

2009

# An exploratory study on the elders' needs and attitudes towards radio programmes

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## Recommended Citation

Chan, C. M. A., & Cheung, K. W. K. (2009). An exploratory study on the elders' needs and attitudes towards radio programmes (APIAS Working Paper Series No.15). Retrieved from Lingnan University website: <http://commons.ln.edu.hk/apiaswp/14/>

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**WORKING PAPER SERIES NO. 15 (APRIL 2009)**  
**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE ELDERS' NEEDS**  
**AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS RADIO PROGRAMMES**

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\* The study is supported by a grant from ORSD Lingnan University no. DR07B5

**Acknowledgement:**

The research team is deeply indebted to RTHK, all the agencies and interviewees who contributed to the study with their time and effort.

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE ELDERS' NEEDS AND  
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# **Chapter 1: Background and Objectives**

## **1.1. Introduction**

Mass media has been one of the most important components in sociological studies. Anthony Giddens (2003) refers that mass media, including its wide variety of forms like television, newspapers, radio, video games, films, magazines, advertisements and CDs, has come to play a fundamental role in modern society. Past literatures suggested that mass media not only restructures the traditional social relationship in, for instance, class, gender, religion, culture, medicine, consumption, political activities and education, the programmes produced and broadcasted also had a great impact on the way of life of the audiences (Kammeyer, Ritzer & Yetman,1987; Popenoe,1993; Farley, 2003; Macionis, 2004; Henslin, 2005). Evidence is rich as well in supporting the use of media in elderly people's lives. According to Doolittle's observation, "various studies have shown that media consumption gradually increases during middle age till well into retirement age" (1979, p. 311). Visvabharathy and Rink (1984) recognised the elderly market segment in mass media is huge and with a great potential. They had later on launched a study exploring the 'neglected business opportunities'.

Radio is one of the popular media in our daily life, which not only does it provide entertainments but also news as a 'window on the world'. Rosalind Gill (1993), however, argued that visual media, such as film, video and television, has dominated the cultural and communication studies. Radio, as a medium ignored by the media scholarship and was faced with 'a period of cultural demise' in the 1950s, when it was replaced or superseded by television (Gill, 1993, p. 323).

## **1.2. Objectives**

Not many studies in the literature were to investigate the positive impacts of radio on health of the elderly in Hong Kong. If listening to radio has a positive impact on older people's health, there would be important implications to the social services in Hong Kong, with regard to further studies on an in-depth understanding of this issue and policy recommendations for the Hong Kong government to improve social services of the elderly population. In light of the above rationale, the present study was designed to explore the qualitative impacts of listening radio on the well-being of elderly people in Hong Kong. The specific aims of the study were:

1. to explore the profile and the listening patterns of elderly audiences;
2. to explore the preference and needs of the elderly audience on radio programme in HK;
3. to explore impacts of the radio programmes on elderly's life satisfaction and the quality of life.
4. to explore the notions of lifelong learning through the medium, which Radio 5 is serving such a function.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1. Age related media use**

The popularity of mass media especially in broadcasting services has played a role in influencing the lives of older persons and in shaping their everyday life experiences (see, for example, Kubey and Csikzentmihalyi 1990; Heidt 1984; Reid, 1989). In explaining the age-related trends in visual and audio media use, research studies supported that higher consumption rate of the elderly group was observed due to an increase in leisure time resulted from retirement and diminishing interpersonal contacts with friends and family (Doolittle, 1979). Similarly, Davis (1971) and Graney & Graney (1975) concluded that older people who no longer visit friends or attend community activities spend more time on watching television, listening to radio and reading newspapers. However, Schramm (1969) argued that, rather than a withdrawal mechanism, older persons' use of media is for maintaining communications with others (1969).

Another survey conducted in New Zealand identified older persons as a significant special interest groups for broadcast programming (NZ On Air, 2001, p.3). The findings suggested that mass media played a part in older persons' later life, as 'a substitute for social contact' that alleviated feelings of isolation and loneliness as the media directed viewers' attention away from themselves (NZ on Air 2001, p.8). Thus, rather than as a one-way transmission of information or entertainment, the introduction of "phone-in" sessions to radio programmes encourages a spirit of active and constructive participation, rather than an apathetic helplessness. Other literature also summarized how mass media influenced elders' way of living in a positive way. Steiner (1963) pointed out various sources of information from the media such as



entertainments from television and radio and information from newspapers and magazines could help stimulate audiences' quest of knowledge.

Studies suggested that the interpretation for older people has been changed by the mass media. As argued by that, in 1970s, older people were associated with poverty, loneliness, abandonment, lack of working opportunities, weak social networks, and bad health (Goldman, 2003). However, since the promotion of Grey Power in the West, the image of old people become more fashionable and energetic. A number of television and radio programmes were hosted by the elderly, who enjoyed a great deal of respect and popularity as well (Chan, 1992). A positive image built up by the mass media has made older people more confident in themselves (Chi, 2000). However, older audiences in Hong Kong are more of a passive type. It is thus significant to see if their confidence will be lifted by Radio.

Radio is usually included in research studies under the name of Mass Media. Studies related to radio for the elderly are rarely found. A public survey in the U.S. showed that 61.2% of audience aged at 55 or above listened to public radio every week and this group of audience spent over 9 hours per week listening to radio (Abitron Inc., 2005). A study in UK showed that the duration of older adults aged 65 and over listening to radio is as longer as 13.0 hours per week at home, plus 2.3 hours elsewhere (Ofcom, 2006). Listening to radio programmes is also found to be one of the most common daily activities amongst older adults in Hong Kong. A recent research study revealed that over 85 percent of elderly population in Sham Shui Po District have an habit of listening to radio programmes every day (Wong & Lam, 2005). Low standard of living of the majority of elders in Hong Kong, living alone and homebound in older districts (Chan, 2002), are believed to be the reasons for the ageing group accounting for

this significant portion of the listenership. Many of the reasons are negative, despite the fact that Radio, as discussed, serves many positive elements. The popularity of portable radio also increases the demand for radio services since people can listen to the programmes with no restriction across places (McCullagh, 2002). Yet, the impact of radio listening, despite its popularity, on older adults is under researched.

RTHK Radio 5 has been playing the role of the exclusive radio station which designs and produces programmes for older audiences in Hong Kong. The Report of Mass Media and the Elderly (RTHK and the Hong Kong Council of social Service, 1988) showed the relationship of radio programmes and the elderly audiences in the history of local mass media research. A total of 641 questionnaires were collected. The research concluded that radio ranked the second, after TV, by the elderly people in terms of the frequency of use. One would expect people from older age group with limitations in vision but they have desire for more programmes choices (e.g. Cantonese opera) from preferred radio. Similar to the previous mentioned research in the West, local elders prefer infotainment, such as those on elderly activities and services as well as health instructions. The preferences on the programmes also differed across gender. Male elders prefer programmes of informative nature with public affairs contents, while female prefers entertainments. Local elders also shared high expectations to the radio programmes in which their psychological and physical issues could be solved through consulting the hosts and understanding the contents of programmes. Generally speaking, radio can significantly serve as a medium to strengthen the tie of the elder audiences with the community. It is argued that there is a need for both the media industry and social service practitioners to further explore the role of radio in promoting community resources and information for elderly (Ma 2004; Ad Hoc Committee on Healthy Ageing, 2001). Seeing the influence brought by Radio as discussed above, it is thus essential to

carry out a study exploring the positive role of radio among the older population in Hong Kong.

A study from the U.S. indicated that older adult is leading among all age groups in regular consumption of TV news, daily newspapers and radio news (Senior Journal.com, 2006). According to a survey conducted by YMCA to explore the future development of elderly life-long learning, 55.2% of respondents recognised that “television or radio” is extremely suitable for older persons to pursue their life-long learning (YMCA, 2002, p.30).

## **2.2. Radio and elderly psychological health**

Local research in Hong Kong agreed that both “watching TV” and “listening to the radio” were popular activities for older adults when coming to spend their leisure time (see, for example, Wan Chai Provisional District Board & APIAS, 1999). Recently, the findings from one of the local researches suggested that listening to radio programmes has become one of the most important entertainments in the elders’ daily life (Wong & Lam, 2005). The result of the Broadcasting Service Survey in 2002 conducted by the Broadcasting Authority, echoed the above, indicated that for those aged 60 or above, the most important reason for listening to radio is ‘for entertainment’ (Broadcasting Authority, 2002, p. 48).

Apart from performing the function of leisure and entertainments, the radio programmes in Hong Kong are a potential medium for education and spreading information especially amongst the ageing population. Local social service practitioners believed that radio can play an important role in facilitating older persons to stay in touch with the society (Ma, 2004). The Senior Citizen Home Safety Association has

pioneered a series of radio programmes with RTHK- Radio 5 on ‘elderly suicide’ aiming at promoting positive messages and providing useful information to older persons (Ma, 2004).

On a softer side, listening to radio is one of the examples of common leisure activities that provide opportunity for pleasure and enjoyment. It brings positive effects to elderly’s well-being such as pleasure, life satisfaction and even enhances the quality of life (Department of Health, 2003).

Amongst all the radio channels in Hong Kong, RTHK- Radio 5, the only public radio unit in Hong Kong, has such a large share of the elderly audience market (RTHK, 2004). With the functions mentioned above, Radio 5 has started to produce programmes solely for older persons in 1980s, aiming at provide useful information and entertainment for elderly people and fulfill their information needs. In 1999, Radio 5 pioneered the *College on Air for the Elderly* (長者空中進修學院) that provided elderly education programmes a wide variety of topics such as health, food and nutrition, home repairing DIY to promoting life-long learning in Hong Kong (Radio 5 –RTHK, 2006). Other programmes including *Programme for the Elderly* (香江暖流), and *Chinese Opera Hour* (戲曲天地) are well received by elder audience. In this sense, rather than providing information and entertainment for the elderly, radio also plays a role in educating the elderly about the importance of health information (physical plus psychological), enhancing their physical health and psychological well-being in their later lives.

## **Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Sampling**

### **3.1. Methodology**

The study is a qualitative one which employs focus group discussions, a more effective way for exploratory data collection. Generally speaking, a large portion of elderly aged 60 or above (78.6%) have only attained primary level of education (Census and Statistic Department, 2000), therefore it is not easy to use quantitative method to collect data. It is quite difficult for them to read and answer print questions. Krueger (1988) mentioned that capturing the real-life data in a social environment can be realized through focus groups. Group dynamics brings insightful opinion on related themes we are concerned. Thus, we propose to apply qualitative approach in this study.

### **3.2. Sampling**

This study is using a qualitative approach by conducting focus group interviews. The main inclusion criteria is that respondent has been listening to Radio 5 for more than 3hours/week for the past month. Six focus groups will be conducted. Respondents basically are divided into two age groups, aged 55-64 and 65 years or over. In each group there will be 5 males and 5 females. The discussion of four of the groups will be on radio programmes for elderly and the impacts of these programmes on their daily life. The rest of the groups are students from *College on Air for the Elderly* and will assess the programme's impacts on their life satisfaction. The respondents in each group represent a mix of high, medium and low socio-economic status (based on total household income). The groups will be audiotaped with prior consent from all respondents. These audio tapes will later be transcribed to facilitate analysis.

Recruitment of targeted audience will be assisted by RTHK through broadcasting. Recruitment respondents will be selected based on their demographic conditions such as

age, sex, socio-economic status, and the pattern of time spending on listening to radio from the list of participation.

The discussion of each group may spend 1 to 1.5 hours and could be conducted in any community centres. In order to guarantee the smoothness and objectivity of the discussions, each group will be guided by a senior moderator. An observer will be invited for monitoring purposes. The whole process of the discussions will be recorded and transcriptions will be by verbatim at next. The data will be quantified and categorized by coding, analysis, comparison and induction. A close-ended questionnaire for statistical purposes will be filled by the participants prior to the discussion. It is useful for supplement of information.

## Chapter 4: Results

### 4.1. Profiles of Participants

A total of 61 participants attended eight focus groups (table 1). The mean age is 67.8, most of our respondents aged between 55 to 86. Of these 61 participants, 16 participants (26.2%) are male and 45 participants (73.8%) are female. 42.4% are living in public housing estates, own private property 27.1%, own public housing flat (20.3%), rented private flat (5.1%) and others (1.7%). 49.1% attained to primary school level, 49.1% attained to secondary school level. 83.6% of the participants listen to radio every day, 6.6% listen to radio once every 2 or 3 days, 3.3% listen to radio once every 5 or 6 days and 6.6% occasionally listen.

Table 1: Focus Group Profile

Types of group	No of groups	No. of Participants
55-64	2	15
65>	2	18
Senior Students (55>)	2	16
No age limitation (55>)	2	10

### 4.2. Focus Groups Findings

#### 4.2.1. *Impact on Psychological Health*

Participants pointed out that there are positive impacts of listening to radio on their psychological health. The interviewees claimed that listening to radio could bring them happiness and relaxation for a better health as in the following quotations:

- i. “聽完 d 節目，心情真係好輕鬆!” (“After listening to radio programmes, I feel relaxed!”).

- ii. “我真係好開心架，開心到跳起呀!” (“I am really happy! I am so delighted!”).
- iii. “個心情輕鬆d，做野都爽快d，一邊聽，一邊做(家務).” (“I feel more relaxed and efficient while listening to radio and working (on household chores) at the same time.”)
- iv. “開心左，尤其是旅遊，我很喜歡旅遊，行山，旅遊尤其是去外國的那一些 我好很喜歡聽，就算沒有錢去，我也想著一路聽就好像自己去緊旅行 知道這麼多東西很開心，好像帶我遊玩緊的心情，好像帶著我去遊玩緊。” (“I am happier, because I like traveling, hiking, and in particular traveling abroad...I especially like that program, even I got no money, I imagine that I am in that trip while listening...knowing so many things makes me happy yet nervous, as if feels like they have taken me to travel with me.”)
- v. “你識多左野自然自信心變強。” (“You learned more, naturally you have higher self-esteem.”)

To some old people, listening to radio is their meat and drink. Radio is a kind of basic necessity for elderly.

- i. “帶給我一些精神上的寄託。” (“Listening to radio brings me spiritual support.”)
- ii. “我不用那麼無聊。” (“I will not get bored”.)
- iii. “精神食糧。” (“spiritual food for every day.”)
- iv. “好像我們喜歡電台的人，可以有一個會，例如老歌歌迷會，香港廣播電台的茶會，聚下，我們已經很開心” (“Those like us who like radio can form a club, say Fanclub of Golden Oldies, we can get together, we will be very happy.”)



- v. “我們可以有一個精神的寄託，有意義呀，……，那些偶像陪我們傾下偈，影下相呀，好開心架啦” (“Radio is spiritual food to me, it is very meaningful,……, we can meet our idols (radio host), to chat and to take photos together. We will be very happy about that.”)

Programme hosts serve as good companions as in the following quotes:

- i. “一個心靈上的安慰，雖然係講一兩句話係無意思，但心靈上已經好有意思，哎呀，我打到啦，好開心，仲開心過你請佢食飯” (“It is a spiritual comfort, even though it is only a few words, it is good enough for our soul. It will mean more to me to have called in successfully than inviting to dinner.”)
- ii. “好似李仁傑咁，好像我們有什麼心事，有打通電話同佢傾，佢好好傾的，了解我地點樣情形，你環境點呀？有時聽到有些患了癌症的人，他又識得安慰，變左心靈上差好遠” (“Just like Lee Yan Kit, when we have something in our mind, we call him, talk to him, and have a good conversation. He will try to understand our lives. Sometimes he talks to cancer patients, he will comfort them, spiritually feeling better.”)

#### **4.2.2. Social Contact and Social Support**

Respondents pointed out that they could keep in touch with the society by listening to radio, extending and broadening their social network by meeting new friends through activities such as elderly college or radio station functions. Extra function of radio facilitated the elderly, who lived in different areas to engage in social interaction, and particularly in contact with others and even regularly in community activities and functions. The following quotations are given to address the above issue:

Listening to radio improved their life satisfaction through social interaction as in the following quotes:

- i. “我都覺得(收音機)好好，識多d野...和別人談話也多些話題。” (“I think radio is good. I can learn a lot...and I got lots of talking point when chatting with other people”).
- ii. “吸引之處就是有好多時調劑一下自己的情緒，還有可以知道香港發生什麼事，而且能夠領略到真身知道香港的情形是怎樣” (“The attraction of radio is that regulate my emotion and I get to know what is going on in Hong Kong, and understand what has happened in Hong Kong.”)
- iii. “因為我們真的沒有時間看報紙，也沒有時間看電視，我也是全部都靠聽新聞，知道外面的新聞” (“I really have no time to read newspaper or watch TV, I can only rely on radio to get to know the news.”)
- iv. “呢樣識果樣唔識，大家互相交流，多左溝通同話題。” (“I don't understand everything, we can share our opinions, and better our communication with each other.”)
- v. 對於認真唔係幾去街，同埋成日留係屋果D，真係非常之好，差唔多當左朋友。” (“For those elderly who do not go out and stay home all the time, it is really good, radio (host) has become a personal friend.”)

Radio not only provides entertainment and information for elderly in their daily lives, but also as buffers against a wide range of psychological problems for the elderly people. The elderly people enjoyed their lives through interacting with their hosts, other elderly people in different functions and activities. By the interaction with other elderly, they become friends in the community, the elderly people would be able to enhance their psychological well-being.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The present study revealed some important findings of the positive impact of listening to radio on psychological health and life satisfaction of the elderly people. The elderly people were able to express themselves in the air, by interacting with radio hosts, sharing their own feelings and by communicating with other in the community through participating in different activities. In addition, radio is a social network that links up the isolated elderly who lives alone in our community. It gives them a sense of belonging to our community. Generally speaking, radio hosts became a life companion to the elderly people, especially who live alone or cannot read newspapers or watch TV.

However, elderly people might not benefit from listening to radio. Some might just treat radio purely as a medium for entertainment. They revealed that they have their only daily activities such as participating in the elderly centres. For this cohort of respondents, we are not only mainly relied on radio to maintain their quality of life and life satisfaction. For those disadvantaged elderly, radio is the only option for them.

In sum, listening to radio to a certain extent might bring benefit to the psychological health and life satisfaction of the elderly people in their daily lives. Function of radio is not only available in the air, combining different of activities such concert, fan club gathering, elderly learning centre. Radio also extends the social network for elderly and improves their psychological health and life satisfaction in their later lives.

### **5.1. Limitations**

The present study was limited by the audiences who are recruited through solely one radio station. We believed that people will have different preference on various kinds of radio programmes.

### **5.2. Suggestions**

The present study was a useful references for researches the impact of radio on the psychological health of the elderly people in Hong Kong. It revealed that radio could independently play the role of life companions for Hong Kong elders. Therefore, further researches would be focused on how radio, as an medium, bring positive impact on the psychological and physical satisfaction of the elderly people.

Furthermore, it is found that increasing in social network by the introduction of learning classes in NGOs which also bring positive impact on their daily lives. Thus, promoting active ageing in the community may increase social interaction among elderly people.

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## **Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) at Lingnan University**

### **HISTORY**

The Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) was established as a University-wide institute in 1998 and has been operating as one of the research centers in the Institute of Humanities and Social Science (IHSS) since September 2001. The mission of APIAS is to facilitate and develop research in gerontology and issues related to population ageing in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.

### **OUR MISSION**

“To develop a better environment for older people and their families in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.”

### **OUR OBJECTIVES**

- To develop an area of research excellence in programme evaluation and action research; both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.
- To strengthen our collaboration within the Lingnan University and the local communities, particularly in relation to student learning.
- To strengthen the collaboration and network amongst the Asia-Pacific region.

For further information on APIAS and opportunities for research collaboration and affiliations with the Centre, please contact us :

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Postage and administrative cost \$20