UTS UNSW

COASTAL CONVERSATIONS ON TRUST: OLDER ADULTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH SMART HOME TECHNOLOGIES

Research Topic

As Australia's population ages, many older adults express a strong desire to remain living independently in their own homes for as long as possible. Smart home and wearable technologies are often promoted as tools to support "ageing in place," yet their adoption in regional and coastal towns remains limited. These areas are often semi-supported digitally, with patchy connectivity, fewer service providers, and limited local training opportunities, but are rich in social connection and community trust.

Research Design

Six hours north of Sydney, we conducted five co-design workshops in the regional coastal towns of Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga, engaging 81 older adults aged 65 and over. Each workshop was held in local public libraries and community spaces, providing a familiar and accessible environment for participants who were all living in independently, some in retirement villages.

During the sessions, participants interacted with a range of emerging smart home and wearable technologies, including sensors, voice assistants, and safety devices. Through guided demonstrations and group discussions, we invited participants to reflect on:

- Which technologies could help you live at home more easily and for longer?
- Which tools do you trust or not trust — and why?
- If you could help design these tools, what would you change or add?

This participatory approach enabled regional seniors to share their lived experiences, evaluate new technologies in a supportive social setting, and co-imagine how digital innovation might support them to continue living independently.

Findings

- Majority of older adults were digitally literate and had used computers and related technologies in their work.
- Many had moved from Sydney after retirement, or during Covid-19 pandemic.
- Some smart-home technologies but were not using it due to lack of knowledge of what they do.
- All had issues with set-up, maintenance, trouble-shooting, and how to manage continual updates.
- Safety and trust were major issues.
- Many had smart watches and used it as a watch but were not aware of functions such as sleep monitoring and fall detection.
- Many shared some powerful stories of how the fall detection feature on the smartwatch was highly valuable.
- There was a preference for free-standing smart-home technologies rather than personal wearable technologies.
- Many re-envisioned ways to use smart home technologies to suit their context, e.g., a wife wanted to customise a smart speaker with smart display to help her husband with dementia to remember the names and faces of his family members.
- A smart doorbell was something none had encountered and was one that was most popular as it was seen as a safety aid.
- **Tech support was the biggest need.**