Türkiye

⁴Department of Public Health Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Kafkas University. Kars / Türkiye

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving world, technology is advancing swiftly and finding its place in every aspect of our lives, including healthcare services. Simultaneously, the increasing use and costeffectiveness of mobile technologies have made them attractive for use in healthcare services [1]. Mobile applications are programs encompassing software, hardware, and internet connectivity on portable devices such as smartphones and tablets, becoming almost integral to people's lives [2]. Mobile health, in brief, involves the execution of health services through programs installed on devices like phones and tablets [3]. Digital health is defined as the field of knowledge and application related to the development and use of digital technologies to improve health across the spectrum of health technologies and services offered in care, including telehealth, mobile health applications, wearable technologies, and online health [4]. Digital health technologies serve as a significant transformational tool in public health nursing. Technologies such as telehealth, mobile health (mHealth), electronic health records, and artificial intelligence facilitate nurses in providing patient monitoring, health education, and counseling services. For instance, telehealth applications allow nurses to conduct remote patient assessments and provide support for the management of individuals with chronic illnesses [5]. Furthermore, technological innovations enhance the accessibility of health services, especially for individuals residing in rural and hard-to-reach areas. Telehealth and mobile health applications contribute to reducing health inequalities by facilitating access to specialized health services for these individuals [6]. The primary aim of this study is to examine the contributions of the implementation of mobile health services in rural areas to public health and to explore the education methods used in mobile health services, considering the current literature.

Materials and Methods

Searches were conducted on major academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed free fulltext, Science Direct, Ebscohost, Sage, Scopus, and CINAHL using keywords including "mobile

health" AND "public health nursing" OR "mobile health technologies" AND "nursing" OR "telehealth" AND "public health nursing" OR "m-health" AND "nursing" and their Turkish translations.

Literature Review

Definition of Mobile Health

Mobile health is an integrated health service covering a wide range of electronic devices, including smartphones, tablets, web pages, message services, and all wireless portable electronic devices. It aims to expand the capabilities of both healthcare providers and recipients for interactive integration, with the goal of rapid diagnosis, effective treatment, and low cost [7,8]. In other words, it is an innovative application with benefits such as remote disease management, collection of health-related data, and early warning systems related to diseases and symptoms using mobile communication technology and infrastructure [9].

Expected Effects of Mobile Health

The expected effects of mobile health include faster diagnosis and treatment, increased awareness among individuals for better health, strengthening preventive healthcare services, more rigorous monitoring of individuals with chronic diseases, and easier access to general data and statistics, enabling cost-effective planning, implementation, and measures [10]. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous studies demonstrated the benefits of telehealth services. In relation to the cardiovascular community, a meta-analysis conducted in 2017 found that heart failure patients treated via telemedicine in addition to standard in-person care visits had lower all-cause mortality rates, lower rates of heart failure admissions, and a reduction in length of hospital stay compared to patients treated solely through face-to-face approaches [11,12]. This has been attributed to the earlier recognition of symptoms and consequently linked to earlier interventions and guided self-management [12]. Similarly, research in primary care settings has shown that levels of glycosylated hemoglobin (HbA1c) were lower in the telemedicine group compared to standard care settings [12,13]. Technological

innovations, particularly telehealth and mobile health services, are increasing the accessibility of healthcare services, especially for individuals residing in rural and hard-to-reach areas. By delivering specialist healthcare services to individuals in these regions, telehealth and mobile health services contribute to reducing disparities in healthcare access. Consequently, public health nurses are able to serve a broader patient population by overcoming geographical barriers [14,15].

Stakeholders in Mobile Health Services

Stakeholders in mobile health services include healthcare professionals (nurses, physicians, midwives. laboratory technicians, etc.), healthcare recipients (patients, family members, healthy individuals), healthcare institutions (nursing homes, retirement homes, hospitals, pharmacies), reimbursement institutions (social security institutions, health insurance companies), pharmaceutical and medical device companies, health-related civil society organizations, and medical call centers [16].

Applications of Mobile Health

The applications of mobile health include education (training for healthcare students and care education for patients and their families), point-of-care support and diagnosis (supporting healthcare professionals in the diagnosis and diagnostic process), patient monitoring (tracking response to treatment, checking if medications are taken at the right times, monitoring medication dosages), disease and outbreak surveillance (monitoring infectious diseases and taking precautions against epidemic risks), emergency medical response systems (issuing alerts in accidents and disaster situations), and health information systems (storage and management of all health data) [17,18].

Mobile Health Applications

Expanding the scope of healthcare to facilitate 'the ease and comfort of receiving medical care anywhere and anytime' should be our main goal. To achieve this, it is necessary to overcome both geographical barriers and facilitate access to technology [19]. According to data from the International Telecommunication Union, the number of mobile phone users worldwide

has exceeded 6 billion, equivalent to 75% of the world's population. In Türkiye, this rate is 96% [20]. An environment where high-quality healthcare is provided with low-cost mobile devices has the potential to change the familiar healthcare world. The potential and spreading opportunities of mobile health are promising, ranging from raising awareness about HIV/ AIDS in developing countries to calculating the calories in a "cheeseburger" with various applications [16,21].

Advantages of Mobile Health Applications

While there are numerous advantages to mobile health applications, a few are listed below:

- Encourages users to engage in physical activity and take their medications regularly and on time.
- Facilitates the monitoring and recording of individuals' vital signs.
- Reduces healthcare expenses, thus lowering costs.
- Enables individuals to monitor their own health, enhancing their knowledge and skills related to health [7,22].

Disadvantages of Mobile Health Applications

- May lead to internet and phone dependency.
- Insufficient cognitive levels of the elderly population may lead to misunderstandings [23,24].
- Excessive or abuse of the Service
- Inadvertent overuse of healthcare resources due to unnecessary visits
- Inequalities in internet use and access to technology between rural communities and ethnic minority groups
- Concerns across personal medical devices [12].

Effects of Mobile Health Technologies on Rural Areas

The World Health Organization predicts a global shortage of approximately 13 million skilled health workers by 2035. Additionally, while developed countries have a high number of skilled health workers, this ratio is insufficient in developing countries. Mobile health technologies will serve as a strong driving force in addressing

this inadequacy, especially in rural areas of developing countries [25,26].

Mobile technologies offer numerous opportunities to shape the future of primary healthcare services and provide effective public health action. With improved communication of mobile technologies over time, supported by education, it is possible to create and strengthen a healthy community. The humanitarian problems faced by the rural population in accessing health facilities, such as extreme weather conditions, difficult terrain, lack of roads, transportation difficulties, time loss, financial challenges, crowding, and traffic, will no longer be obstacles addressed by mobile health. Therefore, barriers between healthcare providers and recipients will be lifted, and new bridges will be established for a fast, active, accessible interaction [27,28].

Measures for the Development and Proliferation of Mobile Health Services

health applications and service delivery will complement, and in many places, supplement traditional healthcare services where they fall short. The integrated health paradigm with mobile technologies covering all healthcare services is in the development stage and gaining momentum. Country leaders, by acting swiftly and not only educating healthcare professionals but also their citizens in this direction, can avoid the concerns of countries at risk of collapse in the future healthcare sector [25,29]. Recommendations for the development and proliferation of mobile health services include:

- Setting new goals in the field of mobile health, creating a strategic plan and roadmap, and increasing government support.
- Strengthening communication infrastructure and increasing mobile health literacy.
- Implementing joint plans and programs with the education sector for all ages and disciplines.
- Conducting activities to promote mobile health awareness among the public.
- Encouraging entrepreneurs and supporting R&D projects to increase the development and use of smart health applications.
- Never neglecting security and privacy issues [7,25].

Randomized controlled trials conducted in the last five years on mobile health technologies are listed in table 1.

Recommendations for Public Health and Nursing Regarding the Use of Mobile Health in Rural AreasMobile health applications can contribute significantly to public health in rural areas and increase their usage, particularly in primary healthcare services. The following recommendations should be considered:

Education and awareness

Prioritize the education of individuals and healthcare professionals in rural areas to enhance the use of mobile health applications. Healthcare service providers should raise awareness among the public about the benefits of mobile health applications and encourage their usage.

Infrastructure development

Strengthening internet access and mobile infrastructure in rural areas is crucial. Healthcare service providers should collaborate with local governments and telecommunications companies to establish robust internet infrastructure in these regions.

Patient monitoring and chronic diseases

Mobile health applications can serve as effective tools for monitoring chronic diseases in individuals residing in rural areas. Healthcare professionals can facilitate patient monitoring using mobile health applications, allowing for early intervention.

Emergency services

Mobile health applications can assist in the effective delivery of emergency services to rural areas. Quick alert and assistance systems can be established through mobile health applications in accidents, natural disasters, and other emergency situations

Accessibility for the elderly population

Ensuring that mobile health applications are user-friendly for the elderly population is essential. Applications should feature simple interfaces, large fonts, and user-friendly functionalities to enable the elderly to benefit more from this technology.

Tablo 1. Randomized Controlled Studies Conducted in the Last Five Years on Mobile Health Technologies

General information	Population and sample	Methods	Measured criteria	Results
Yuting & Xiaodong, (2023) [30] Effectiveness of a mHealth intervention on hypertension control in a low-resource rural setting: a randomized clinical trial	Participants (n = 134; 66 in the intervention group and 68 controls)	The intervention group participants were instructed to use the Wearable Monitoring Device and download a Smartphone Application, which included reminder alerts, adherence reports, medical instructions, and optional family support, for a period of 12 weeks to complete the study.	Individuals from low-resource rural settings in the Hubei province of China were included in the study from health centers, home visits, and community centers.	Among participants with uncontrolled hypertension, individuals randomized to use a monitoring wearable device with a smartphone application had a significant improvement in self-reported hypertension compliance, self-efficacy, life quality, weight loss and diastolic blood pressure, but no change in systolic blood pressure compared with controls.
Alsaqer, & Bebis, (2022) [31] Self-care of hypertension of older adults during COVID-19 lockdown period: a randomized controlled trial	Participants (n=120)	A total of 120 participants were randomly allocated to three groups (<i>n</i> = 40); interventional group (public health nursing interventions plus m.Health applications) and two control groups (m.Health applications alone group and standard care group).	Participants were enrolled in the study if they were (1) 55 years and above, (2) have follow-up as out-patients of KAUH, (3) had been diagnosed with HTN, (4) on anti-HTN medication—at least one drug, (5) reported that he/she has a personal smartphone (Android)—internet access is not important, and (6) able to read and understand the Arabic language.	This study supports the adoption of technology with nursing intervention as a method of supporting continuity of self-management of chronic illness during the pandemic, and its potential implications for future delivery of health care, not just in Jordan, but across the world.
Ebrahimabadi, Rafiei & Nejat, (2021) [32] Can tele-nursing affect the supportive care needs of patients with cancer undergoing chemotherapy? A randomized controlled trial follow-up study	This study focuses on patients on patients on the patients of the patients of the patients of the patients of participants in the study is 60.	Experimental Group: For the experimental group, a telephone support service was provided twice a week for 15-30 minutes over a two-month period. Control Group: For the control group, the same service was delivered through face-to-face training.	The effects of tele-nursing on the supportive care needs of cancer patients have been measured.	The support service provided via telephone has been found to particularly enhance access to support services for individuals residing in rural areas and reduce the supportive care needs of oncology patients. The average score of supportive care needs in the intervention group was found to be significantly lower than the control group after the intervention (p<0.05).

Tablo 1. Randomized Controlled Studies Conducted in the Last Five Years on Mobile Health Technologies- continue

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General information	Population and	Methods	Measured criteria	Results
	Sample			
.021)[33] 	62 Women in the	Experimental Group: Women in the experimental	Measurement of the Impact of	The study concluded that online postpartum
Çevilliği eğilili ve	rostpartum		_	education, counseling, and tollow-up were
s yoluyla	Period	(education and counseling) as follows: First		effective in preventing postpartum depression
	(Experimental:	Follow-up: Between Postpartum Days 2-5, Second	Depression and Postpartum	and enhancing postpartum sleep.
postpartum depresyon ve	31, Control: 31)	Follow-up: Between Postpartum Days 13-17, Third	Sleep	
postpartum uyuma etkisi:		Follow-up: Between Postpartum Days 30-		
Randomize kontrollü bir		42. Control Group: Women in the control group		
çalışma		received routine follow-ups.		
Cai, Gong, He, Hughes,	277 community-	The intervention group received (1) lay health	The patient participants of the	In an expanded application, interventions
Simoni, Xiao, & Xu. (2020).	dwelling	supporters (medication or care supervisors), (2) e-	program were required to (1)	involving mobile messaging and healthcare
[34]	villagers	platform (mobile-texting reminders and education	be community-dwelling, (2) be	workers in a resource-constrained community
Mobile texting and lay	(intervention,	message) access, (3) a token gift for positive	enrollees of the 686 Program,	setting were found to be more effective than the
health supporters to	n=139; wait-	behavioral changes, and (4) integration with the	(3) have a primary diagnosis of	686 Program alone in improving medication
improve schizophrenia care	listed control	existing government community-mental health	schizophrenia according to the	adherence, alleviating symptoms, and reducing
in a resource-poor	group, n=138)	program (the 686 Program) while the wait-listed	International Statistical	hospital readmissions.
community in rural China		control group initially only received the 686	Classification of Diseases,	
(LEAN trial): randomized		Program. Subsequently (in the extended period),	Tenth Revision [19] (diagnosis	
controlled trial extended		both groups received the LEAN intervention plus	reconfirmed by the 686	
implementation.		the 686 Program. The secondary outcomes were	Program psychiatrists while	
		symptoms measured during visits to 686 Program	they were enrolled), (4) be on	
		psychiatrists using the Clinical Global Impression	oral psychotropic medication,	
		scale for schizophrenia and functioning measured	and (5) be residents of 1 of the	
		by trained student assessors using the World	9 rural townships.	
		Health Organization Disability Assessment		
		Schedule 2.0. Other outcomes included data routinely collected in the 686		
Ghodsbin, Javanmardifard,	This study	The experimental group underwent a 12-week	The impact of physical activity	Results revealed that the tele-nursing
Kaviani&Jahanbin,	focused on 60	intervention consisting of diet and physical activity	and diet monitoring on patients'	ficantly acce
(2018)[35]. Effect of tele-	patients with	monitoring. During the first month, they received	ultrasound findings was	improvement process in both liver size and tissue
nursing in the improving of	non-alcoholic	bi-weekly phone calls, followed by weekly calls		for patients with NAFLD. The findings
the ultrasound findings in	fatty liver disease	for the next three weeks. The control group did not		emphasize the positive effects of remote nursing
patients with nonalcoholic	(NAFLD) who	receive any intervention.		care in managing and monitoring non-alcoholic
fatty liver diseases: A	presented to the			fatty liver disease through dietary and physical
Randomized Clinical Trial	Gastroenterology			activity interventions.
study	outpatient clinic.			

Tablo 1. Randomized Controlled Studies Conducted in the Last Five Years on Mobile Health Technologies- continue

General information	Population and Methods sample	Methods	Measured criteria	Results
Zhou, Liao, Feng, Ji, Zhao & Wang (2018) [36]	403 patients with cardiovascular	Zhou, Liao, Feng, Ji, Zhao 403 patients with During a six-month period, the experimental group Measurement of Patients' Self- The results indicated that telephone follow-up education, with Efficacy Levels for the education positively influenced patients' self-	Measurement of Patients' Self- Efficacy Levels for the	The results indicated that telephone follow-up education positively influenced patients' self-
0	disease:	weekly sessions in the first month, bi-weekly Prevention of Cardiovascular efficacy and healthy lifestyle behaviors.	Prevention of Cardiovascular	efficacy and healthy lifestyle behaviors.
follow-up education		sessions in the second and third months, and Risks:	Risks:	
program based on the self-		monthly sessions in the last three months. The		
efficacy among patients		control group, on the other hand, received face-to-		
with cardiovascular disease		face education. The patients' self-efficacy levels		
		were measured for the prevention of		
		cardiovascular risks.		

Privacy and security

Ensuring the privacy and security of data collected through mobile health applications is of paramount importance. Healthcare service providers should implement strict security protocols and educate users on these measures.

Collaboration and stakeholders

Effective collaboration among healthcare professionals, local governments, telecommunications companies, and other stakeholders is crucial for the successful implementation of mobile health applications in rural areas.

Community engagement

The design and implementation of mobile health applications should focus on the needs of rural communities. Community engagement and feedback can contribute to making applications more effective and user-friendly.

Relevant legislation and policies

Establishing and implementing relevant legislation and policies to support the use of mobile health applications is essential. Healthcare service providers should stay informed about regulations supporting mobile health applications and monitor developments in this field.

These recommendations aim to enable the effective use of mobile health applications in rural areas, making significant contributions to public health.

Funding

The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this paper.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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