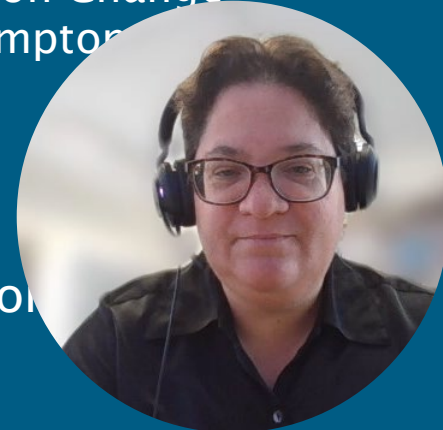


Has COVID-19 Been the Great Leveler? The Changing Use of Intergenerational Digital Communications Amongst Older People in England During the Pandemic

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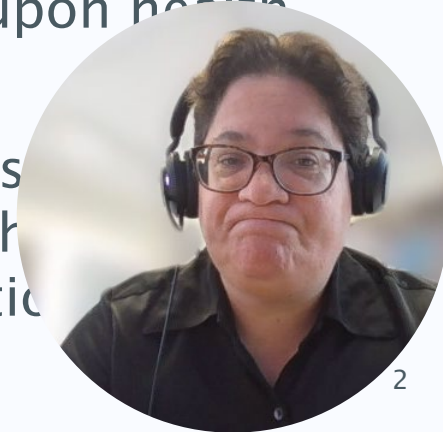
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NCRM DTRN Webinar on Exploring Ageing through Nation

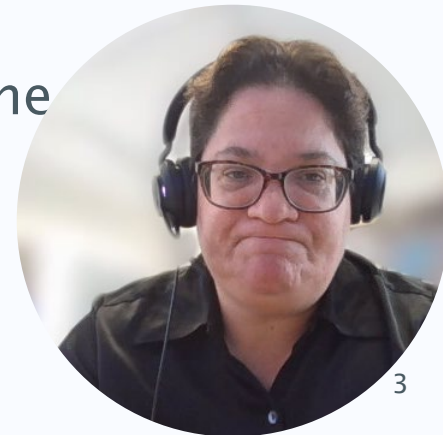
Background (I)

- Family ties remain strong in England, with research showing that most mid-life adults had received support from their parents earlier in life, and many provide support to their elderly parents (Evandrou et al., 2018).
- The COVID pandemic had direct and indirect health impacts in England, e.g. more severe morbidity and greater mortality among older adults than other age groups
- The pandemic also disrupted family interactions, and research evidenced feelings of isolation and loneliness among individuals ‘shielding’ (Derrer-Merk et al., 2022)
- Digital solidarity considers the role of technology in maintaining contact between generations, positively impacting upon health and wellbeing – “associational solidarity”
- Such solidarity was especially valuable for older persons in the early stages of the pandemic when well-established interactions using traditional modes of communication and emotional and practical support were disrupted.



Background (II)

- Previous research has shown that increasing age reduces the likelihood of internet use and digital communication (although what matters is one's age at a particular moment in time, defined by cohort membership) (Peng et al., 2018)
 - Men and women use the internet differently (Kimbrough et al., 2013), and persons with higher educational qualifications are more likely to use communication technology with their offspring than lower-educated persons (Peng et al., 2018)
 - Individuals in poorer health are less likely to use technologies (Gell et al., 2015)
- But do such associations hold in the context of the pandemic?



Objective & Research questions

Objective:

This research examined patterns of intergenerational digital contact before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in England.

Research questions:

- How were socio-demographic factors and internet experiences associated with intergenerational digital communication before the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did intergenerational digital communication change during the pandemic? Who shifted towards, and who shifted away, from frequent intergenerational digital communication during the early phase of the pandemic?
- To what extent have the changes experienced during the COVID-19 crisis reinforced or mitigated existing *inequality* of digital communications and intergenerational co



Data and Methods

- Data were drawn from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) wave nine (2018-9) and the first wave of the ELSA COVID-19 Sub-study (2020).
- The analysis included 4,180 adults aged 65 and above, having at least one surviving immediate family member living in another household, including adult children, parents and grandchildren.
- Digital communication was defined as emailing, texting or video-calling contact. Intergenerational digital communication was digital contact with children or family members outside the household. 'Frequent' and 'less frequent' contact was distinguished using a threshold of 'at least once a week'.
- Multivariate binary logistic regressions were applied to the determinants of frequent intergenerational digital communication.

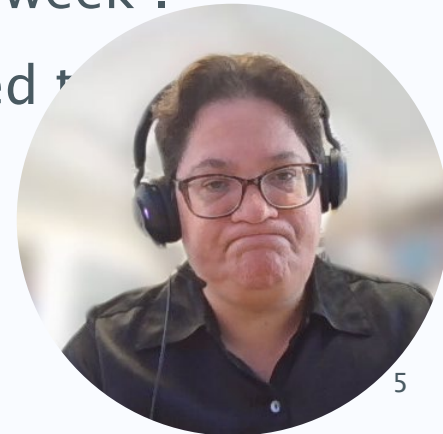


Figure 1. Percentage of all respondents' aged 50+ engaging in frequent intergenerational digital communication pre-pandemic, and shifts in such communication during the pandemic.

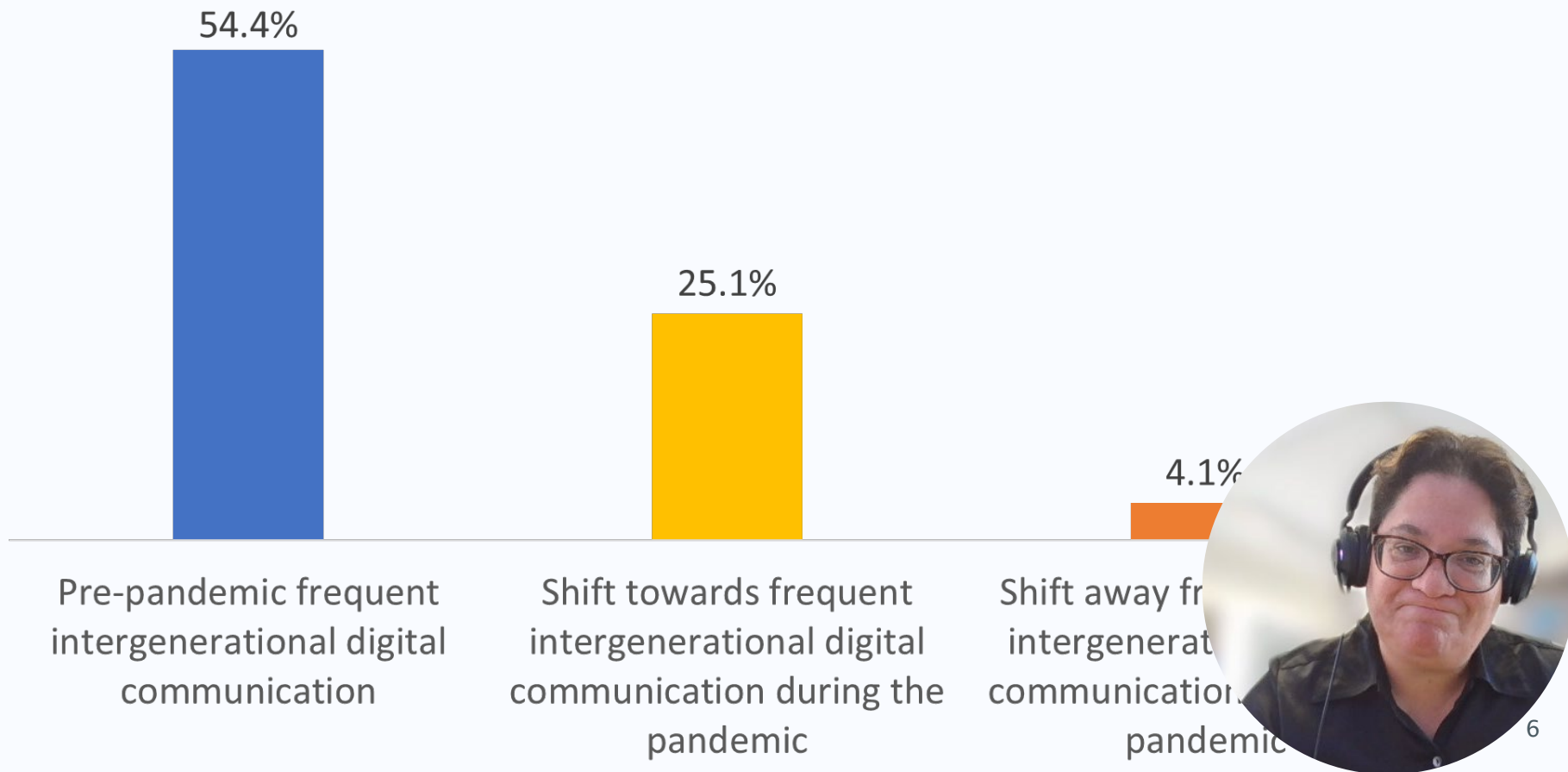


Figure 2. Percentage of men/women engaging in frequent intergenerational digital communication pre-pandemic, and shifts in such communication during the pandemic.

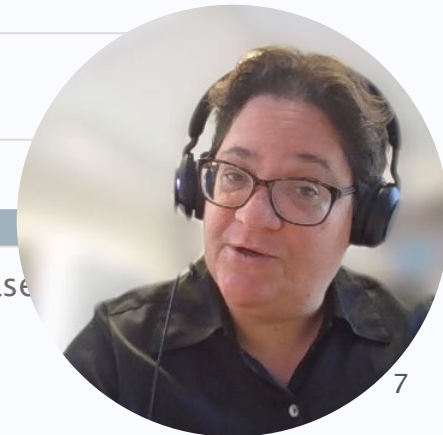
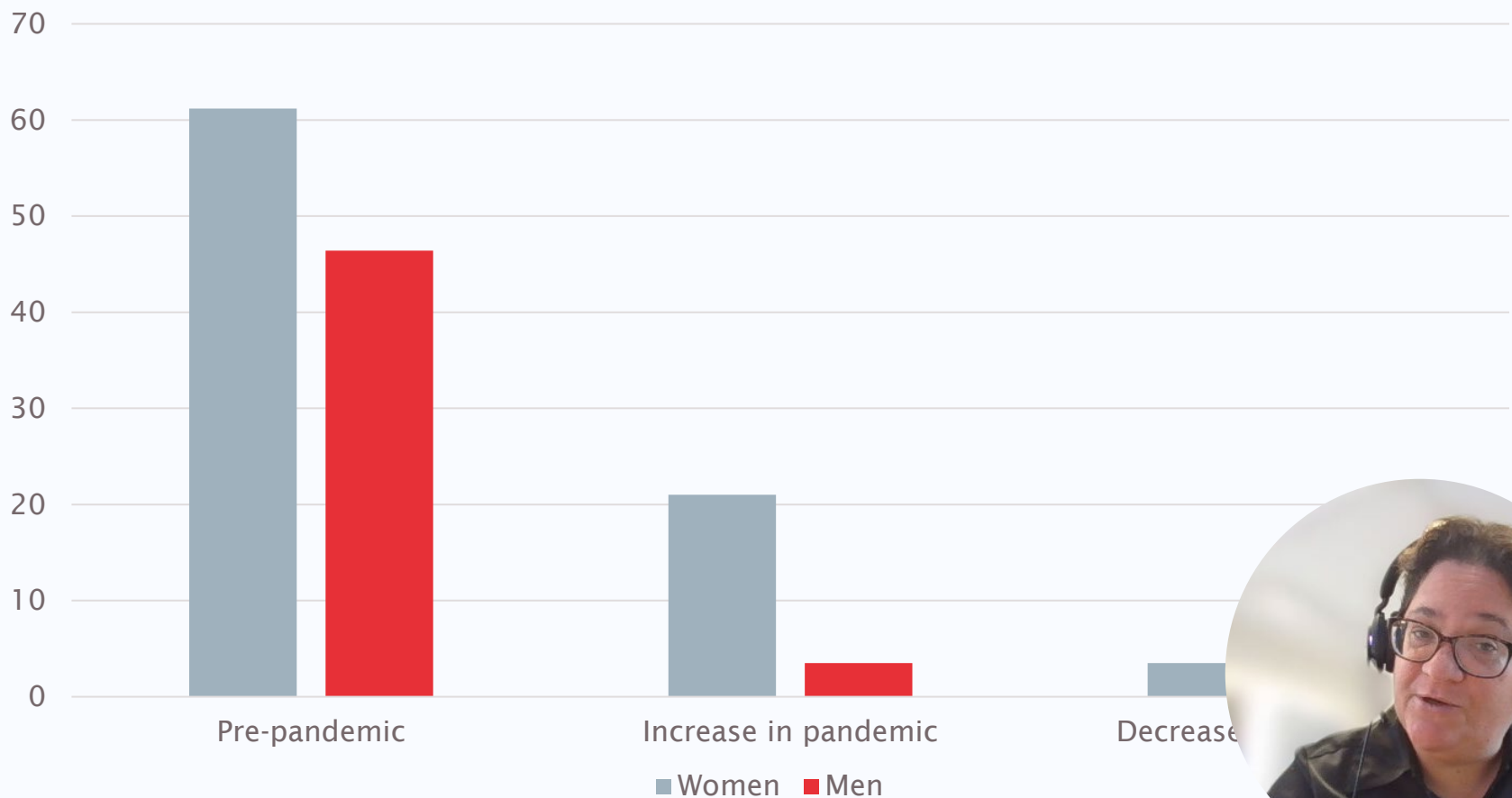


Figure 3. Percentage of respondents engaging in frequent intergenerational digital communication pre-pandemic, and shifts in such communication during the pandemic, by previous use

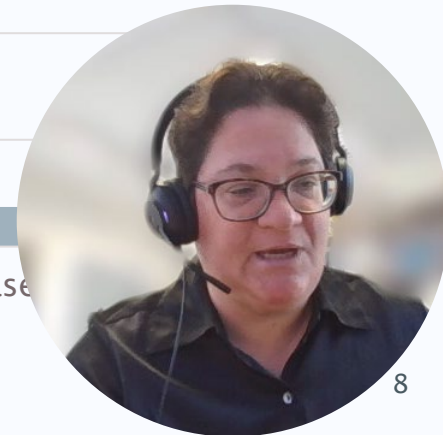
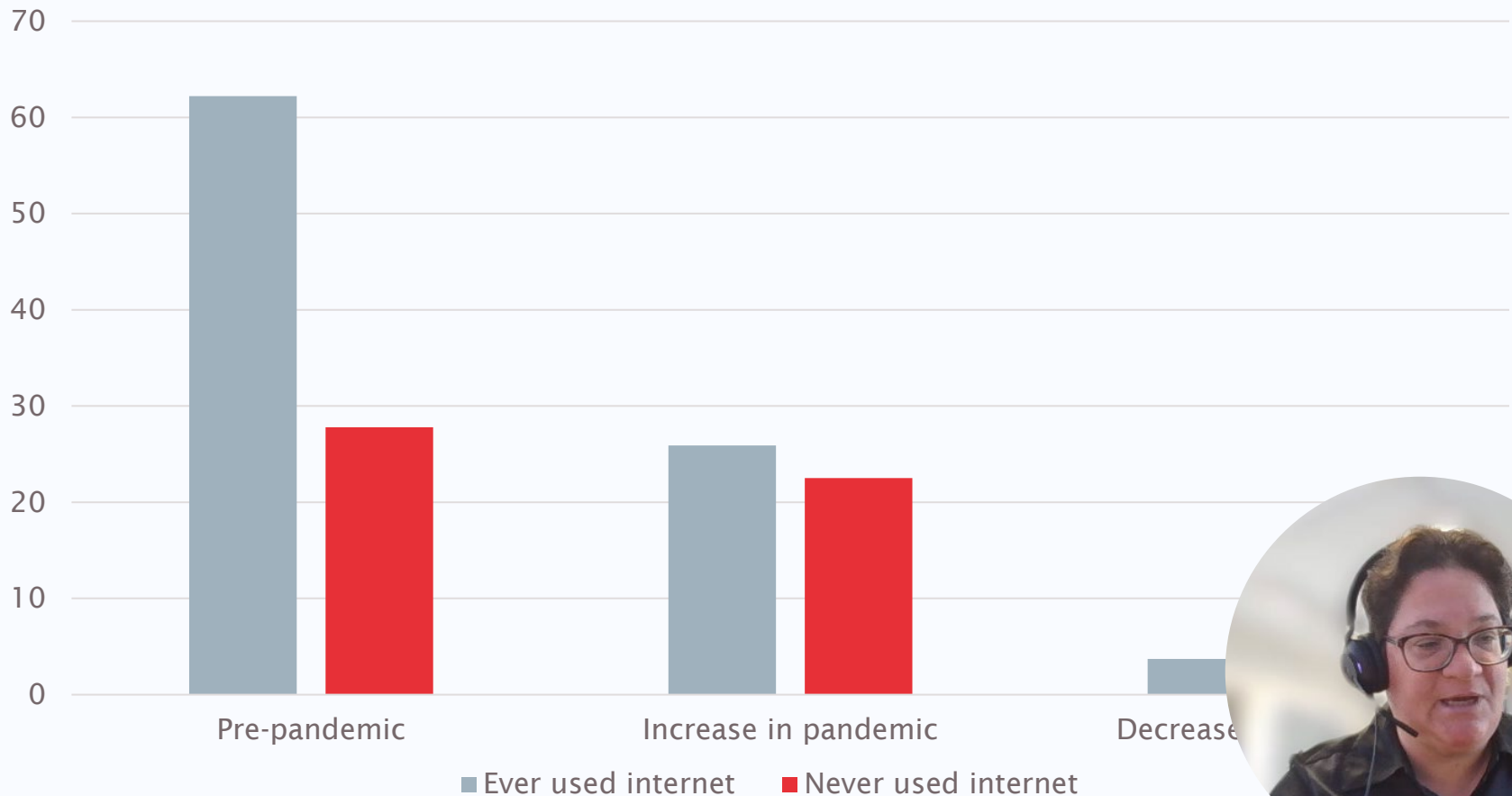


Table 1. Disparity changes among sub-populations (of frequent intergenerational digital communication) between pre-pandemic and during the pandemic.

| Disparity changes pre-pandemic and during the pandemic | Percentage points change | Disparity narrowed or enlarged |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Men vs Women | 7.6 | Narrowed |
| Respondents with close family members vs Those without | 19.7 | Narrowed |
| Pre-pandemic internet users vs Non-users | 5.2 | Enlarged |

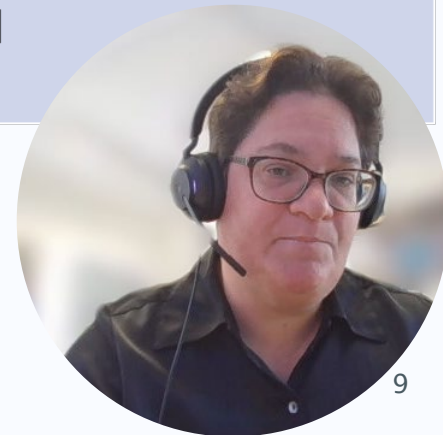
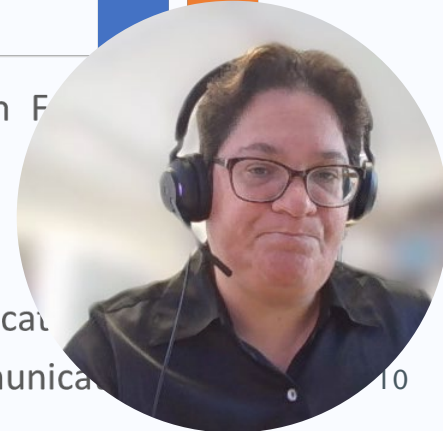
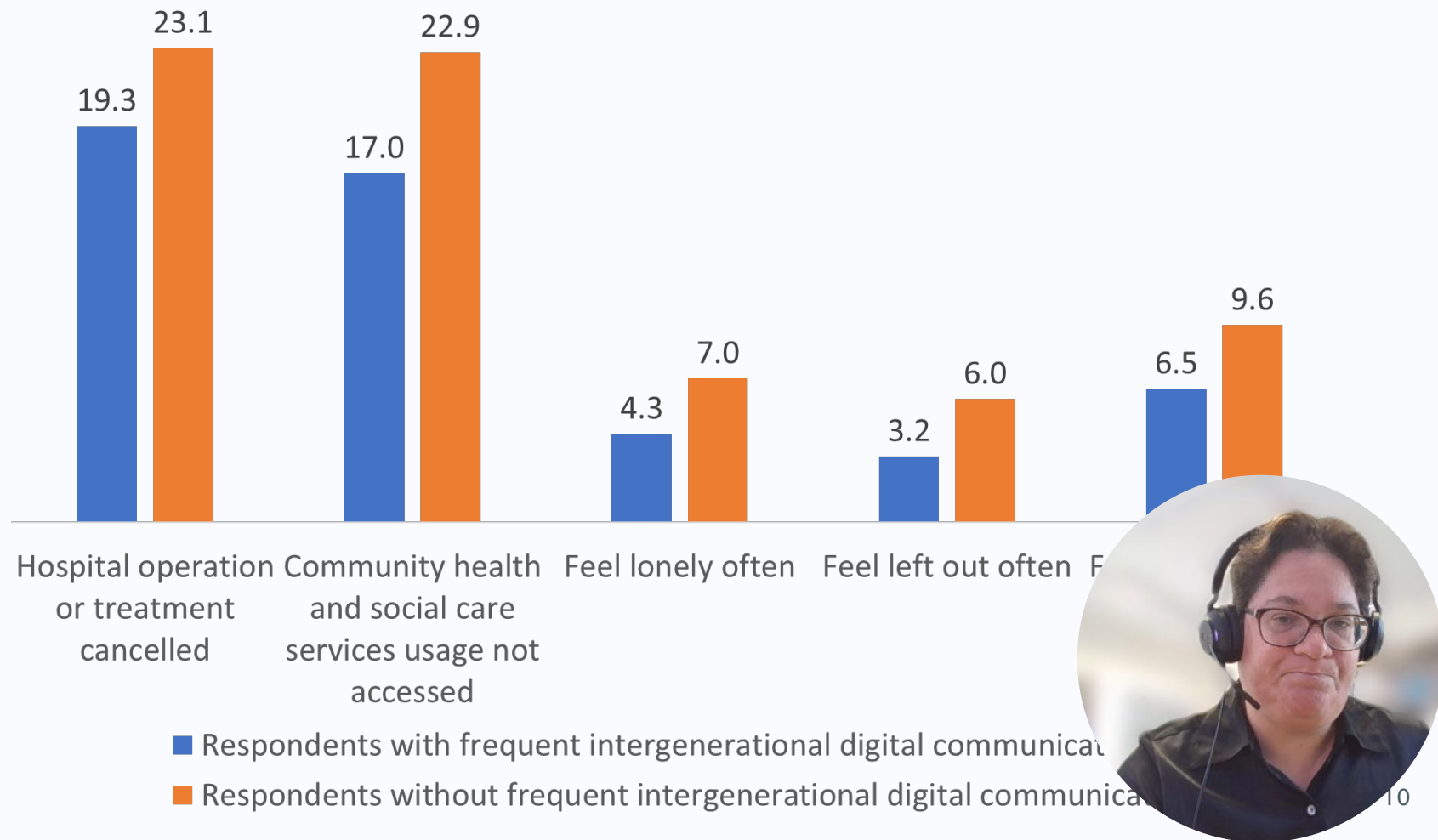


Figure 4. Impacts of frequent intergenerational digital communication on health, social care usage, and loneliness during the pandemic (%).



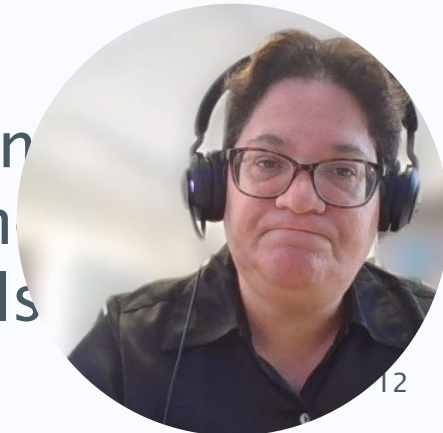
Key findings

- Prior to the pandemic, over half of respondents aged 50+ reported frequent intergenerational communication (Figure 1). Women, younger cohorts, those living with someone or having close family members, healthier, and internet users all had a higher likelihood of frequent intergenerational digital contact.
- During the pandemic, many older persons shifted towards frequent intergenerational digital contact (Figure 1). Such shifts were observed across all sub-groups with different demographic, socio-economic characteristics and internet skills (Figs 2-3).
- The ‘digital gender gap’ and disparities in digital communication related to the closeness of family relationships narrowed during this period. However, inequalities between internet users and non-users widened (Table 1).
- Intergenerational digital communication played an important role in meeting older people’s health and social care needs, mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic on well-being (Figure 2).



Conclusion

- Thanks to the increased uptake of information and communication technologies, many older persons experienced greater associational solidarity with their families during the first phase of the pandemic.
- There remained a sub-group of vulnerable older people who were at risk of being left behind – “digitally excluded”
- To bridge the remaining digital divide, education programmes for digital skills will need to highlight the benefits of being online to overcome any apprehension about engagement
- The future design of ICT will need to respond to adults’ needs and capabilities – currently more than half (53%) of persons who lack basic digital skills are aged 65+



Thank you!

The full paper can be accessed at:

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