

Use of smartphones:

report on pilot questionnaire survey

Local Level, 2014



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Local Level

Local Level is a community development consultancy with extensive experience in issues of social and digital exclusion. Further information at Local-Level.org.uk.

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1. Summary of key findings

The limitations of the study, particularly with regard to sample size, are discussed in Section 2 below, and should be kept in mind when considering the following points and throughout the report.

- A quarter of respondents 'rarely' or 'never' use their smartphone as a telephone; the same proportion 'rarely' or 'never' use theirs for texting.
- Overall, email is nearly as popular as telephone and texting, with almost half saying they use their smartphone for email 'daily' or 'multiple times a day'. Nonetheless, a significant 44 per cent say they rarely or never use their smartphone for email.
- Only 28 per cent of respondents are using their smartphones to access social network sites on a daily basis. However, half of those who live in low income households use their smartphones for social networking on a daily basis.
- Most communication using the smartphone is with family (within and beyond the household) and close friends. On a weekly basis or more frequently, communication seems to be fairly evenly distributed between these three categories.
- Some 80 per cent of respondents either 'often' or 'constantly' make a conscious effort to find and stay in touch with friends and contacts. But only forty per cent felt that using a smartphone makes it easier to keep in touch.
- Asked to express a hypothetical preference between having broadband and owning a smartphone, two thirds would choose broadband, with less than a quarter opting for the smartphone.
- Nearly a quarter of respondents (23 per cent) say that at some point they have downgraded their phone for reasons of cost.
- More than a third of the respondents from low income households said they use the smartphone for shopping or banking on a daily basis or more frequently.

2. Introduction

This report describes a small experimental study to understand how people are using their smartphones, particularly for maintaining their social networks in the context of social inclusion. It was prepared for **Cosmic**, to support the company's work on digital inclusion and suggest future directions. The research was carried out and the report written by Kevin Harris, Local Level.

Rationale

Research has shown the importance of social networks in helping people to improve their employability and in getting jobs.¹ The wide availability of smartphones could have significant implications for the diversity of social networks. The intention behind this research was to begin to explore how people use their devices with particular reference to people on low incomes.

Heavy use of mobile phones (for text messaging and voice connections) serves to strengthen people's *core networks* (usually about 2-4 individuals), especially with kin. These are friendship ties that help people to survive challenges or crises, but they are unlikely to help them to overcome poverty. Mobile phone use is associated with high levels of face-to-face contact, leaving people with less time and energy for connections at the periphery of their networks. This in turn serves to restrict network size.²

Against that, research has shown that online technologies make 'a positive and substantive total contribution' to network diversity and hence to the potential for people to escape poverty.³ The direct contribution of even limited relationships established on social networking sites, to the diversity of relationships, is substantial.

As smartphone technology becomes more widespread and inexpensive, the question arises: to what extent are people using these devices to access email, online lists, forums, networks and social media sites? If they do so, are they paying less attention to their core networks in favour of greater network diversity? Are there likely to be specific examples where network expansion has served to help lift individuals or families out of poverty? One hypothesis is that those who treat networking almost as a task, requiring deliberation, have an immediate advantage.

It could be that the combined power of social media and smartphones, in the hands of someone who is strategic about their social networks, could help many individuals to overcome network poverty and hence financial poverty.

¹ See for example [McCabe et al \(2013\)](#).

² [Hampton and Ling, \(2013\)](#).

³ [Hampton et al \(2011\)](#).

Sources of data

There were two main sources of data for this study.

1. A focus group was run in Devon where hard copy versions of the questionnaire were distributed. A total of 12 useable returns were received.
2. A revised and extended version of the questionnaire was then developed and published online. The project partners distributed the link through their networks: we also benefitted from the support of [Citizens Online](#), who sent the link to their longitudinal study participants. A total of 53 returns were received for this version.

A topic guide, based on the online version, was prepared for use in face-to-face interviews, to augment the data, but in the end was not used. In the circumstances and with the budget available it was not possible to increase and extend the sample.

Where the questions were the same in the two versions of the questionnaire, data were combined. Nonetheless this only gives a maximum sample of 65 and for most questions the base was lower than this. Percentages are offered in the report below but it should be kept in mind that the base is often around 45 or less.

In the online version we asked for information about approximate household income (not including benefits) and usual number of occupants. We identified households on low income as those with an average weekly income of less than £100 per person. This sample comprised only 14 respondents so the data have no statistical validity, but we are satisfied that the methodology would work with a larger sample and the research would be worth replicating. Some suggestions about relevant hypotheses for this group are discussed in the report.

3. How people use their smartphones

- A quarter of respondents 'rarely' or 'never' use their smartphone as a telephone; the same proportion 'rarely' or 'never' use theirs for texting.
- Email is nearly as popular as telephone and texting, with almost half saying they use their smartphone for email 'daily' or 'multiple times a day'. Nonetheless, a significant 44 per cent say they rarely or never use their smartphone for email.
- Only 28 per cent of respondents are using their smartphones to access social network sites on a daily basis.
- Less than 20 per cent of respondents use their smartphone to listen to music with any regularity.
- Use of the diary function was unexpectedly high by comparison, with well over half the sample using it at least on a weekly basis.

Table 3a Use of smartphones: frequency of use of functions

How often do you use your smartphone for the following?

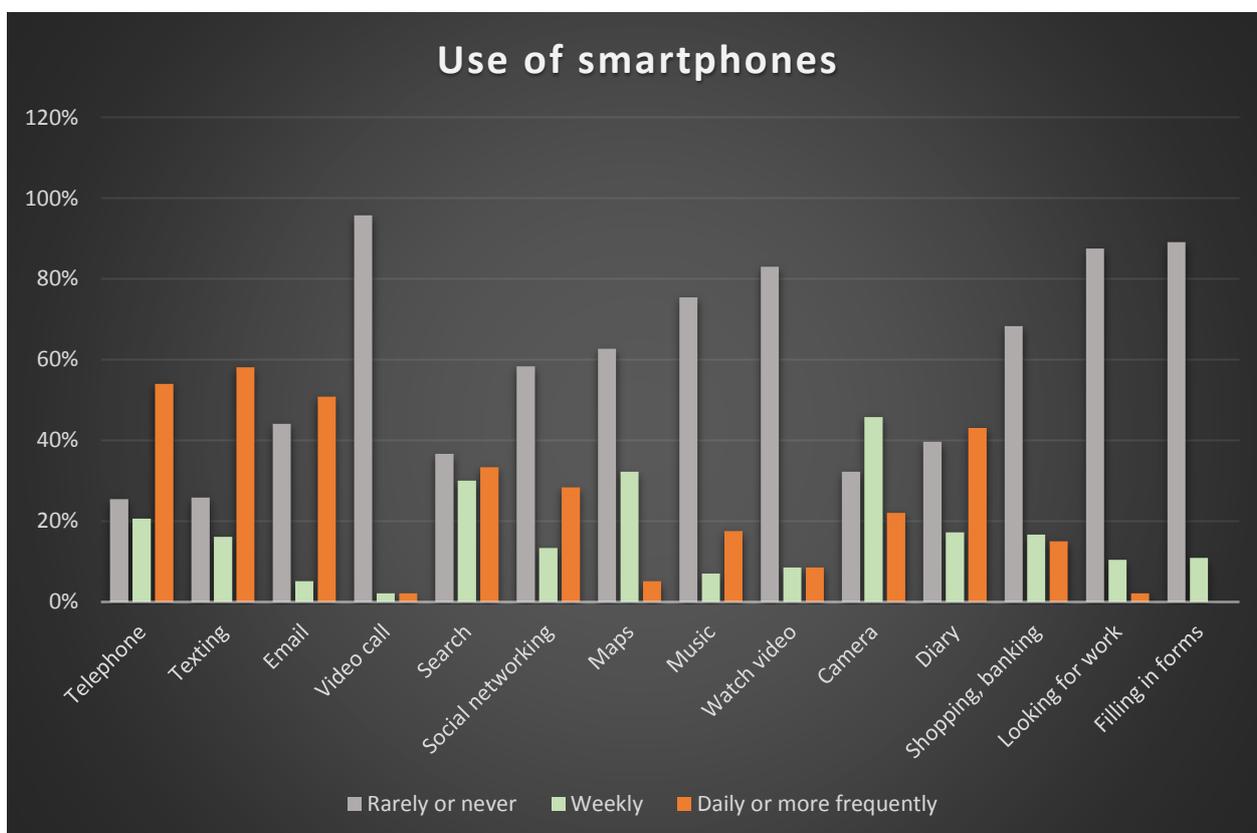
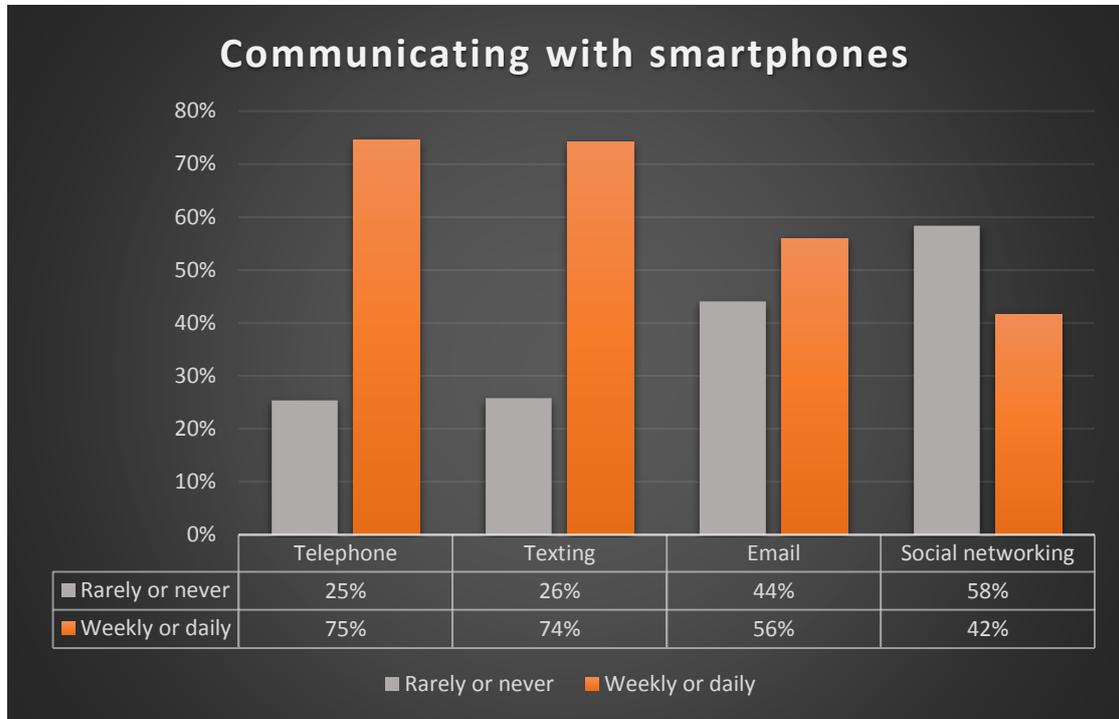


Table 3b Use of smartphones: frequency of use of communication functions

Table 3b indicates that three quarters of respondents use the telephone and texting function on their smartphone regularly; slightly more than half use email; and 42 per cent access social network sites.

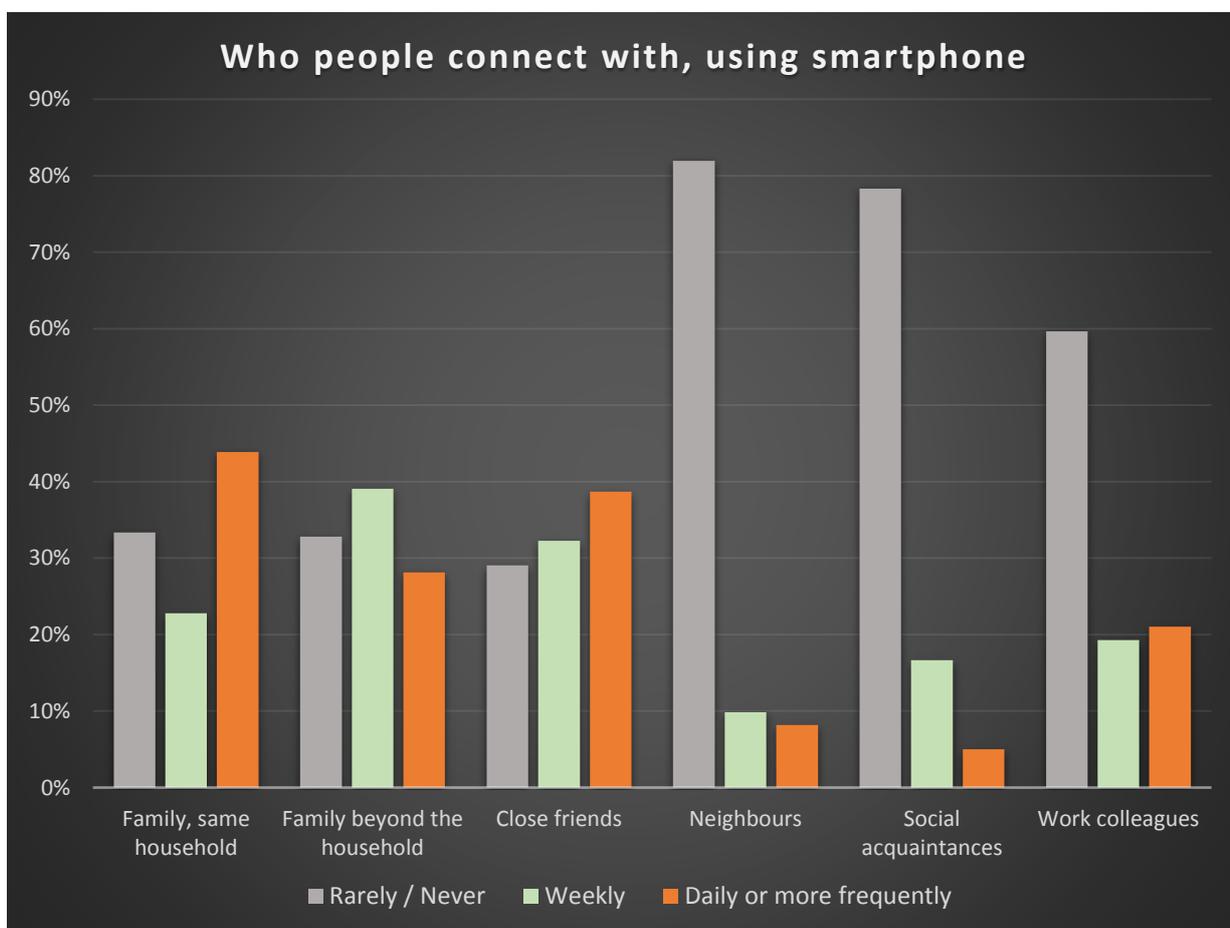


4. Who do people connect with, using their smartphone?

- Most communication using the smartphone is with family (within and beyond the household) and close friends, as would be expected. On a weekly basis or more frequently, communication seems to be fairly evenly distributed between these three categories.
- Smartphones are seldom used for communication with neighbours (although among our tiny sample of people on low incomes the proportion was roughly twice as high: see section 5 below).
- Communication with work colleagues on a daily (or more frequent) basis using a smartphone is reported by 21 per cent of respondents.
- Even on a weekly basis, less than a quarter of respondents say they communicate with 'social acquaintances' (including 'friends of friends') using their smartphone.

Table 4 Who do people connect with, using their smartphone?

Who do you connect with, using your smartphone?

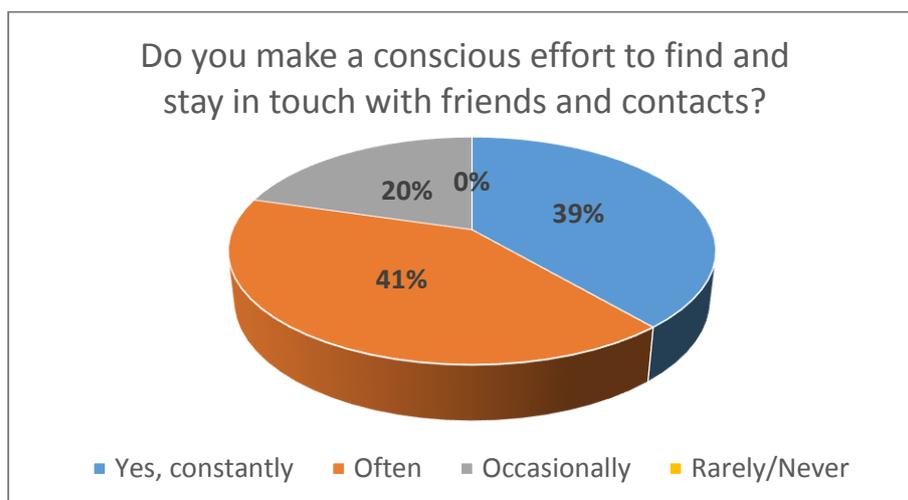


5. Staying in touch with friends and contacts

- Some 80 per cent of respondents either 'often' or 'constantly' make a conscious effort to find and stay in touch with friends and contacts.
- Forty per cent of respondents felt that using a smartphone makes it easier to keep in touch.
- In addition, some 21 per cent of respondents told us that they have friends or useful contacts who they got to know online before they met them face-to-face.

We were interested in the extent to which people take a strategic approach to their social networks, or whether they just 'go with the flow'. Some 80 per cent of respondents indicated that they are strategic, either 'often' or 'constantly' making a conscious effort to find and stay in touch with friends and contacts. This supports the hypothesis that, given appropriate tools, more people are likely to take advantage of the power to shape their own social networks.

Figure 5a



Opinions differ noticeably over whether or not using a smartphone makes it easier to stay in touch. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents felt that it is easier. More than a quarter say it's much the same as it always was, with a significant minority of eight per cent saying that it makes it harder (Figure 5b).

It is noticeable that several respondents who said it is 'about the same as it always was' or who responded 'Can't say' offered positive comments. For example:

'I can ring/text/e.mail when something relevant comes to mind'

'More instant and convenient'

'Ready access to social media: its social media is the central change rather than the device'

'usually get instant reply'.

Among comments from respondents who thought using a smartphone makes it easier to stay in touch, were the following:

'there is no need to call, or get to a computer to contact people. People are generally easier to reach. You can spend time contacting them in time that would otherwise be unused (such as when waiting for someone or something)'

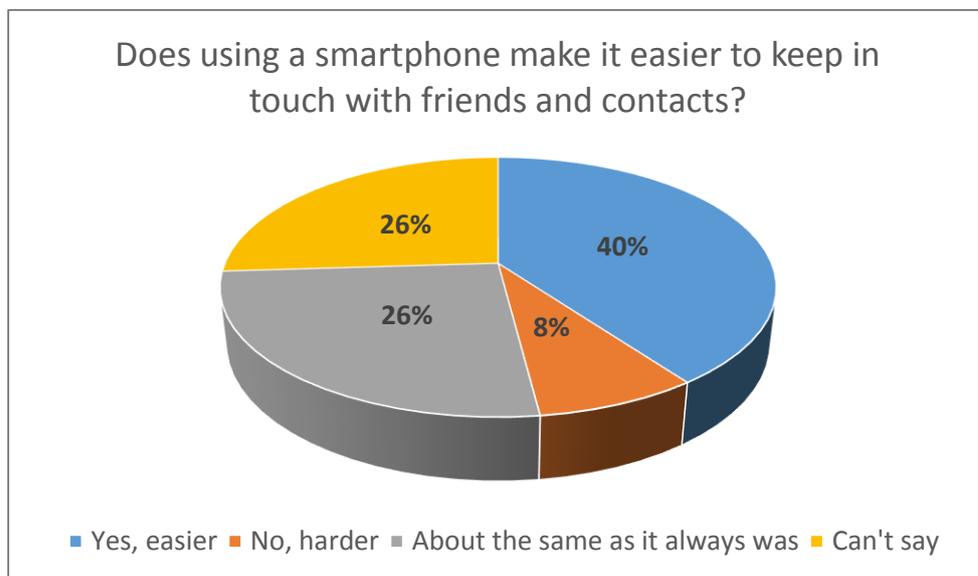
'It's to hand when a thought or event occurs'

'Much easier to share info / updates without interference in each other's lives and can avoid some of the artificial formalities of conversation'

'It's great to have multi way chat groups using apps such as whatsapp. It's much easier to keep in touch that way. Although nothing beats face to face'

'Because of all the apps and different ways to talk to people'.

Figure 5b



Twenty-one per cent of respondents say that they have friends or useful contacts who they got to know online before they met them face-to-face. Explanations for how this came about included:

- 'Through Linked-In specifically. Introduced through another contact'
- 'I have used the internet to develop community projects and sometime meet people through online promotion'

- 'Work contacts through Twitter'
- 'Online dating'
- 'YouTube community - I talked to people who make YouTube videos then we all met up at a YouTube gathering in London!'

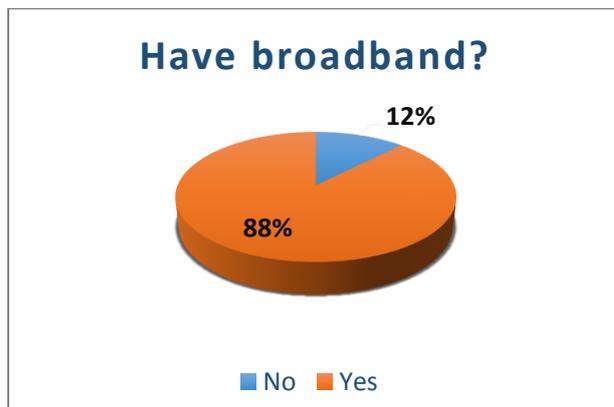
6. Ownership of digital technologies

- Some 87 per cent of our respondents have broadband coming into their home.
- Asked to express a hypothetical preference between having broadband and owning a smartphone, two thirds would choose broadband, with less than a quarter opting for the smartphone.
- Half the respondents own a tablet, with a further 19 per cent 'considering buying' one.
- Nearly a quarter of respondents (23 per cent) say that at some point they have downgraded their phone for reasons of cost.

Broadband and smartphone

Some 88 per cent of our respondents have broadband coming into their home (Figure 6a). This is noticeably higher than the UK take-up of around 72 per cent (2013).⁴

Figure 6a. Do you have a broadband service coming into your home?



In the context of economic austerity, we were interested in the relative value people place on broadband and smartphones. We asked, 'if you had to make a choice between spending on a smartphone or on broadband, which would you choose?' There was a clear but not overwhelming preference for broadband, with several respondents finding it too close to call (Table 6b).

Comments from those who would opt for a smartphone naturally emphasised the portability:

'It is communication means that I can carry with me'

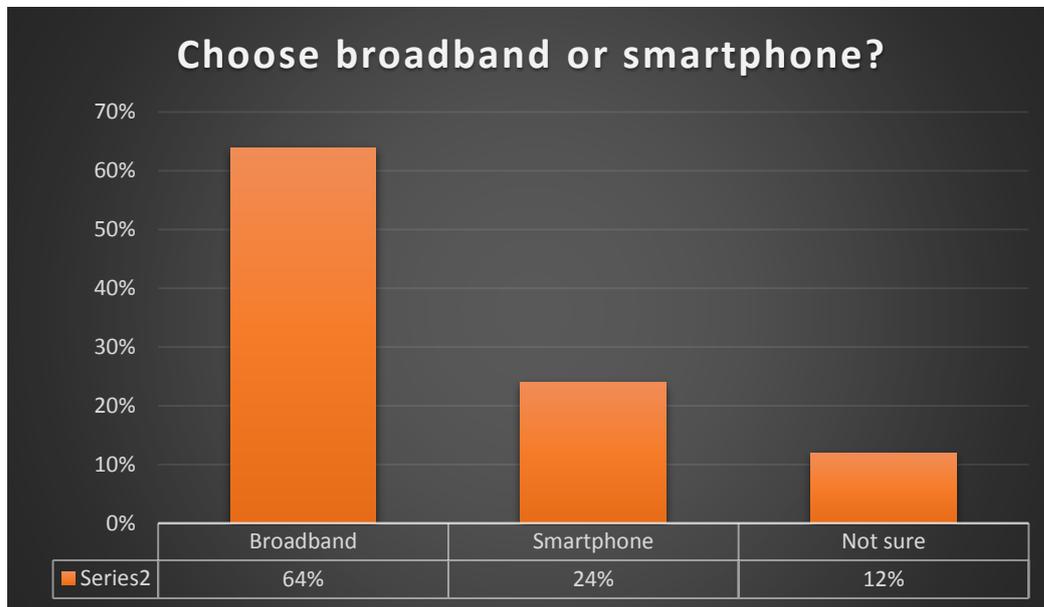
'Use my smart phone wherever I am'

⁴ [Ofcom infrastructure update](#), 2013.

'Because I could use wifi or 3G'

'More useful to travelling around and keeping contact / diary etc.'

Table 6b. 'If you had to make a choice between spending on a smartphone or on broadband, which would you choose?'



By contrast, the main reasons for choosing broadband over smartphone seemed to be to do with cost and the convenience of a full keyboard and screen. Several suggested that they would happily opt for a combination of PC with broadband plus 'good old fashioned' mobile phone. Comments included:

'Prefer to use a keyboard computer at home when I am more relaxed in my leisure time.'

'More beneficial spending on broadband.'

'Because it's not always possible to get reception for the smartphone.'

'Most of the time spent on line would be at home. Outdoors is not the intended place.'

'Larger screen size for PC use due to sight issues and hand disability.'

'Need broadband for more varied uses than are possible on a smartphone, e.g. reading, editing documents. Use broadband connection with the smartphone for many applications e.g. downloading talking books to listen to on smartphone.'

'Don't think I know enough about the technology to use the phone for other activities.'

'I tend to connect when stationary rather than on the go.'

'Without broadband i wouldn't be able to work.'

'I could always have a simple mobile phone.'

'It's cheaper (and I can connect the phone to the broadband).'

'Mainly at home, so takes precedence and anyway better screen.'

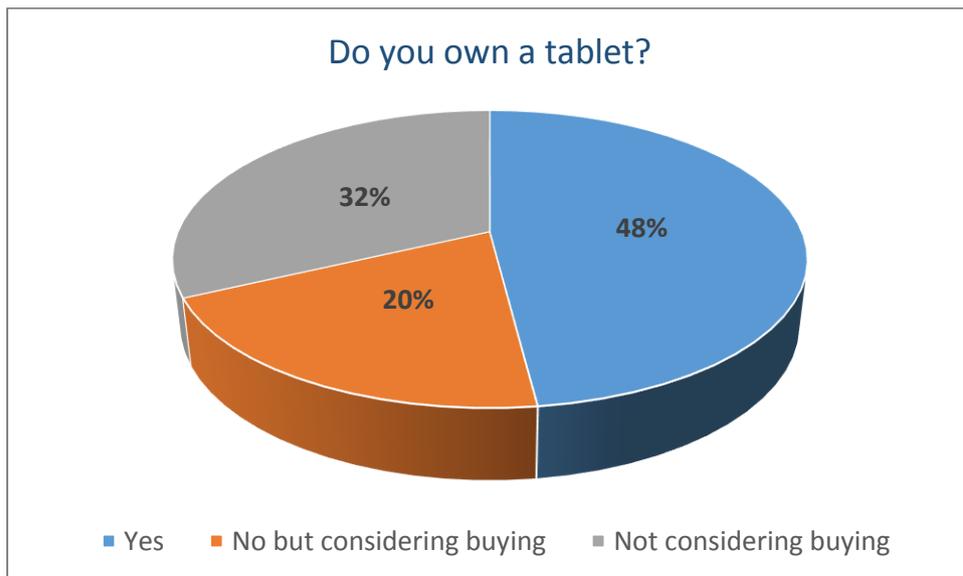
We recorded some additional comments about the use of smartphones from our focus group participants; for example -

- 'Life changing. Saves time and money'
- 'Useful but not for me'
- 'Wouldn't be without'
- 'Smartphones are genius for anyone'
- 'Free socialising'
- 'Useful but don't depend.'

Tablet and phone ownership

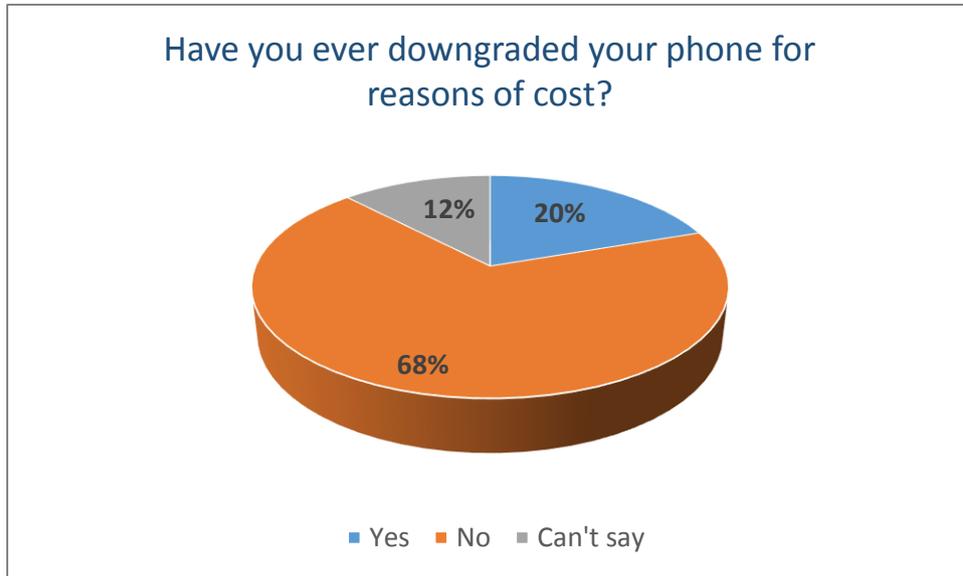
Almost half the respondents own a tablet, with a further 20 per cent 'considering buying' one. Nearly one third do not own and are not considering buying a tablet (Figure 6c).

Figure 6c. Do you own a tablet computer (such as an iPad) or are you considering buying one?



The recent financial downturn is likely to have influenced people's spending on their mobile telephony. One in five respondents told us that at some point they downgraded their phone for reasons of cost (Figure 6d).

Figure 6d. Have you ever downgraded your phone for reasons of cost?



7. People on low incomes

The sample proved too small to identify a meaningful subset of respondents from low income households. Experimentally we identified responses, knowing the number of occupants, where the weekly household income (excluding benefits) indicated *less than £100 per week per person*. These only amounted to 14 responses, so not even tentative indications can be drawn, but the following tables are offered to show the kinds of finding that might emerge in a full-scale study.

Table 7a. How often do you use your smartphone for the following?

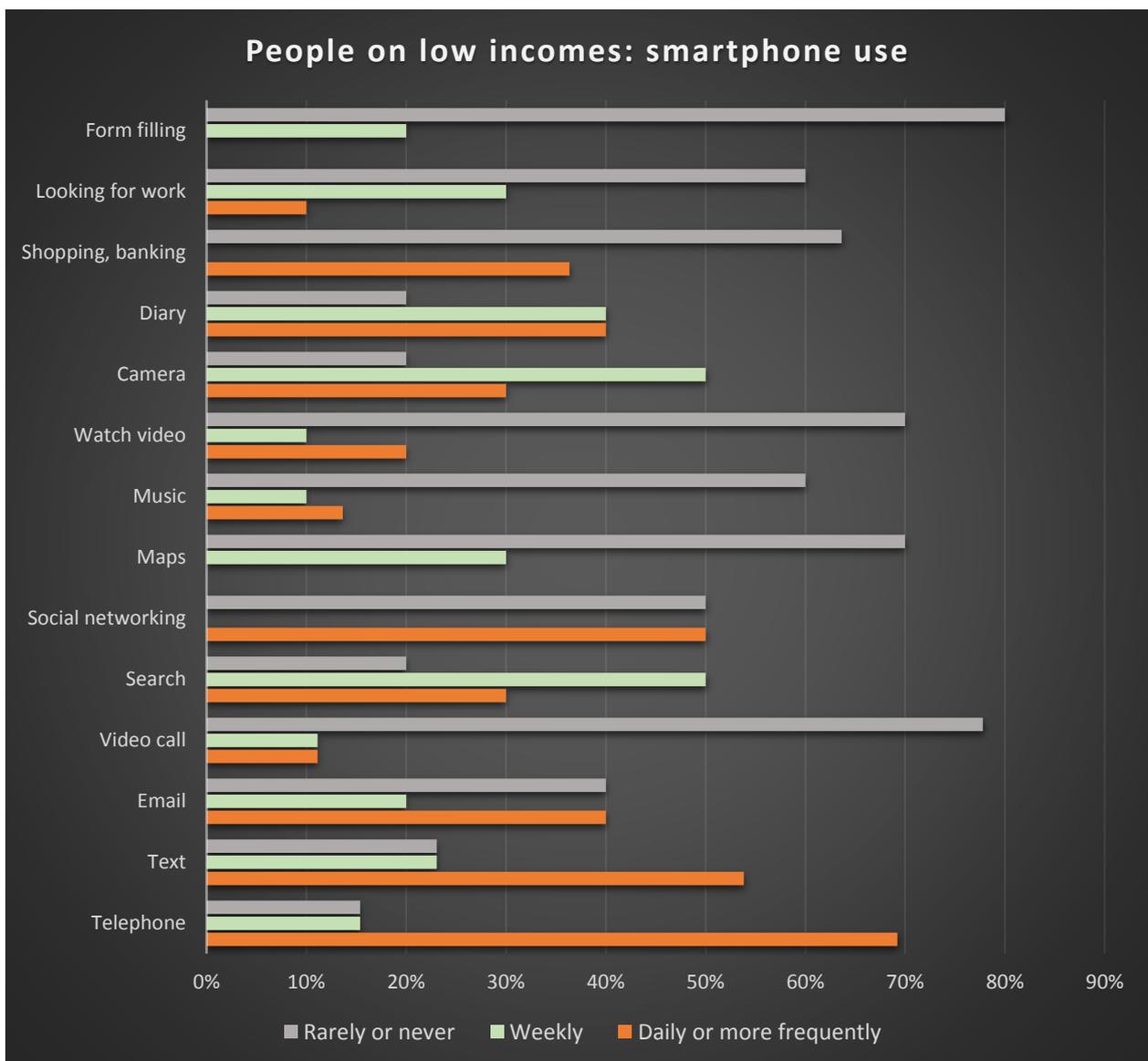
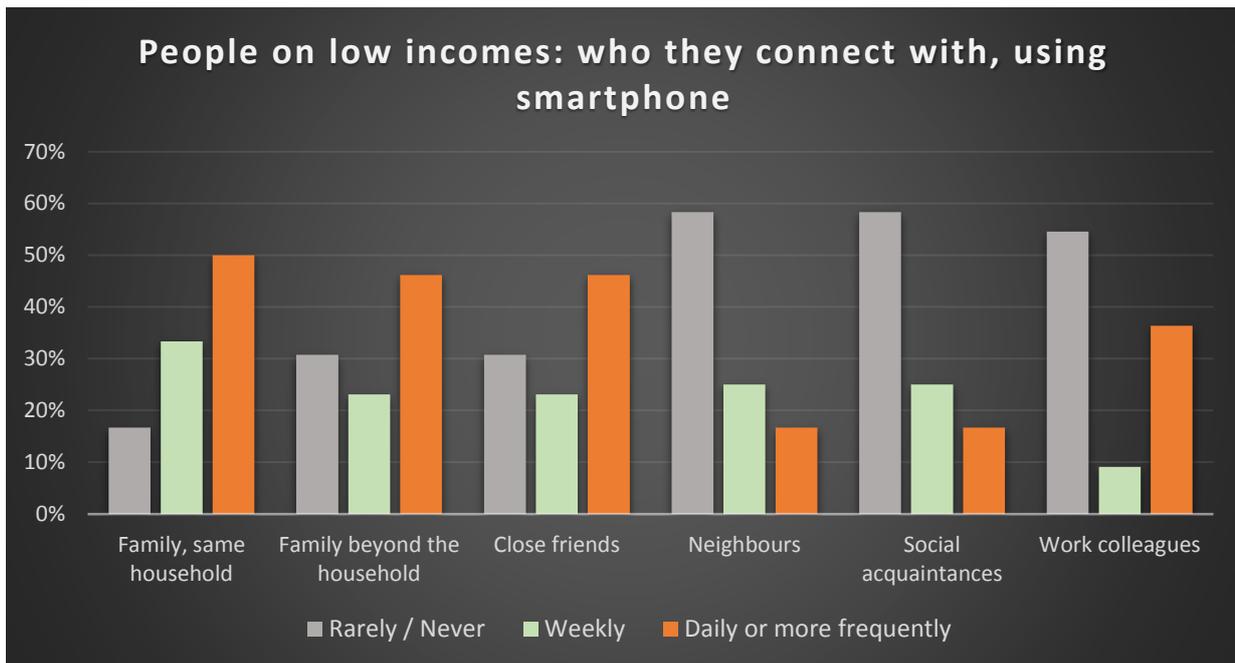


Table 7b. Who do you connect with, using your smartphone?



Nonetheless we might use this exercise to help frame hypotheses for further research. For example, 50 per cent of our tiny low income sample use their smartphones for social networking on a daily basis, compared with just 28 per cent for the whole sample. If a similar difference was repeated in a larger, representative sample, it would attract interest in our initial hypothesis regarding the potential impact of smartphone use on the social networks of people in poverty.

In section two above, we noted that smartphones are seldom used for communication with neighbours: in our whole sample, the proportion who said they do so daily or more frequently was an unsurprising eight per cent. In this small sample of people on low incomes the proportion was twice as high, at 17 per cent. If confirmed with a larger sample, this would reflect the relatively localised lifestyles of people on low incomes which in turn, for many, reinforces the limitations of their social networks.

Surprisingly, when it comes to using the smartphone for shopping or banking, more than a third of the respondents from low income households said they do so on a daily basis or more frequently. Again, if this sort of proportion were reflected in a sufficiently large study it would be of particular interest to people in those sectors and to policy makers.

8. Concluding remarks

This study emerged from the hypothesis that the combined power of social media and smartphones, in the hands of people on low incomes, could help many to overcome network poverty and hence address financial poverty – especially among those who are strategic about their social networks. In order to clarify this theme we need to know more about how people use their smartphones to establish and maintain connections with friends and contacts. The survey was intended to contribute to that knowledge and to begin developing a methodology.

Within the acknowledged limitations, on both counts – clarifying the hypothesis and developing the methodology – the study can be described as a success.

We have seen that the hypothesis merits the attention of a larger, more rigorous, study. The data hint at some potential interesting contrasts between the whole sample and the small, low income sub-sample. We note that a possibly significant minority do not use their smartphone as a telephone; and a similar minority do not use theirs for texting. There are indications that use of the smartphone as a powerful networking tool is by no means widespread.

This report has illustrated how the methodology might be used in more extended research, with indications of the kinds of finding that could be expected to emerge. Some of the points implied in this study – for instance that 80 per cent of people think about their social networks strategically - might well have been distorted for example by response bias: and this is the sort of issue that will need to be addressed with an appropriate sampling framework. A deeper and wider study, on a national or regional basis, could take advantage of the ability of housing associations, charities and other agencies to reach an appropriate sample of respondents.

Why might it make a difference?

We found that 60 per cent of respondents remain to be convinced that a smartphone makes it easier to keep in touch with friends and contacts. This is surprisingly low, and it will be interesting to see if the figure increases in the next few years. But it's uncontentious to observe that smartphones have huge potential as social networking tools: it's not too soon to be studying their use in relation to the social networks of people who experience exclusion. Deeper practical knowledge in this respect could be combined with learning material on how to develop and maintain a social network; this in turn would contribute to guidance for advice and support workers, careers advisers, charities and community groups in helping people to escape poverty.

9. References

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