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New and transferable digital skills in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic: Mobilizing social support

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MOBILIZING SOCIAL SUPPORT:
New and transferable digital skills in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic

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SOCIODIGITAL MEDIA LAB

COLLABORATORS

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We acknowledge the hardships of the pandemic & its differential impacts

SSHRC CRSH

OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S TALK

- East York context
- Objective & research questions
- Background
- Methods
- Findings
- Conclusions

Last year, my friend calls me, I have a friend who lives near Peterborough, he had some family problem, so we talked a lot over the phone; he came down here too.

An Dung Tran (P15, M, 71)

EAST YORK CONTEXT

- Fourth wave of the East York Project
- ~ 120,000 residents
- Mostly working- and middle-class families
- Average income in 2018: $113,802
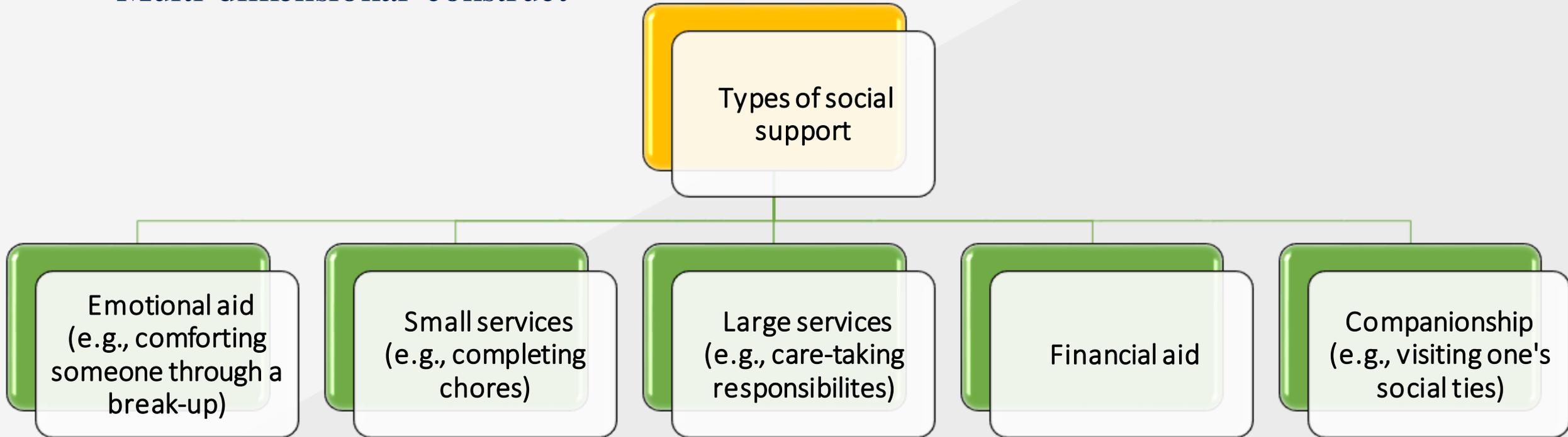- Median age: 41
- 13% older than age 65

OBJECTIVE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- **Main objective:**
  - To learn about digital life skills linked to social support mobilization and their transferability to the COVID-19 crisis

- **Research questions:**
  - 1. What digital life skills do East Yorkers have and which ones are needed for the post-pandemic era?
  - 2. What types of social support are mobilized via digital media? Are digital media a good alternative when in-person meetings are not possible?
  - 3. What challenges can arise for individuals in different stages of the life course when using digital alternatives for support exchange?

SOCIAL SUPPORT

- **Social support**
  - Sum of available resources accessible through a person's social networks
  - Multi-dimensional construct

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                    Types of social
                       support
        ┌──────────┬──────────┼──────────┬──────────┐
  Emotional aid  Small services  Large services  Financial aid  Companionship
  (e.g., comforting  (e.g., completing  (e.g., care-taking              (e.g., visiting one's
  someone through a  chores)          responsibilites)                social ties)
  break-up)
```

Types of social support

Emotional aid (e.g., comforting someone through a break-up)

Small services (e.g., completing chores)

Large services (e.g., care-taking responsibilites)

Financial aid

Companionship (e.g., visiting one's social ties)

SOCIAL SUPPORT MOBILIZATION & THE LIFE COURSE

Early-life stage

- Immense support received
- Parents, peers → Important sources of support

Mid-life stage

- More formalized obligations → More support given than received

Later-life stage

- Shrinking social networks
- Support more likely to be received, but...
  - Support given to intimate ties

SOCIAL SUPPORT MOBILIZATION & CRISES

- **Value of social support during crises**
  - Provides protection against adverse outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety)

- **Social support & social ties during crises**
  - Different ties provide different types of social support

- **Social support & different stressors**
  - Different stressors require different supports

SOCIAL SUPPORT MOBILIZATION & DIGITAL MEDIA

- **Digital media & social support exchange**
  - Different media afford and constrain the potential to exchange social support
  - Digital media can help signal a need for social support

- **Digital life skills & the life course**
  - Younger adults:
    - Decreased loneliness, depressive symptoms
  - Older adults:
    - Increased awareness of available supports, increased companionship, decreased loneliness

METHODS

- **Sample**
  - 101 adult participants aged 27 to 93 (M=60)
  - Four age groups: Under 35 (6), 35-50 (22), 51-64 (32), 65+ (41)

- **Data Collection**
  - Semi-structured interviews lasting approx. 60-90 minutes
  - Range of topics (e.g., social networks, digital media use, social support)

  - **Data Analysis**
  - Thematic analysis
    - Coded for two central themes: digital life skills and social support mobilization
  - Meaningful quotes selected to highlight key findings

DIGITAL LIFE SKILLS

- **Transferability of digital life skills across the life course**
  - Younger and middle-aged = digital skills as innate; more digital confidence
  - Older adults = not fearful of trying newer technologies; relied on established skill sets

Dorothy O'Neil (P65, W, 69)
Probably because I've been using it for so long and because I'm not afraid of it. And I find that by my age, the people who are using it very often are afraid they're going to break it…They're just uncomfortable with the technology. It's not something they have ever had to use…it's simply not using it enough.

DIGITAL LIFE SKILLS

- **Application of digital life skills to organize and socialize online**
  - Adapting digital life skills can provide alternative ways of socializing
  - Use digital life skills to extend connectivity and socialization

Julie Lee (P99, W, 64)

I do a lot of tea over Skype for the business. Just getting to know other practitioners, people in other parts of the world who do different healing techniques to, you know, just to connect.

DIGITAL LIFE SKILLS

- **Learning new digital skills for substituting in-person contact**
  - By expanding their digital skills, East Yorkers reaped many benefits provided by the features and affordances of digital communication channels

Harry Jones (P42, M, 40)

Of course, it's easier to connect. I do connect a lot more frequently with cousins in Montreal and whatnot. When people are so far that you can't see them, we Skype them. We'll have a brief conversation on phones and arrange a time to hang out on Skype…I enjoy FaceTime rather than simply talking to someone over the phone, especially if it's someone you care about. It makes maintaining relationships easier and I can stay connected with people I care about.

EXCHANGING SOCIAL SUPPORT

- **Expansion of one's digital skills to mobilize social support**

- **Companionship**
  - Expanding digital skills, integrating more forms of digital media, and engaging in media multiplexity allowed for co-presence and bridged gaps

Bethany Cobbler (P25, W, 40)
Facebook is a good way to keep in touch with people and find out what's going on in their lives without talking to them every single day. Especially with people who are maybe not located nearby, geographically. So, you can feel close to them without having to be physically close.

EXCHANGING SOCIAL SUPPORT

- **Emotional Aid**
  - Despite the potential of digital media channels, there was no replacement for in-person encounters

Pierre Rennie (P84, M, 81)

And this happens with all friends, you often provide emotional support. Somebody has a breakup, somebody loses their parents or something, or is just going through a bad patch, and you know then, you're the, you're the shoulder. And uh, that happens. And that can't be done online. And I think that happens with all of us, and it's often by telephone, you just, somebody just wants to talk one evening and calls you up and you just...you'll listen. And so that, and that's mutual. Give and take. That's what friends are for.

EXCHANGING SOCIAL SUPPORT

- **Large Services**
  - Combination of digital and non-digital communication channels

Maggie Darling (P22, W, 60)

Well, I had everybody all lined up before my surgery as to who was going to come and take shifts and my, like I said, my youngest son lives in Edmonton…I had my son, my middle son, and I just said, 'Okay, you and your wife, you're going to, I want you to be here.' 'No problem, Mom.' My other son came over and his wife came over, and my girlfriend was here, and yeah. I just needed help. And I needed help getting in and out of bed. I needed help having a shower. And…I needed help walking. So… I called them. And I told them, 'This is what I need done.' And they were here, 24/7.

EXCHANGING SOCIAL SUPPORT

- **Technical Support**
  - Family members provided this support to help East Yorkers expand their digital skills

Duncan Robertson (P33, M, 83)

Now, I am beginning to see its advantages. It's like anything — nobody comes and says, "This is how it works." They think it's immediate, but I can't understand it. Some nice grandson needs to come along and say, "Grandpa, this is how you do it." And I'll do it. No one's done that yet. I need the push.

LIFE COURSE DIFFERENCES

- **Younger adults** equally gave and received companionship and emotional aid
  - Engaged in more media multiplexity; less reluctant to use digital channels to exchange social support

- **Middle-aged adults** exchange companionship equally, but 51-64-year-olds gave more emotional aid
  - Less keen to exchange support digitally, but were willing to use digital media when necessary

- **Older adults** gave more support than they received
  - In-person exchanges were preferred; some failed to see digital media as a substitute
  - Many saw the benefits of using digital media, which motivated them to become more skilled

CONCLUSIONS

- Key takeaways
- Media multiplexity
- Technology readiness
- Pervasive awareness
- Limitations
- Future research and developments

Probably because I've been using it for so long and because I'm not afraid of it. And I find that by my age, the people who are using it very often are afraid they're going to break it … They're just uncomfortable with the technology. It's not something they have ever had to use … it's simply not using it enough.

Dorothy O'Neil (P65, W, 69

THANK YOU

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