Medical Xpress

New tool rates quality of health apps

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With more than one million 'health & fitness' mobile applications on the market - and very little research to indicate their effectiveness - how do you know which you can trust?

The Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) and QUT have developed the first multidimensional tool for assessing the quality of mobile health apps.

The Mobile Application Rating Scale (MARS) was developed by a team of psychologists, web/app developers and designers at QUT, and tested on 60 randomly selected wellbeing apps.

Results indicated the MARS provided a comprehensive, reliable and objective tool for app developers, researchers, health professionals and the public to rate apps against four quality scales: engagement, functionality, aesthetics, and information quality.

It also provides a measure of the perceived level of user satisfaction and utility of the app.

VicHealth has already acknowledged the MARS as one the most outstanding projects and campaigns involved in improving the health and wellbeing of Victorians, handing the research project a 2014 Victorian Health Promotion Foundation Award.

Project leader Associate Professor Leanne Hides said 'health & fitness' and 'medical' app categories in the Apple app store currently ranked at

11 and 18 in popularity respectively.

"In the past, subjective and un-regulated nature of star-ratings in app stores means that they can be unreliable, and previous attempts by people to create mobile app evaluations have been found to be too technical or specific," said Professor Hides, a mental health researcher with QUT's Institute for Health and Biomedical Innovation.

"The MARS is a game-changer for our modern, app-centric lives.

"Researchers and app developers will benefit from having a reliable tool to help them create high-quality apps. It will also increase the confidence of young people and their parents in the reliability and accuracy of the apps they are using."

The MARS is a simple, objective, reliable and widely applicable tool for measuring app quality.

A simpler 'app user' version for the public has also been developed to allow researchers and app-developers to conduct user-acceptability studies. This version of the MARS uses simpler language and does not require health expertise or training.

The MARS allows people at all levels of app-interaction to confidently create and use reliable apps, to ensure app users receive the best help and support possible.

"The MARS is an excellent addition to the new body of evidence and practical resources we are creating at the Young and Well CRC, which explores how new and emerging technologies can improve the [mental health](link) and wellbeing of young people," said Young and Well CRC CEO, Associate Professor Jane Burns.

"The MARS will be a comfort to parents and professionals in making informed choices about the use of apps."

A paper describing the development and testing of the MARS was recently accepted in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*.

More information: Read the final report on the Young and Well CRC website: www.youngandwellcrc.org.au/kno … b/publications/mars/

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