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The significance of smartphone in integration-related information encounters

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This abstract studies how smartphones figure in encounters where integration-related information is shared and discussed, that is, information encounters (Ruokolainen, 2023). The technological advancements of recent decades have significantly transformed the way people seek and interact with information (Mantere, 2022, s. 2), offering access to a wide range of resources and tools. Previous studies have mostly focused on the role of smartphones as tools for information-seeking, language learning, communication, and network-building in immigrant contexts (Kaufmann, 2018; Awad & Tossell, 2019; Mancini et al., 2019; Eide, 2020; Hylland Eriksen, 2021; Zani & Cockel, 2022; Jasim & Mills, 2023). However, research with a more holistic understanding of smartphone significance and use in encounters is scarce. We emphasize the need to better understand how owning, using, and accessing smartphones during information encounters not only facilitates engagement with integration-related information but also enhances the encounters overall.

Method and data

The data comprises observation fieldnotes that were collected by two researchers during 22 group and 12 individual information encounters in Southern Finland between autumn 2023 and spring 2024. During these encounters, integration-related information was shared and discussed between the facilitator(s)/counsellor(s) and the immigrant(s). The encounters included individual counselling (ICS), guided library tours and presentations (LIB), language café meetings both onsite (LC) and online (ZLC), international café (IC), and an entrepreneurship course online (ZEC). The fieldnotes were transcribed, anonymized, and analysed using an inductive approach, allowing the research findings to emerge from the significant themes within the raw data (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Findings

We identified several key methods of smartphone use during information encounters, leading to the emergence of three primary themes: Agency and empowerment, Trust, and Reassurance and comfort. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Findings.

Smartphone use	Observations	Main theme	Excerpt from the fieldnotes
Handling information, accessing information.	Accessing and sharing previously stored information; searching, storing, and sharing new information Storing information using the smartphone.	Agency and empowerment	<p><i>They [client and counsellor] book another two-hour meeting. The client takes a picture of the counsellor’s calendar booking. (ICSb 8)</i></p> <p><i>The client takes out their phone and talks about the things TE-office has ordered the client to do, showing the phone to the counsellor. (ICSb 5)</i></p>
Tool for facilitating communication with others.	On-the-spot translation and interpretation. Image use for communication and language learning.	Agency and empowerment; Reassurance and comfort	<p><i>Volunteer 1 asks about what type of swimsuit is required or permitted in the course. Volunteer 2 explains that “[any, just not underwear].” The teacher searches on the phone for pictures of a swimsuit and shows it to the participants. Participant 2 exclaims: “aah... [child] (nods and points at herself)”. (LC 5)</i></p> <p><i>One participant is using the phone for voice to text interpreting throughout the entire tour. During the tour, I notice that the following text appears on the participant’s phone: “The building was built in 1903”. The student exclaims “Oooh!” and shows eagerly the phone to their peers. After that I hear whispers from the group: “Very old...”. (LIB 4)</i></p>
Inviting third person to the encounter.	Third party’s role in the encounter. Reflecting on the encounter with the third party.	Agency and empowerment; Trust; Reassurance and comfort	<p><i>This is an important moment of the appointment because the client calls the spouse to provide the picture of the passport. The phone call is on for most of the remainder of the appointment, we can thus establish that the spouse entered the appointment and at least partly can follow it. (ICSa 3)</i></p>
Personal artefact	Giving access to the smartphone as an expression of trust.	Trust; Reassurance and comfort	<p><i>The client takes out their phone and starts to dig out messages on it. The counsellor advice: “Save all the messages,” and asks: “Can I have your permission to read</i></p>

	Smartphone as a reassuring device.		<i>the messages?”. The client gives permission and continues to explain the case hastily while the counsellor quietly reads the messages. (ICSb 1)</i>
Performing bureaucratic acts required for the encounter (e.g. identification).	Reassurance through the presence of the facilitator facilitates trust and agency.	Agency and empowerment; Trust	<i>They send in the application. The counsellor waves their hand towards the client’s phone to show that they will soon receive a confirmation. The client confirms “yeah it came”. (ICSb 5)</i>
Actions unrelated to the designated encounter.	Filling void moments. Entertainment. Smartphone’s disruptive potential. Indicator of non-relevant or non-engaging information or encounter.	Reassurance and Comfort	<i>Behind me in the table there are quite many children who watch videos on the phones out loud. (IC 2)</i> <i>Organizer: “One thing I want to talk about is books in Easy Finnish. Has the teacher told you about Easy Finnish?” Teacher shakes their hand, while not lifting the head from the phone (LIB 4).</i>

Discussion

Our analysis goes beyond viewing smartphones merely as devices for handling and sharing information. Instead, they are connected to broader themes: Agency and Empowerment, Trust, and Reassurance and Comfort. Agency and empowerment were evident in using translation tools, acquiring new smartphone skills, or requesting permission to access a device, allowing participants to take control of certain aspects of the encounter. Trust was demonstrated when participants permitted others to access their devices. Reassurance and comfort were reflected in creating images for better understanding, conversing through messaging tools, or using smartphones as stress relievers. Thus, smartphones enhanced key elements of a successful information encounter (Ruokolainen, 2023).

Conclusions

Our study contributes to research on integration-related information by examining smartphones not just as tools for accessing and sharing information, but also as artefacts that can enhance the information encounter. This is especially relevant for immigrants who often need diverse support with information (Ruokolainen, 2022). Understanding different aspects of smartphone can help integration practitioners refine communication strategies, customize information delivery, and create guidelines for third-party involvement via smartphones. Flexible approaches to smartphone use in these encounters are essential.

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