Smartphone Based Audiometric Test for Confirming the Level of Hearing; Is It Useable in Underserved Areas?

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OBJECTIVE: To determine the hearing levels of participants of a randomized group using a smartphone hearing application and to compare these results with the results from a pure-tone audiogram.

MATERIALS and METHODS: A heterogenous group consisting of both normal-hearing and hearing-impaired participants were included in this study. Pure-tone audiogram thresholds were measured from 250 Hz to 8000 Hz, while smartphone measurements were obtained with a Samsung Galaxy GT-19500 S4 with a bundled headphone running the Hearing Test™ software (e-audiologia.pl), which was downloaded from the Google Play Store as a free application. We compared these results with those obtained from pure-tone audiograms performed by an audiologist as a reference.

RESULTS: Validity analysis indicated that the results for each ear and each frequency were excellent (>0.75). We assessed the mean difference between the pure-tone audiogram and the smartphone hearing test results and found the absolute difference to be less than 8.8 dB.

CONCLUSION: Smartphone hearing test applications are providing alternative tests that present low-cost solutions. Using the hearing application test may decrease the demand for audiological services in underserved areas. The study suggests that smartphone hearing test results are comparable to pure-tone audiometry results.

KEYWORDS: Smartphone, audiometry, hearing
MATERIALS and METHODS
This is a within-subject study design to screen participants across different situations. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Antalya Education and Research Hospital hospital. The participants were recruited at our outpatient clinic between October 2014 and November 2014 from among patients who had been sent to the audiology service for a tympanogram and conventional audiometry. A total of 100 participants (41 female and 59 male; 200 ears) with a mean age of 34.6±12.8 years (range, 18-66 years) were included in this study. Twenty-six had a high-frequency hearing loss, 6 had sudden sensorineural hearing loss, while 68 of the participants had normal hearing.

Audiometric Procedures
An otoscopic examination was conducted on each participant before testing. This was followed by tympanometry. Tympanometry was performed to gain information regarding the middle ear using an impedance audiometer (AZ26, Precision Acoustics; New York, USA) and an 85-dB sound pressure level tone set at 226 Hz to measure the middle ear function. Participants with normal peak compliance, peak pressure, gradient, and ear canal volume, according to American Speech-Language-Hearing Association criteria, were included in the study.[6] After assessing the middle ear, a pure-tone audiogram (PTA) was performed by the same audiologist using the same audiometer (AC-40 Clinical Audiometer, Interacoustics; Denmark) because PTA is the gold standard for describing hearing sensitivity. The audiometer was calibrated in decibels hearing level (dB HL), according to the International Organization for Standardization criteria, and American National Standard Institute standards.[8] TDH 39 and HDA 200 headphones are the only available devices for obtaining audiometric calibration standards.[8] All the participants used the contralateral masker at 40 dB; while the sounds above 60 dB HL were not masked, while for the sounds of intensity between 40 dB HL and 60 dB HL, the application used the contralateral masker at 40 dB; while the sounds above 60 dB HL were masked with 60 dB contralateral noise. Once the test was completed, we noted the patient's details on the phone and saved the data. In addition, the smartphone hearing test does not measure hearing loss levels above 100 dB due to the software program.

All the smartphone measurements were obtained with a bundled headphone, which was connected using a 3.5 mm stereo plug to a Samsung Galaxy GT-19500 S4 running the Hearing Test™ software (e-audiologia.pl). This was downloaded from the Google Play Store as a free application. It generates pure-tone signals with a calibration function to the required RETSPL (reference equivalent threshold sound pressure level). In addition, ambient noise levels were measured using the SoundMeter™ application; if the noise levels were appropriate to ensure the reliability of the hearing application test results, the smartphone hearing test was then performed in a quiet room.[11] The SoundMeter™ application was also downloaded from the Google Play Store.

Participants
One hundred individuals voluntarily participated in this study. All the participants signed the informed consent form. An otoscopic examination was performed on each participant before the tympanometry and audiometry testing. The participation exclusion criteria were the following: less than age 18 years of age, the presence of a conductive or mixed hearing loss, and having the inability to perform the test. Participants were first recruited from our outpatient clinic and were then sent for tympanometry and conventional audiometry examinations. After undergoing the tests, which were performed by a trained audiologist using the same device, the participants were sent to a quiet room, and the smartphone hearing application test was performed using the same procedure as for the typical audiometer when the ambient sound levels measured approximately 35-40 dB sound pressure level (Figure1). These levels allow valid testing by modern standards (EN ISO 8253-2010).[12]

Performing the Application Test
Applications to evaluate hearing levels using smartphones are available at no charge. The applications emit pure tones at different frequencies and also test both ears individually and sequentially. There are some additional features, such as writing notes to the test results, printing the results, or sending the test results to a clinician. Headphones are required to perform the test and these should be provided with the mobile device. For performing the hearing application test, we first had to select headphones that were either bundled or not. We chose the bundled headphones, because calibration was not required. If other headphones had been chosen, calibration by a normal-hearing person would have been required prior to the test. Each individual completed the test in less than 8 minutes. The ears were sequentially tested. When performing the test, if there was more than a 40 dB (HL) hearing loss, suppression with the masking noise was begun. Masking noise was conducted using the narrowband filter. Sounds of intensity below 40 dB HL were not masked, while for the sounds of intensity between 40 dB HL and 60 dB HL, the application used the contralateral masker at 40 dB; while the sounds above 60 dB HL were masked with 60 dB contralateral noise. Once the test was completed, we noted the participant’s details on the phone and saved the data. In addition, the smartphone hearing test does not measure hearing loss levels above 100 dB due to the software program.
Statistical Analysis
Data analysis was performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences v.18.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc.; Chicago, IL, USA). The results of the smartphone hearing test, which was performed in a quiet room, were compared with the pure-tone audiogram results. The continuous data were expressed as the means and standard deviations, and categorical data as the frequency and percentage. Normality testing was performed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. For the comparison of repeated measures, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used. To test the validity, the degree of agreement between the smartphone audiogram and conventional audiogram was calculated in terms of the interclass correlation coefficient (ICC) with a 95% confidence interval. Interpretation of the data was performed according to Cicchetti et al. [13]. An agreement was graded as poor for ICC values less than 0.40, fair for values between 0.41 and 0.59, good for values between 0.60 and 0.74, and excellent for values between 0.75 and 1.0. The difference between the pure-tone audiogram and smartphone audiogram was calculated for each frequency (ΔdB = |dB Audiogram − dB Smartphone|). A 2-sided p value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS
A total of 100 patients with a mean age of 34.6±12.8 years (range, 18-66) were included in this study. There were 39 (39%) female and 61 (61%) male participants. Among the participants, 26 patients had high-frequency sensorineural hearing loss. We included 6 patients who had sudden sensorineural hearing loss (3 patients had hearing loss in the left ear and 3 patients had hearing loss in the right ear). Findings of validity analysis of the results for each ear and each frequency are presented in Table 1 (all frequencies>0.75). The ICC values were measured between 0.878 and 0.933. When we assessed the mean difference between the pure-tone audiogram and the smartphone hearing test results, we found an absolute difference (ΔdB) of less than 8.9 dB for each frequency (Table 1). With regard to the comparison of the measurements at 500 Hz, 1000 Hz, 2000 Hz, and 6000 Hz with both the left and right ears, we found a statistically significant difference (p<0.05) (Table 2). The audiometric results at 500 Hz, 1000 Hz, and 2000 Hz and the smartphone hearing test results at 6000 Hz had better outcomes. At these frequencies, the mean difference was lower than 4.60 dB. When assessing the 250 Hz, 3000 Hz, 4000 Hz, and 8000 Hz frequencies in both the right and left ears, we found that the results were not significantly different (p>0.05) (Table 3). The smartphone hearing test results at 250 Hz, 4000 Hz, and 8000 Hz (only at right ear) had better outcomes than the pure-tone audiogram results. The mean difference between these 2 methods across these frequencies was lower than 1.43 dB. Therefore, these insignificant differences between the pure-tone audiogram and smartphone hearing test results in high-frequency measurements indicate that both tests are similar for these frequencies.

Based on this finding, we determined that the smartphone hearing application test results on both normal-hearing and hearing-impaired participants corresponded with the pure-tone audiogram results (Figure 2, 3).

DISCUSSION
The accuracy of hearing application test is important for identifying a hearing loss. It does not suggest an alternative scenario to fully replacing audiometry. The hearing application test outcomes should be similar to the results from a pure-tone audiogram to be considered accurate. We aimed to test the validity of smartphone-based audiometry for hearing level testing in a heterogeneous group who were randomly selected. In this study, the agreement between the smartphone audiogram and pure-tone audiogram results was excellent (0.878-0.933). At 500 Hz, 1000 Hz, 2000 Hz, and 6000 Hz, we
found a statistically significant difference between these 2 methods. This was an expected result, particularly for the 500 Hz and 1000 Hz frequencies, because of the ambient noise. At 250 Hz, 3000 Hz, 4000 Hz, and 8000 Hz frequencies, the results were not significantly different. The better results observed with the smartphone hearing test at 250 Hz, 4000 Hz, 6000 Hz, and 8000 Hz (for right ear) were unexpected (Figure 4). This may be due to the self-administered test that gives the user full control of the result. Additionally, the quiet room where the smartphone hearing tests were performed could be contaminated by ambient noise, which could cause the participant to be confused during the smartphone test. Nonetheless, there was no significant difference when comparing high frequencies with low frequencies.

Over 5% of the world’s population has hearing loss, comprising 90% adults and 10% children. One-third of the individuals over 65 years of age have hearing impairment [1]. If people are aware of their hearing loss, the progression of the hearing loss can be prevented. Therefore, early hearing screening and initial treatment could significantly improve an individual’s quality of life.

The use of mobile phones is increasing rapidly worldwide. Smartphones mimic a personal computer. Health apps are becoming key tools. With the development of mobile phone technologies, there is also increasing interest in using smartphone applications for health and wellness. Individuals are empowered to monitor themselves to assess such parameters as their amount of sleep, heart rate, and blood pressure [14]. These data can thus improve an individual’s ability to assess his/her health.
There are many articles regarding the use of smartphone health-related applications. Some of these articles are concerned with tracking the heart rate, blood pressure, caloric intake, or weight, collecting data on alcohol use and cocaine cravings among the homeless or sending short message service (SMS) messages to users about the disease and adherence to treatment. Some of the applications are useful in the clinic, such as orthopedic applications for radiographic evaluation, and some of the applications have a combination of a mobile phone-blood glucose monitor that is monitored by the patient and the clinician. In the otology area, there is a rapidly increasing interest in developing applications, such as the detection of noise levels, and monitoring hearing thresholds, as well as using a smartphone-enabled digital otoscope. These applications are used to collect, save, transmit, or share the data.

There are a few articles that have reported data on the validity of the smartphone-based applications. These studies mostly used the iPod® device and iPod-based applications, for which there is no standardized calibration procedure as yet. The clinical validity of smartphone-based audiometry was studied by Swanepoel et al., who compared the hearScreen™ application using a smartphone with conventional audiometry on 162 school children. These authors demonstrated that these 2 methods were in agreement in 97.8% of ears. Kam et al. compared the application tests with conventional audiometry and checked the reliability and validity of the application in 325 subjects between 6-10 years of age. Kam et al. found 63% sensitivity and 82% specificity ratios. Foulad et al. determined the feasibility of a smartphone-based application and compared its accuracy with formal audiometry. These authors performed the application test in a quiet room and found 94% of the threshold values were within 10 dB of the threshold values obtained with formal audiometry in 42 subjects. These hearing applications were successful in demonstrating the close correspondence of the threshold values to those obtained via conventional audiometry. A different group of patients with unilateral sudden sensorineural hearing loss were tested with both conventional and smartphone-based audiometry by Handzel et al. The results showed that the application test had a sensitivity of 76% and specificity of 91%. The correlation coefficient for the comparison of the hearing grade was 83% and the smartphone-based hearing application results were more accurately reflected, particularly at middle and high frequencies. Szudek et al. studied a group of patients with moderate hearing loss, and demonstrated that UHear™ (an iPod-based hearing screening test) was useful and provides accurate results for ruling out hearing loss. The present study has a sensitivity of 98% in correctly diagnosing hearing loss, whereas the application results overestimated by 8 dB the conventional audiometry results in the sound booth. In contrast, Khoza-Shangase et al. carried out a study with 86 participants to compare non-calibrated insert earphones with conventional audiometry. These authors found inaccurate thresholds that were significantly elevated and large deviations at lower frequencies. The mean thresholds that were measured using UHear™ reflected worse hearing results than conventional audiometry in both ears across all frequencies. It was stated that non-calibrated smartphone applications and ambient noise levels may have resulted in the elevated thresholds with the UHear™ test. Recent studies have limitations due to the use of smartphone-based devices that have no standardized calibration procedure. Additionally, there are possible effects of ambient noise influences, which may lead to poor accuracy because current applications do not offer a facility to control for ambient noise influences. A clinical study was carried out by Wong et al. pointing out that ambient noise results in an increased variance in the hearing thresholds at lower frequencies. It was stated that the level of ambient noise would have had an effect at both high and low frequencies.

There are some limitations regarding the performance of the application hearing test. First, the users can drive it to any result they want because of self-administration of the test. The instructions are in English language. In addition, the test must be performed in a quiet room to prevent ambient noise. The application test uses pure tones and not speech audiometry and is thus less reliable than a pure-tone audiogram performed by audiologists. The hearing test does not distinguish between conductive and sensorineural hearing loss critical to populations in underserved areas, and smartphone hearing applications do not deal with this condition. There may be inaccurate results, particularly for low frequencies, because of the ambient noise.

In conclusion, smartphone hearing test applications are providing alternative tests in underserved areas that provide low-cost solutions that can result in early detection. This is particularly important in developing areas where audiology services are unavailable. A smartphone hearing test is easy to perform and can be self-administered at any time. The findings from our study demonstrate that the smartphone hearing test may be an alternative method in underserved areas to screen the hearing levels of patients.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval was received for this study from the ethics committee of Antalya Training and Research Hospital.

Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from patients who participated in this study.

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