

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

Vlachantoni A, Falkingham J, Evandrou M, Qin M.

Centre for Research on Ageing and ESRC Centre for Population Change -
Connecting Generations Programme, University of Southampton

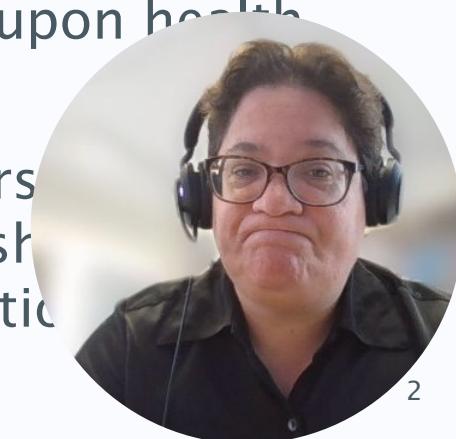
Email: a.vlachantoni@soton.ac.uk



NCRM DTRN Webinar on Exploring Ageing through National Data

Background (I)

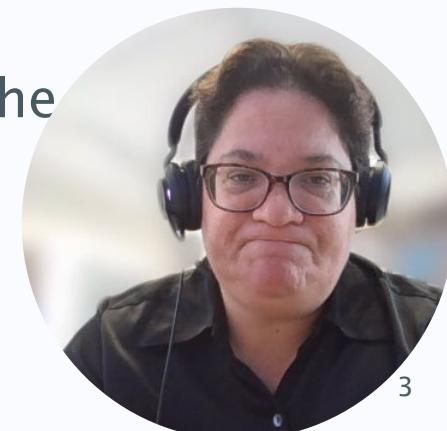
- Family ties remain strong in England, with research showing that most mid-life adults had received support from their parents earlier in life, and many provide support to their elderly parents (Evandrou et al., 2018).
- The COVID pandemic had direct and indirect health impacts in England, e.g. more 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 19 crisis reinforced or mitigated existing *inequalities* of digital communications and intergenerational contact?



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 determinants of frequent intergenerational digital communication.

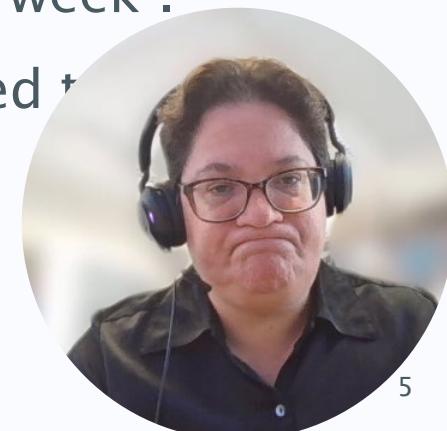


Figure 1. Percentage of all respondents' aged 50+ engaging in frequent intergenerational digital communication pre-pandemic, and shifts in such communication during the pandemic.

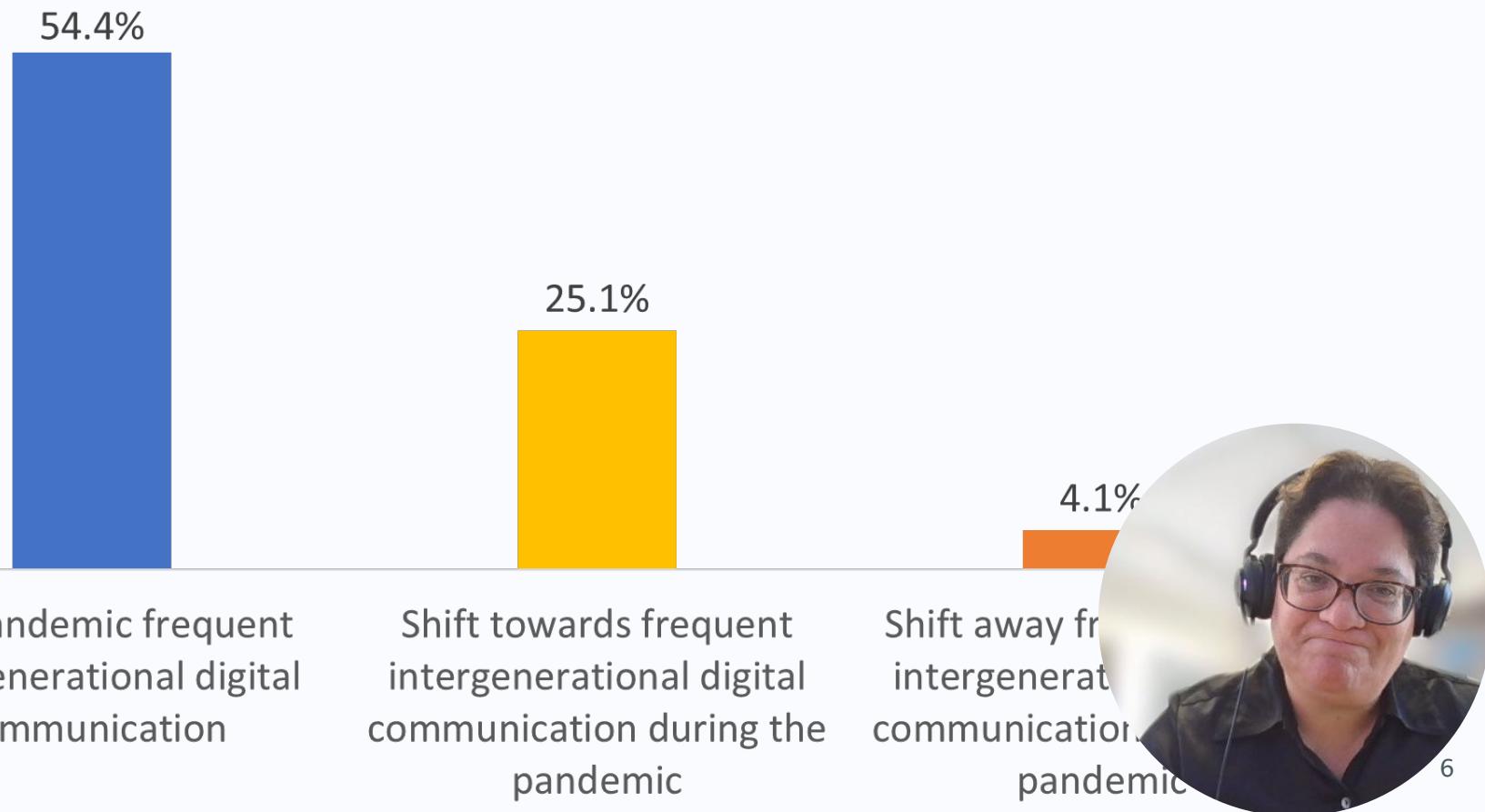


Figure 2. Percentage of men/women engaging in frequent intergenerational digital communication pre-pandemic, and shifts in such communication during the pandemic.

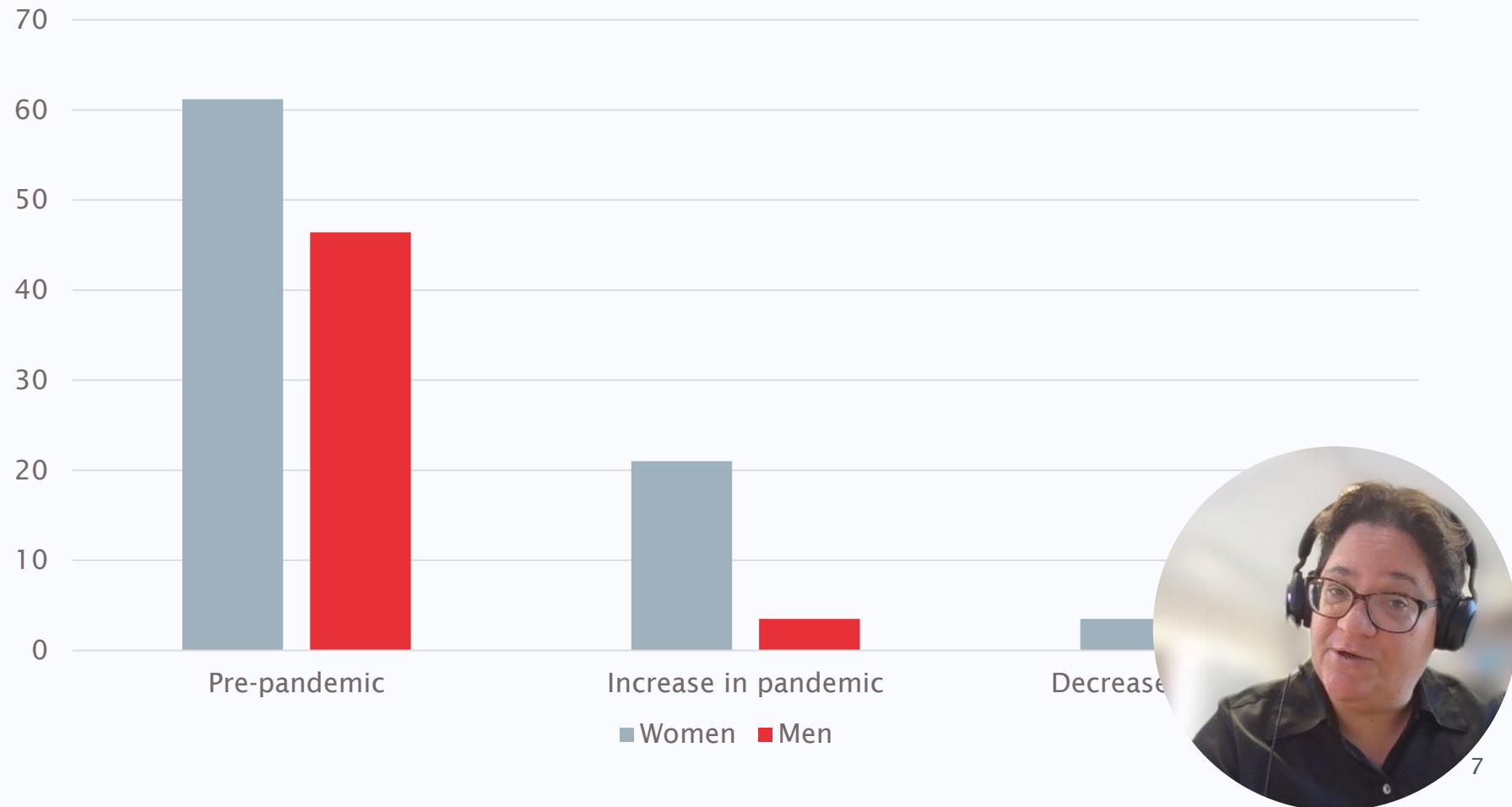


Figure 3. Percentage of respondents engaging in frequent intergenerational digital communication pre-pandemic, and shifts in such communication during the pandemic, by previous use

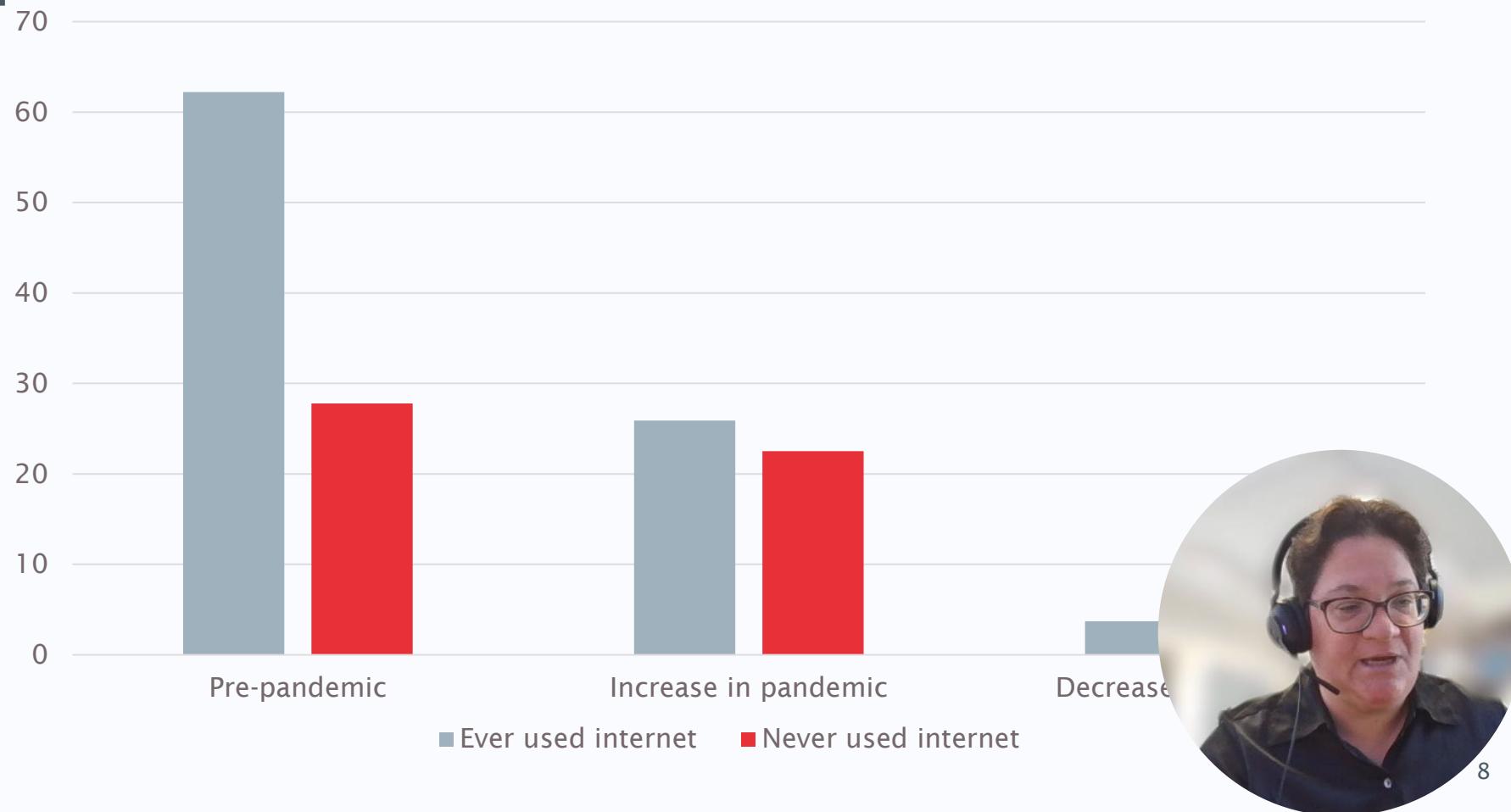


Table 1. Disparity changes among sub-populations (of frequent intergenerational digital communication) between pre-pandemic and during the pandemic.

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

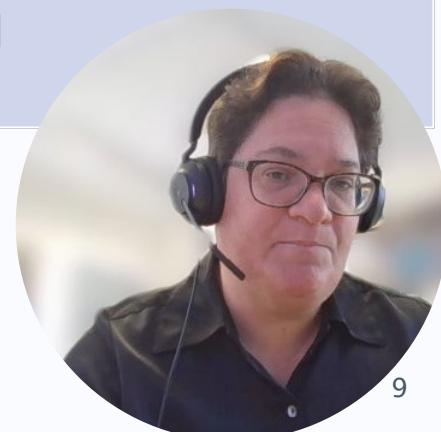
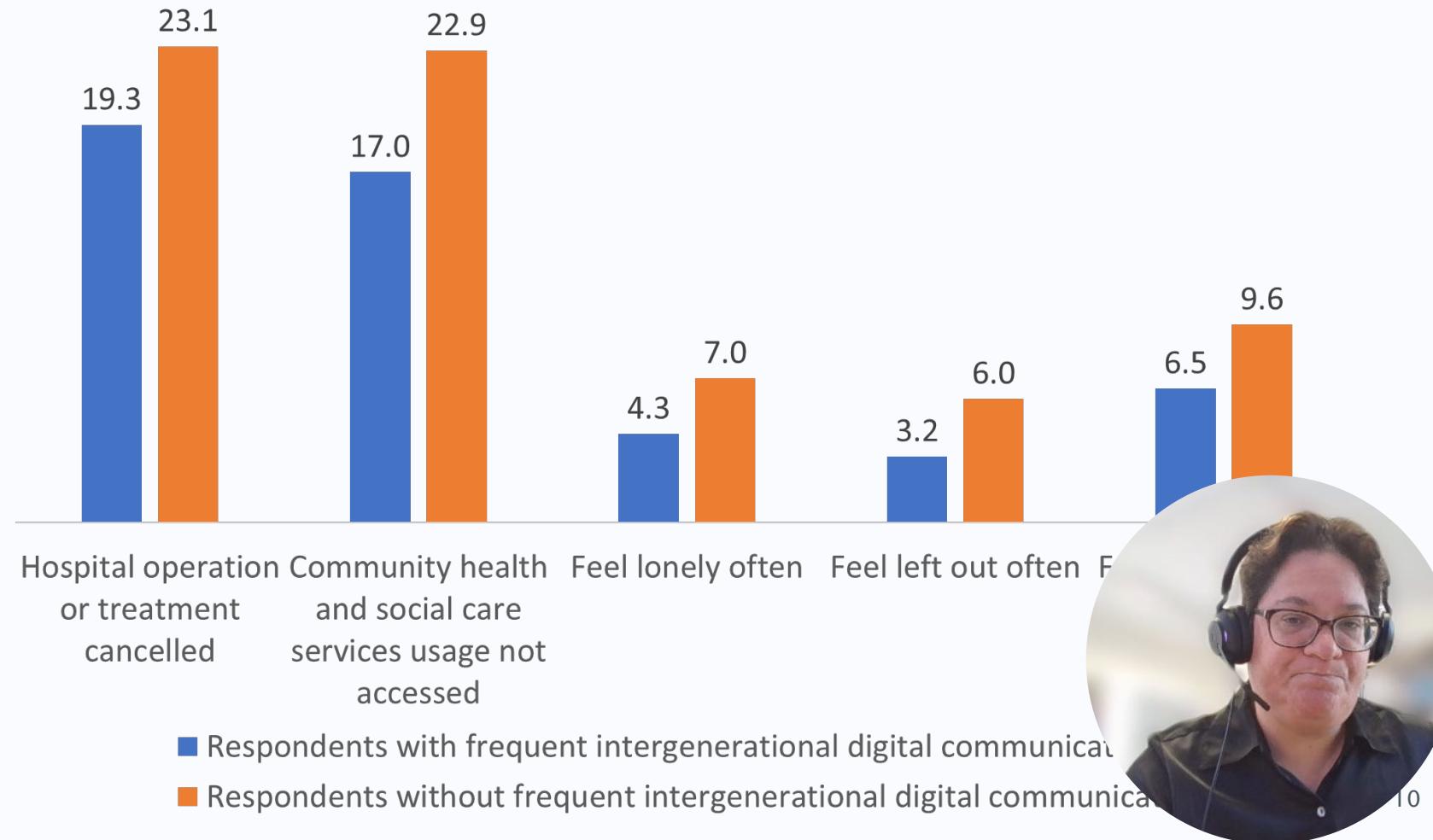
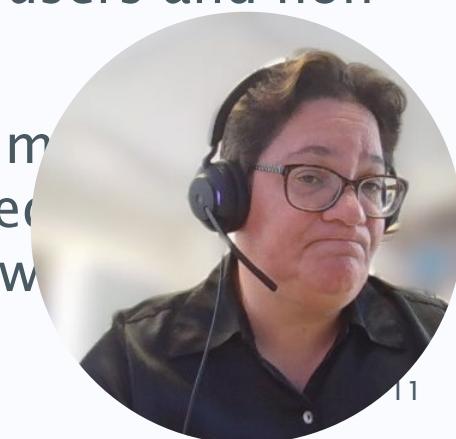


Figure 4. Impacts of frequent intergenerational digital communication on health, social care usage, and loneliness during the pandemic (%).



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 most (53%) of persons who lack basic digital skills are 65+



Thank you!

The full paper can be accessed at:

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