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CONTENTS

Can Smart Phones Support the Homeless during the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Case Study in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Smartphones are a necessity for society today and was especially important in helping the homeless throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The diversity of functions available within a smartphone was able to provide significant benefits for homeless people in the face of the pandemic. A qualitative study was conducted by interviewing seven homeless persons to identify the perspectives of those who are homeless regarding the benefits of smartphones. Based on these perspectives, five themes about the benefits of smartphones were obtained. The findings indicate that smartphones enable people to stay in touch and communicate with family and friends, the acquisition of information on assistance provided by the government, the acquisition of information on financial aid, food distribution, and necessities provided by NGOs, the acquisition of information on COVID-19 prevention measures and to get news related to the latest COVID-19 situation. This study proved that smartphones were beneficial to homeless people in the face of the pandemic. The difficult situation during the pandemic made mobile phones a necessity to enable homeless people to cope with life on the streets.

Keywords: smartphone, benefits, homelessness, pandemic, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) regularly conducts studies on access to mobile phones. This present study uses a newer and more specific lens to examine mobile phone use among homeless people throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of mobile phones for homeless people is critical, especially in obtaining information related to food, shelter, employment, health, and safety. This need became more significant during the COVID-19 pandemic where homeless people used mobile phones to obtain information related to their basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and so on. As stated by Bernama (May 17, 2020), it is hard to imagine if the COVID-19 pandemic that is currently affecting almost the whole world occurred in the 80s and early 90s, before the information technology boom. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, technology and communication have been the cornerstone for the strengthening of the economy and safeguarding the lives of people.

Understanding the benefits of smartphones to the homeless will improve the communications and media knowledge pool. This study aims to explore the access of homeless people to health information through the use of mobile phones, apart from gathering data on the type and purpose of using the mobile phones.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Demographic Profile and Homeless Scenario In Malaysia

In Malaysia, homeless groups are categorised as paupers under the Orang Papa Act 1977 (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 2020). This group is actually not precisely and comprehensively defined, as well as not organised according to specific categories such as the homeless. Based on Table 1.1, the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia released statistics which reported that there were 4,240 homeless people (beggars) in 2017, 3,472 homeless people in 2018 and 3,221 homeless people in 2019. Of all the states in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur recorded the highest number that is, a total of 1,639 homeless males with citizen status and a total of 334 homeless females with citizen status in 2017. There were 848 homeless males with citizen status and a total of 284 homeless females with citizen status in 2018. The latest data stated that there were 490 homeless males with citizen status and 179 homeless females with citizenship status.

States	2017 C		2017 NC		2018 C		2018 NC		2019 C		2019 NC		Total C	Total NC
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		
Johor	127	52	6	10	158	46	9	25	246	83	18	4	711	71
Kedah	15	9	5	3	74	32	36	13	72	42	25	1	244	83
Kelantan	7	6	1	0	41	8	24	15	49	9	7	0	121	47
Melaka	97	29	25	7	67	20	8	2	125	53	9	1	391	52
N. Sembilan	73	35	11	18	63	15	1	7	91	34	7	8	311	52
Pahang	48	31	6	1	78	34	3	1	49	22	28	25	262	64
Perak	109	31	9	7	44	22	2	0	125	33	7	3	364	28
P. Pinang	382	129	51	19	342	125	87	69	312	130	86	59	1420	371`
Sabah	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	58	20	36	45	78	81
Sarawak	55	12	3	0	4	0	0	0	52	17	3	0	140	6
Selangor	136	70	59	73	212	85	98	43	204	59	73	76	766	422
Terengganu	90	22	8	12	105	26	14	20	44	21	4	6	308	64
W.P. Kuala Lumpur	1639	334	264	73	848	284	117	110	490	179	20	8	3776	592
W.P. Labuan	4	0	2	0	1	0	0	3	8	13	3	0	26	8
Total	2801	766	450	223	2068	687	399	308	1935	722	328	236	8989	1944
Total N and NC	4240				3472				3221				10933	

Indicator: M – Male
F – Female
C – Citizenship
NC – Non-Citizenship

Source : Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (2020)

According to Idris and Ramli (2017), there was an increase in the number of homeless people in major cities in the country such as Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Johor. This is supported by Ramli and Dawood (2017) who said that the highest number of homeless people are in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang. In a profile study conducted by JKM in 2012 on 1,378 people, the main factor of homelessness was the lack of employment which comprised 646 people or 46.6%. The second factor is due to poverty and low income comprising 245 people or 17.7% (Drani, 2016). Most of the homeless found on the streets and shelters were those aged 30-60 years (Alhabshi & Manan 2012; Mohamad, Ismail, Subhi & Omar 2016). Most of them came from the Malay ethnic group. However, the figure that was studied was obtained from arrests of homeless people made by the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia's under the Kutu Rayau and Orang Papa Act 1977. It is almost certain that the actual number of homeless people is more than that as there are still many homeless people who were not arrested. Thus, the number could be even higher if one considers this possibility.

The presence of these homeless people can be due to various attractive and repulsive factors. The concept paper written by Idris and Ramli (2017) stated that some of the factors were urban poverty, family conflict, social problems and mental health. As a result, they decided to take the easy way out by living and sleeping on the streets without considering their hygeine (Idris & Ramli 2017).

Plight of the Homeless throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the first case was reported, the Malaysian government has played its part in dealing with the effects and impact of COVID-19 in the country. According to Suah (2020), COVID-19 has become a pandemic on a scale unprecedented in previous generations. To date, the country has shown an increase in the number of active cases and deaths that eventually led to the Malaysian government implementing a lockdown. Not all virus carriers and infected individuals show symptoms related to the disease. If symptomatic, a person is likely to show symptoms such as fever, cough, vomiting, shortness of breath, and so on in a period between five and 14 days after the infection occurs (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020). To date, 114 million people have been infected with the disease, claiming 2.5 million lives worldwide (Worldometer, 2021).

According to Ramli and Dawood (2017), the number of homeless is high in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Penang. In Kuala Lumpur, most homeless people are in Jalan Chow Kit, Jalan Dang Wangi, Dataran Merdeka, Masjid Jamek and Pasar Seni. Homeless people consist of Malaysians, but there are homeless among the immigrants, especially from Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar (Adib, Hussin & Ahmad, 2016). As many as 10 percent of homeless groups on major roads around Kuala Lumpur are non-citizens (Adib et al., 2016). The statistical data reported only refers to official data from various sources and past studies. The actual number of homeless may be more than the official figure.

Large numbers of homeless people coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis that hit the world in early 2020 is of great concern to many parties, including the government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Among the most pressing problems is the spread of COVID-19 infection among homeless people. In the chaos of staying away from being infected with COVID-19, many homeless people are exposed to the risk of infection (Pritchard, 2020). At the height of the crisis, homeless people failed to follow orders to stay indoors because they were homeless (The Times, 2020). They have no temporary shelter other than on the sidewalk or under a bridge. Such a life makes them more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus than individuals or families who have a home. At night, homeless people usually sleep on boxes or mattresses at the end of shops or covered streets (Sham, & Selvaratnam, 2018). During the day, they move to the surrounding area by doing various jobs such as collecting used waste to support their daily lives. It was difficult to change the way they live despite the government implementing movement restrictions. According to Slaghter (2020), social incarceration to prevent COVID-19 infections becomes challenging and impossible for homeless people. This situation makes this study important in examining the benefits of smartphones for these homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Benefits of Mobile Phones during the Pandemic

According to Junierissa (2018), technology benefits human beings; the existence of technology can facilitate all aspects of human life. The technology in question for this study is mobile phone, specifically smartphone. Among the benefits of mobile phones throughout the pandemic are health and medical care, updates on the current state of COVID-19, learning and teaching, and the application of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). One of the benefits of mobile phones to the homeless is using them as an open-source platform through mobile hardware to read and gain new knowledge during the pandemic (Shamsul, 2020). According to Manjunath (2021), mobile phones function in displaying the current situation of the updated COVID-19 and as a facilitator in the implementation of SOPs. Malaysia has introduced the MySejahtera application to facilitate contact tracing during the pandemic. When entering any premises, users of this application need to scan the QR code available at the premise entrance so that incoming and outgoing data can be adequately recorded (National Security Council, 2021). According to Jasni, Nasir, and Ibrahim (2020), one of the more effective strategies to communicate with the homeless is through the WhatsApp application. This accentuates the idea that there are certain applications unique to smartphones that are crucial to the life of a homeless during the pandemic.

Furthermore, mobile phones are essential for health and medical care (Koehler, Vujovic, & Mcmenamin, 2013). This is because smartphones allow users, including homeless, to have better access to health and medical care such as requesting for appropriate transport to medical facilities. Komalasari (2020) stated that mobile phones will be able to enhance information and communication for medical purposes.

These prove that smartphones carry out multiple aspects and features that are of great benefit to homeless people in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researcher chose to conduct a qualitative method to answer the objectives of the study. The design of this study was crafted to focus on demographic profiles and to explore the benefits of smartphones to homeless people during the pandemic around the city of Kuala Lumpur.

Population, Sampling, and Sampling Techniques

The population of this study focused on the homeless around Kuala Lumpur. To study the benefits of mobile phones among homeless people throughout the pandemic, it was essential to have a sample that used smartphones. For the qualitative study, the researcher set a small number of samples to participate in this study. The study sample consisted of an estimated 5 to 25 people based on Cresswell's (1998) recommendation for phenomenological studies. This study utilised two types of snowball sampling techniques and sampling to identify the characteristics of the homelessness criteria involved in this study. Among the features identified of the homeless were they were living without a stable home, owned a smartphone, and had a Malaysian citizenship. A total of seven (7) homeless people participated in this study.

Data Analysis

The researchers converted text data in the form of verbatim transcripts before the analysis was performed. Once the interview recording was completed, it was crucial to transcribe the recording into a written form. The transcribing process took place on Microsoft Word, and it was deemend necessary to also add the notes made throughout the interview process.

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

This qualitative study involved seven respondents in the range of 37 years to 61 years old. All respondents were found to be from various states. All had low level of education having attained only primary and secondary levels of education. Only one of the respondents has a Diploma from GIATMARA. In terms of marital status, four people of them were divorced, two are single, and one lives separately from his partner. It was also found that three people are recipients of Baitulmal assistance, two people did not receive any form of aid, one received a SOCSO pension, and one received allowance for volunteering provided by NGO organisation. Their period of homelessness was in the range of 5 years to 20 years. One of the respondents had rented a room for almost six years.

All of the respondents were smartphone users, of which four people had bought new phones and five people had bought used ones. Based on the study's findings, the price of a phone was in the range of RM 80-RM300. This showed that homeless people used cheaper phones compared to an average person. Researchers found that all of the respondents used prepaid plan instead of post-paid. Most of them downloaded various social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Bigo Live and TikTok. In terms of frequency of use, most respondents said that they used the phone very frequently. The full findings of the benefits of smartphones for homeless people throughout the COVID-19 pandemic will be discussed in the next section.

Benefits of Phone During the Pandemic

The results of the study found that there were five themes obtained from the respondents' answers. Among them are as follows:

    i.   For staying in touch and communicating with family and friends

The first theme showed that the smartphone benefits homeless people as it allowed them to communicate and connect with family and friends. The smartphone has made an impact to our lives by allowing humans to communicate easily. The homeless did not have to worry about problems created by the pandemic such as movement restrictions that prevented physical meetings. They stated that it was easy to communicate with family and friends throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with a smartphone.

Among the verbatim interviews which mention this are stated below:

> *"Mobile phones make it easier for me to communicate with family and friends. I don't need to meet them, I just call."*
> (Syafiq/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"I can easily contact my family. Even though I live in Kuala Lumpur, I can contact family members who are outside Kuala Lumpur."*
> (Firdaus/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"I like the phone because it allows me to call my family members and my friends."*
> (Eddy/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"Communication becomes easier with this mobile phone."*
> (Afif/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

ii.   Obtain information on assistance provided by the government

During the COVID-19 pandemic, homeless people used mobile phones to get information about food aid provided by the government. Information about various government assistance were channelled through this medium and allowed the homeless to gain access to it. The verbatim responses are as follows:

> *"I got various information about the assistance provided by the government."*
> (Nazri/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"With the phone, I can access information about the aids available."*
> (Faiz/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"I can get information about government assistance."*
> (Zainudin/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

iii.   Obtain information on financial assistance, food distribution and necessities provided by NGOs

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, NGOs often assisted in terms of financial assistance, food, clothing, and necessities. Most NGOs will report this information over the mobile phone especially through the WhatsApp application. Thus, this allowed the homeless people to have access to this information, as discussed below:

> *"NGOs always provide information about their assistance through mobile phones. Various assistance provided such as financial assistance, food and other assistance such as pampers, clothes and so on."*
> (Syafiq/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"I often find out about aid from NGOs that are distributed through mobile phones. So, I know when and where food distribution is given."*
> (Firdaus/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"Most of these NGOs will inform in advance about the assistance. Other friends will forward the message to us. So, we know when this NGO wants to distribute food"*
> (Nazri/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"I always get food aid information from NGOs through my mobile phone."*
> (Eddy/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"There is also a lot of information about the food provided by NGOs. All information is disseminated through this mobile phone."*
> (Faiz/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

iv.   Obtain information related to COVID-19 preventive measures through the application

The respondents also mentioned that the phone allowed them to be informed about Covid-19 preventive measures. Information regarding preventative measures that the people, including the homeless, can practice were provided through mobile phone channels.

> *"With the availability of mobile phones, we can learn about Covid-19 preventive measures."*
> (Nazri/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"The government disseminates a lot of information on preventive measures through these mobile phones"*
> (Faiz/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"I know information about preventive measures through my mobile phone"*
> (Afif/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

v.   Acquire news related to the latest situation of COVID-19

The use of mobile phones allowed homeless people to get news related to the latest updates regarding COVID-19. News is delivered through multiple applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp and MySejahtera. This allowed homeless people to gain access to COVID-19-related news easily, as discussed below:

> *"I found out the news about Covid-19 over the phone. Various information such as the latest statistics on Covid-19. I can know when I open the mySejahtera application"*
> (Firdaus/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

> *"I easily found out about the latest statistics on Covid-19. I also know the current situation of Covid-19."*
> (Zainudin/ Interview location: Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur/ December 2020)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although owning a mobile phone is common for many homeless people, gaining access to the Internet is still a challenge. Moreover, within this demographic, many are most likely to experience serious difficulties with the costs and conditions imposed by postpaid plans. It is important to understand in greater detail why someone would need to own a mobile phone, beyond the usual reasons of wanting to own or upgrade to the latest gadget. For homeless people, this is an issue of surivival - there are no other alternatives such as landlines or broadband connections to use. The various activities that are the basic forms of social and economic participation, including access to emergency services, medical assistance and crisis support, depend on ready access to telephony devices.

These requirements are accompanied by costs. For online and mobile services to be accessible and beneficial to this group, access costs and specific barriers and limitations faced by homeless users should be addressed. There are a number of ways mobile service providers as well as government services and support can contribute towards this goal. A set of recommendations addressed to these groups, and guided by the principles of service continuity, affordability and accessibility flexibility, is detailed in the final section of this report. Briefly it is divided into the following:

A. Internet Service Provider/Telcos

There are several avenues that telcos can explore to help increase Internet usage among homeless people. This is because homeless people are a marginal and isolated community. However, the Internet and technology are crucial to helping them overcome their difficulties and sustaining their lives.

i. Subsidy and Discount Assistance Programme by Telcos

One of the most important things that homeless people need is a programme that can help them access Internet services. Telcos need to identify homeless people who are experiencing financial difficulties and be aware of the special needs of homeless people to maintain continuity of service in accessing the Internet and paying their bills. They could introduce new assistance and subsidy programmes to support access to mobile and data services (e.g., mobile phones, credit recharge, discount options and Wi-Fi access). They need to consider how assistance programmes can be provided and function effectively across all mobile service providers. Studies have found that homeless people were more dependent on the Internet throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, and therefore a good internet connection has become an essential requirement for them. They need an internet connection that is not only fast enough to help them but also commensurate with their budget

ii. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

The telcos can organise CSR programmes that reach out to the homeless which will help to enhance market reputation and brand image of the telcos.

iii. Collaboration with Housing Providers, Local Councils and Service Users

The telcos can work with housing providers, local councils and users of these services to develop and promote affordable internet access and provide solutions that enable the homeless to use digital technology.

B. Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (JKM) and Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL)

The Department of Social Welfare Malaysia and Kuala Lumpur City Hall also have a big role in realising opportunities in bringing homeless people closer to the Internet, as well as access to health and treatment information. These two agencies could start thinking of methods in enabling the provision of internet hotspots that can help homeless people to get internet access. In addition, various programmes can be jointly organised to increase the productivity of the homeless.

CONCLUSION

Mobile phones are central communication tools for homeless people and, during the time of the pandemic, are even more crucial because they need to be aware of the latest information for them to be able to comply with the new norms. The use of mobile phones is vital for homeless people to help them receive information on current issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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