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Attitudes, behaviours, and the well-being of older Singaporeans in the time of COVID-19: Perspectives from the Singapore Life Panel

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RESEARCH BRIEF

Singapore Life Panel

July 2020

Attitudes, behaviours, and the well-being of older Singaporeans in the time of COVID-19: Perspectives from the Singapore Life Panel

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 has affected all Singaporeans, regardless of age and socioeconomic status (SES). Many measures have been implemented by the government to control the spread of this disease, including restrictions on social gatherings, restrictions on overseas travel, and making it compulsory to wear a mask. Measures have also included a partial lockdown – known as the ‘circuit breaker’ – which began in April 2020. This forced Singaporeans to quickly adapt to a new normal with some doing better than others. This research brief provides an overview of how COVID-19 and its related measures have affected seniors in Singapore using data from the Singapore Life Panel (SLP). The SLP is a population representative monthly survey with a monthly response rate of about 7,500 respondents, tracking the lives of Singaporeans aged 55 to 75 to understand the factors that shape the well-being of older adults (see Annex B for a profile of respondents). Additional questions were fielded in the months of May 2020 and June 2020 in order to understand the impact of COVID-19 on respondents. The research in question thus explores key topics of interests such as the effect of

COVID-19 as well as government responses to the pandemic on the attitudes, behaviours, and well-being of older adults in Singapore within the social, economic, and mental-health domains. Additionally, findings are contrasted between respondents of different socioeconomic status (SES) and education levels.

Information Sources	<p>Older adults sought information from reliable sources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to source information from newspapers, government sources, social media, and internet research
Trust in Government	<p>Older adults displayed confidence in the government’s decisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 73% of respondents somewhat or completely trusted the government’s management of the COVID-19 situation
Trust in Healthcare	<p>Older adults showed trust in healthcare equality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 in 3 respondents believed that all Singaporeans have equal chances of receiving necessary treatment regardless of differences in SES
Compliance with measures	<p>Older adults complied with COVID-19 measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of face masks when outside increased from 1 in 10 respondents to 9 in 10 in the month of April
Household spending	<p>Older adults’ household spending dropped</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Household spending reduced by 23% and consumption spending reduced by 18% in April 2020 compared to January 2020
Well-being	<p>Older adults experienced a drop in overall life satisfaction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall life satisfaction for respondents dropped by 3.8% in April 2020, and 4.0% in May 2020, compared to January 2020 • Respondents also experienced a sharp increase in feelings of socially isolation in April 2020, with individuals living alone experiencing larger increases
Adapting to new technologies	<p>Older adults expressed difficulty using new technologies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 40% and 44% of respondents felt comfortable scanning QR codes for SafeEntry and holding video conversations with friends or family respectively

Figure 1. Brief overview of findings

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Information during public health crises can be at a disarray due to sensationalism (Shigemura et al., 2015). Misinformation, especially from unreliable news sources, may tear the social fabric of a country by fanning rumours and causing stigmatisation (Goodwin & Sun, 2013; Barrett & Brown, 2008). However, the findings from the present research illustrate that older Singaporeans have relied more on official media sources for information regarding COVID-19. Three in 4 respondents consumed televised (TV) and radio broadcasts over alternative forms of media. Of note is that those with a higher level of education tend to source for information from newspapers, government sources, social media and internet research more than those with a lower level of education (see Fig. 2). Thus, the results show that older Singaporeans are sourcing information reliably during the period of pandemic despite the propensity for misinformation during public health crises.

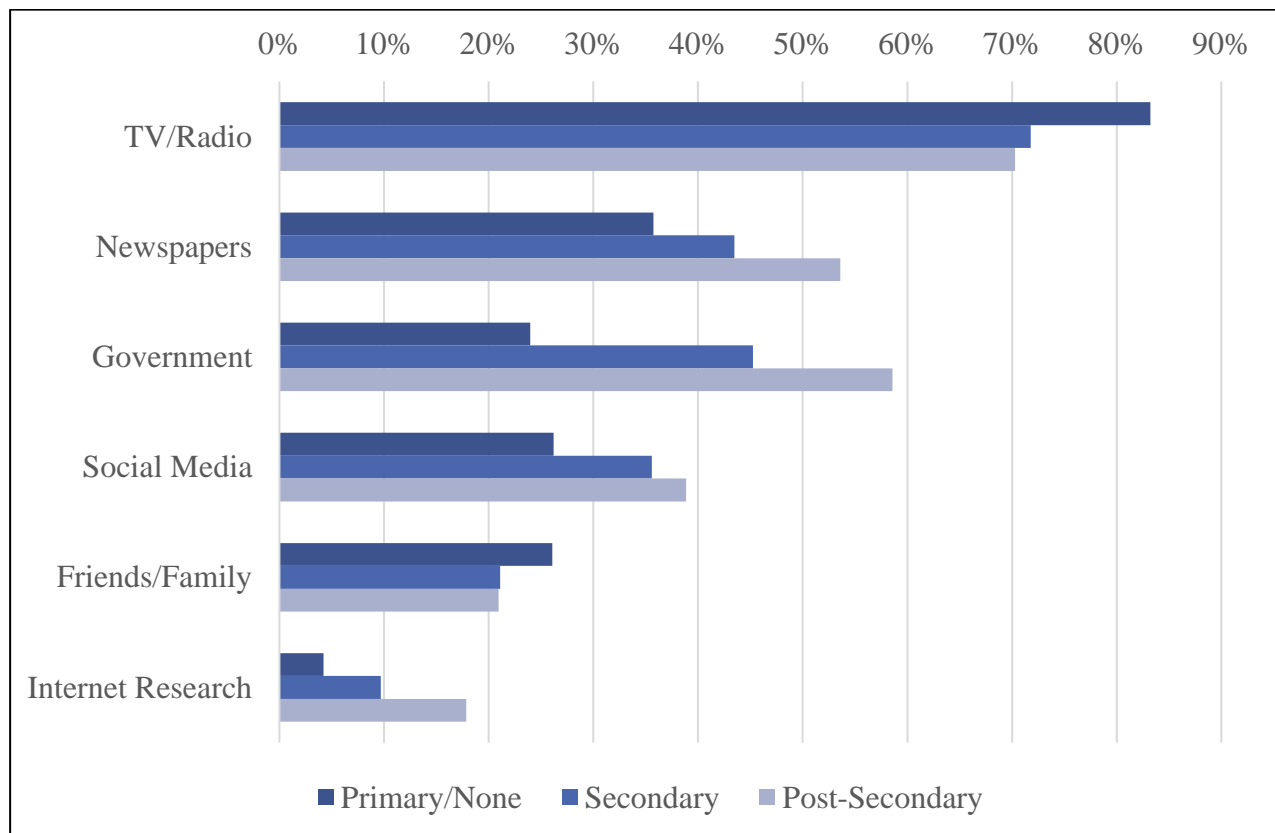


Figure 2. Share of respondents using source for information on COVID-19, by education.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The survey looked at attitudes towards the government's response to COVID-19 next. Respondents showed confidence in the government's decisions, with 73% of respondents stating that they somewhat or completely trust the way the government is managing the COVID-19 situation. Most respondents also approved of the government's provision of financial support to Singaporeans during the pandemic, with 61% agreeing or strongly agreeing that sufficient support has been provided. These results are consistent with the high level of satisfaction Singaporeans felt about the government's response to the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak (Deurenberg-Yap et al., 2005).

In terms of the compliance of older adults with the government's COVID-19 restrictions, health behaviour indicators showed that the majority of older Singaporeans have heeded the government's advice. More than 70% of respondents avoided outside activity such as grocery shopping and physical activities. Furthermore, use of face masks increased from 1 in 10 Singaporeans to 9 in 10 within just the month of April (see Fig. 3). This significant jump is likely to be attributed to the government's decision to make it compulsory to wear masks when out of the house (Ang & Phua, 2020).

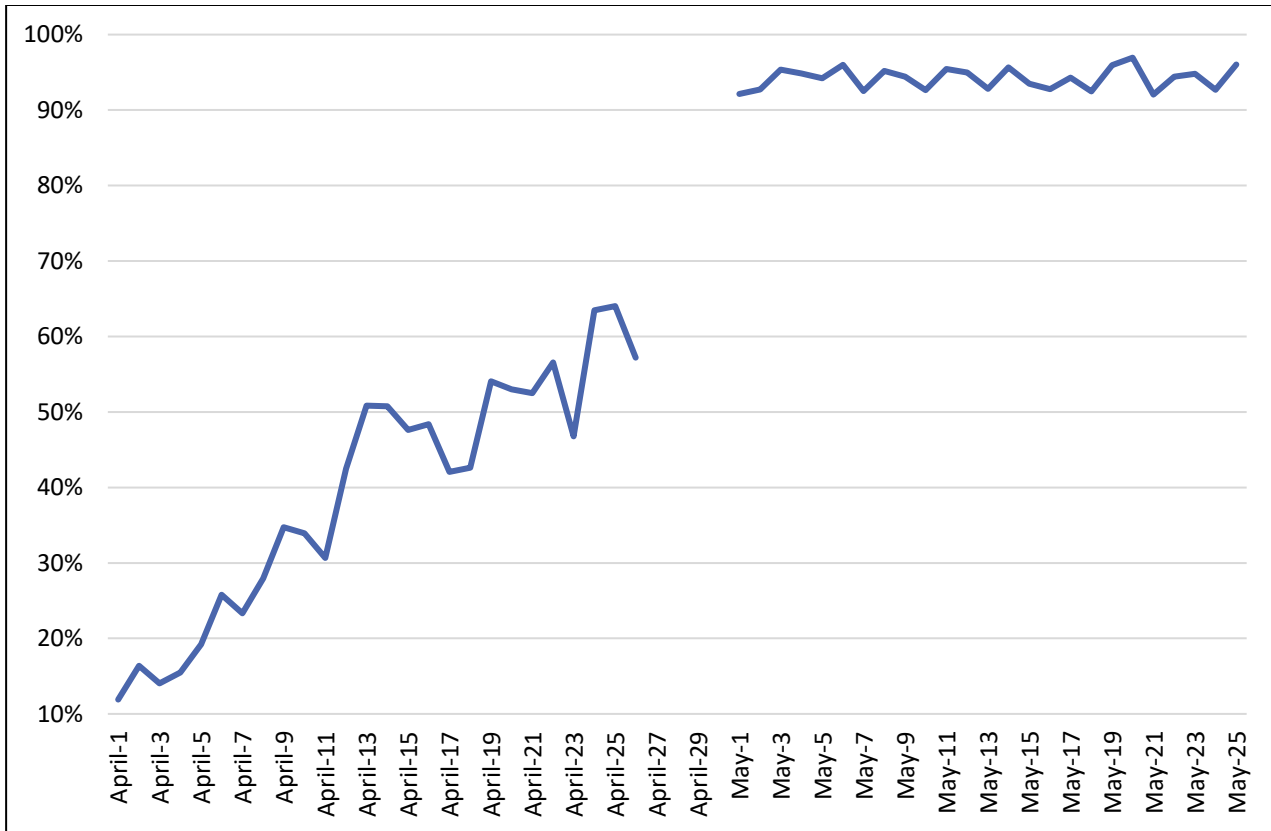


Figure 3. Share of respondents wearing a mask “most” or every time they leave home

ATTITUDES TOWARD SOCIAL COHESION

Meanwhile, attitudes toward social cohesion in Singapore as a result of the pandemic have been moderate. Slightly over half of respondents (57%) believed that other citizens would accept personal restrictions in order to help a fellow Singaporean, while less than half (49%) felt that COVID-19 has demonstrated reliable social cohesion in Singapore. On a positive note however, only 19% thought social cohesion appeared weak during the pandemic (see Fig. 4). Furthermore, respondents displayed trust in healthcare equality with 2 in 3 believing that all Singaporeans have equal chances of receiving necessary treatment regardless of SES. This contradicts the opinion of

some experts who fear COVID-19 might highlight the public's perception of social inequality in Singapore (Han, 2020).

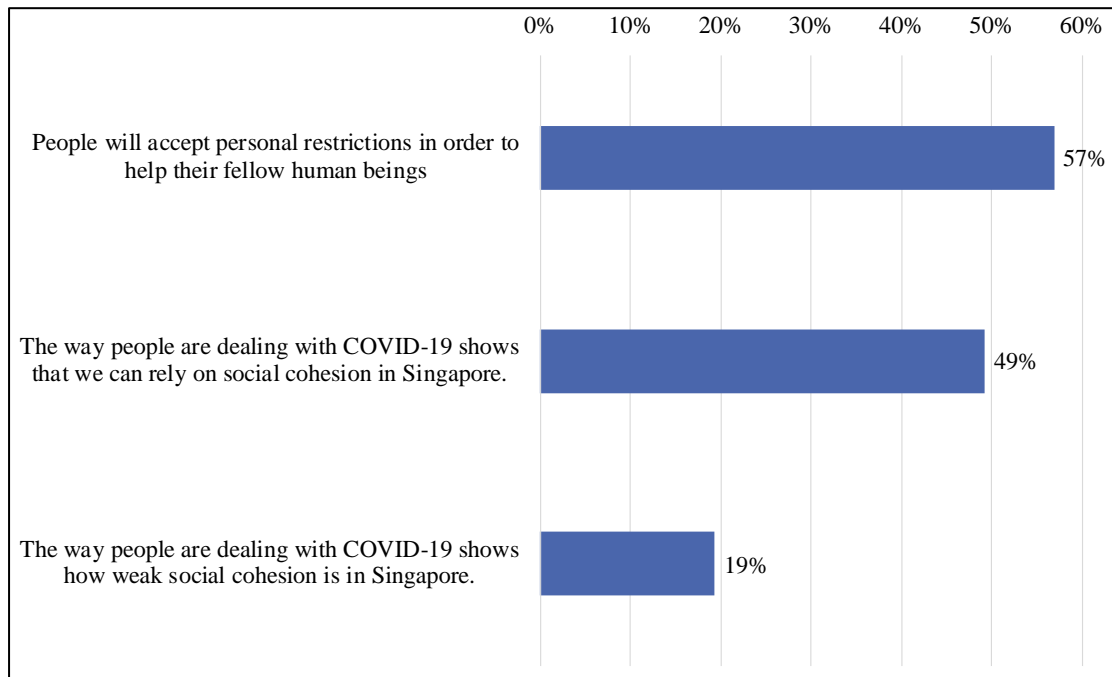


Figure 4. Share of respondents who agree or strongly agree with each statement

ECONOMIC INDICATORS

COVID-19 reduced household spending, which fell by 9% in March and by a further 23% in April (see Fig. 5) compared to January 2020. Declines in spending were concentrated around more discretionary spending items such as leisure activities and travel. These observations can likely be attributed to the government's implementation of the circuit breaker measures aimed at reducing COVID-19 transmissions, specifically island-wide closures of retail outlets and businesses (COVID-19 (TEMPORARY MEASURES) ACT, 2020).

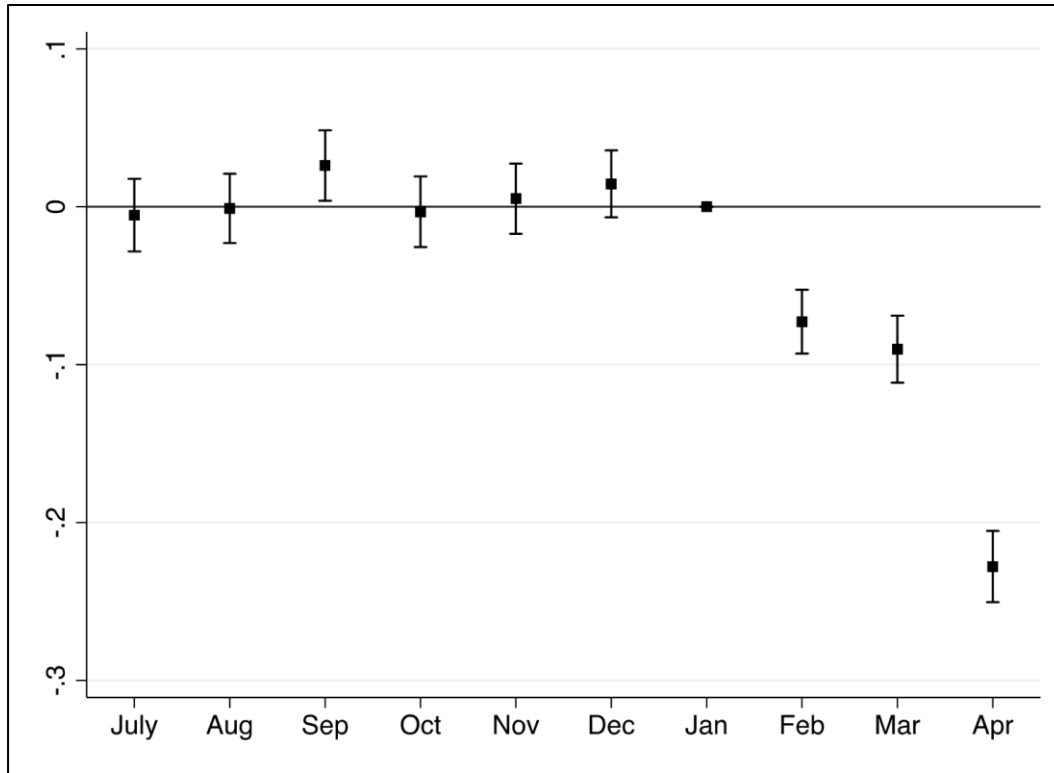


Figure 5. Estimated changes in household expenditure due to COVID-19 with 95% confidence intervals from July 2019 to April 2020

COVID-19 also reduced employment income by 6% in the month of April. Notably, examining this impact in relation to SES showed that Singaporeans from low- and middle-SES households experienced larger losses of income as compared to high-SES households. Lower-SES households experienced a loss in labour income of 10% and were more likely to lose their jobs, while higher-SES households had very little change in employment or income.

Of note is the observation that both households that experienced losses in income as well as households that did not experience losses in income reduced consumption spending by about 18%. In addition to drops in consumption spending, expectations for the future economy were also lower.

For instance, 32% and 24% of respondents expressed being either very or extremely worried about the economy in general and their own financial situations respectively (See Annex A – Fig 11).

WELL-BEING OF OLDER SINGAPOREANS

We see a drop in overall life satisfaction for respondents following the implementation of circuit-breaker measures in April 2020. Respondents reported a decrease of overall life satisfaction by 3.8% in April 2020 and 4.0% in May 2020, as compared to January 2020. A similar decline of satisfaction was also seen in domains such as Daily Activities and Job satisfaction, Income satisfaction, and satisfaction with the Economic Situation (see Fig. 6). Results further showed that by May 2020, the decline in overall social satisfaction was steep enough to bring the social satisfaction of those who live with others down to the baseline level of those who live alone in ordinary times (see Fig. 7). Meanwhile, the social satisfaction of those living alone declined even further. These results are consistent with studies done in other countries, for instance in the United Kingdom and China, that showed that COVID-19 measures have had a negative impact on one's well-being and life satisfaction (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2020; Zhang, Wang, Rauch & Wei, 2020).

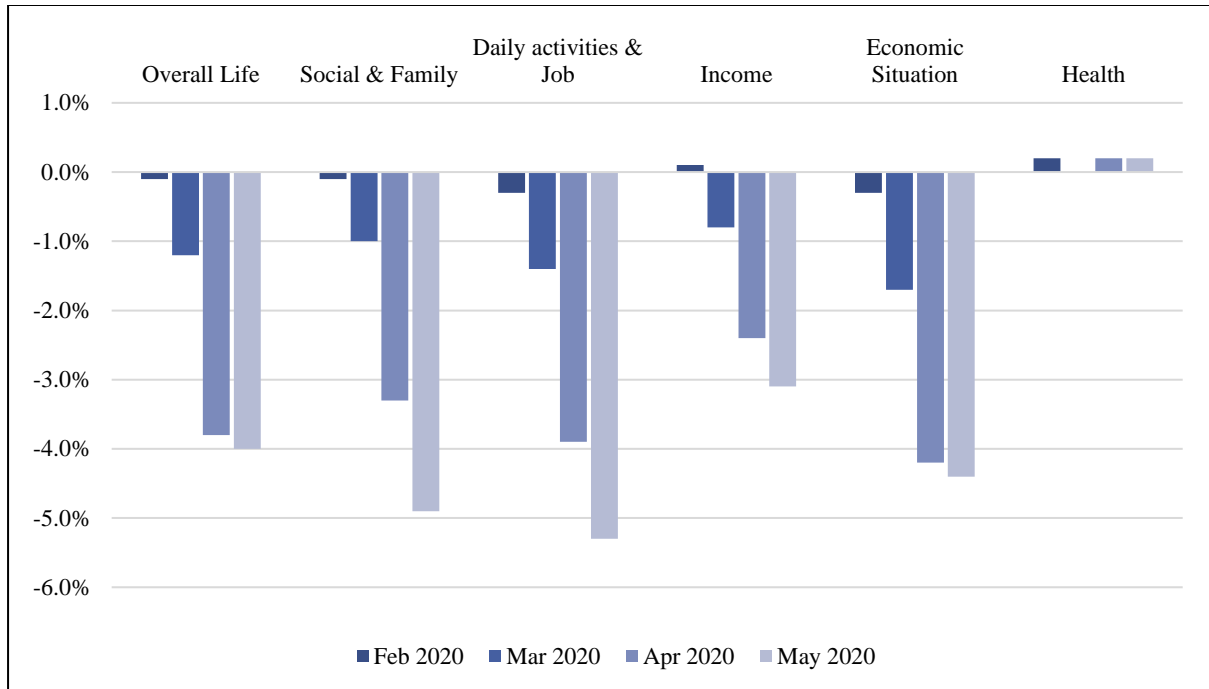


Figure 6. Changes in overall life satisfaction and domain satisfaction scores compared with January 2020

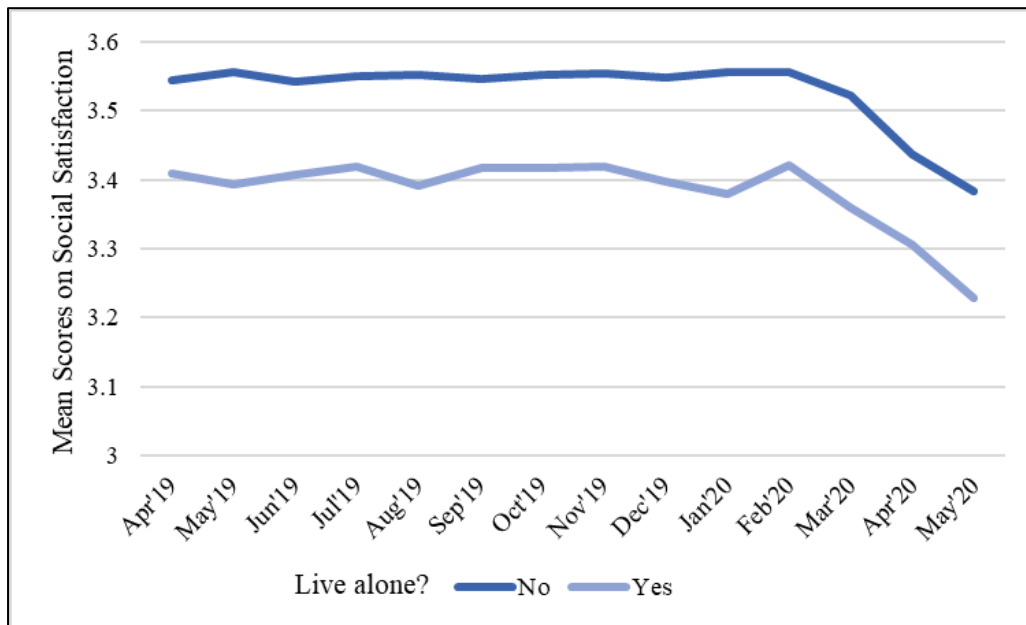


Figure 7. Changes in social satisfaction from April 2019 to May 2020

The respondents in the present study also reported a stark increase in feelings of isolation as the circuit-breaker began in April 2020, with larger increases for those living alone (Fig. 8). This could be a factor contributing to the drop in subjective well-being (SWB), as Abel and McQueen (2020) argue that there is a need for greater social closeness in times of global crises. Additionally, respondents reported that the circuit-breaker has affected the interactions they have with members of their household. This effect, however, has not been homogenous – for instance, 53% of respondents reported an increase in family bonding with members of the same household as a result of the circuit-breaker, while 10% of respondents experienced increased friction with family members living in the same household (see Annex A – Fig 12). Regardless, the results illustrate that the circuit-breaker significantly impacted the social relations of older adults which is another possible reason for the drop in SWB.

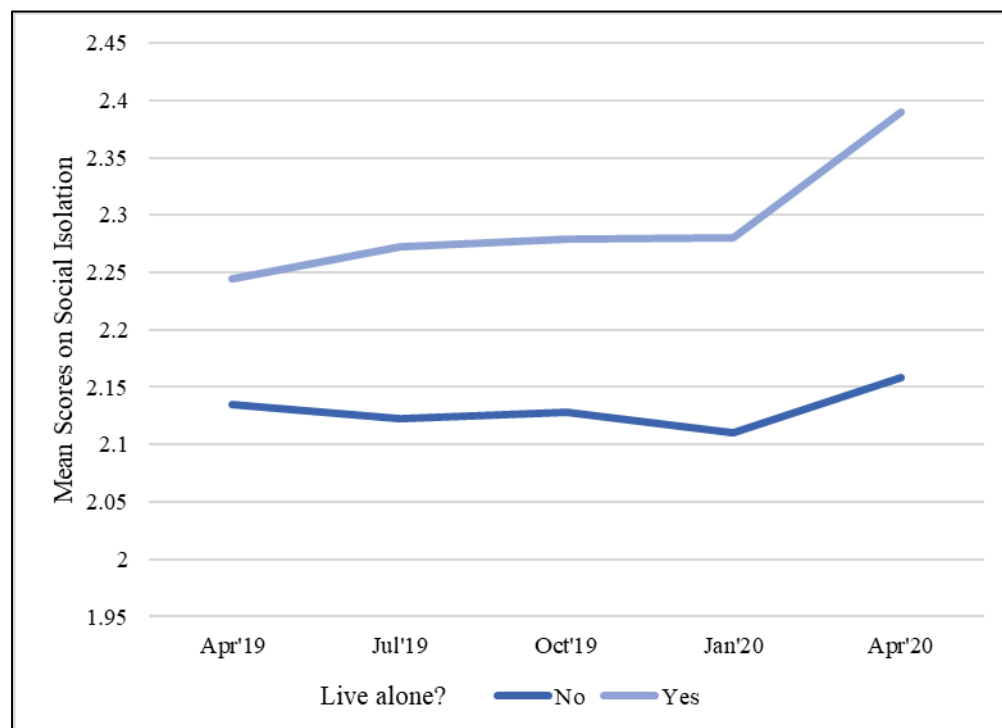


Figure 8. Changes in feelings of social isolation from April 2019 to April 2020

USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The extensive use of technology was one of the developments that followed the new measures being implemented. This includes the SafeEntry system and a considerable increase in places allowing for cashless payments as well as the usage of video calls to replace physical meetings. However, less than half of the respondents (40%) expressed comfort with scanning QR codes for use in SafeEntry registration. Similarly, slightly less than half of the respondents (44%) felt comfortable holding video conversations with friends or family (See Fig. 9). These findings highlight the difficulties that older adults face when adopting new technology into their daily lives, as well as coping with the challenges that COVID-19 measures have imposed.

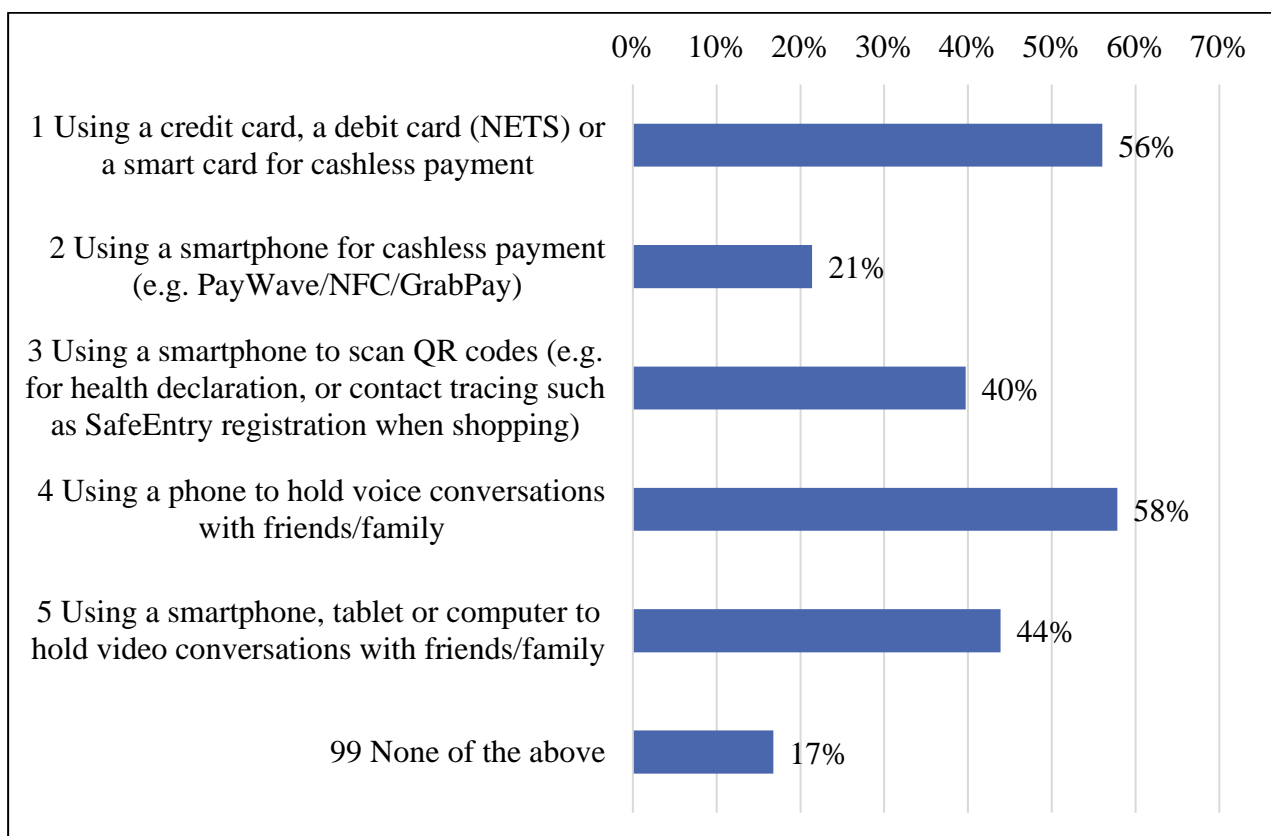


Figure 9. Share of respondents who are comfortable using this technology

ANTICIPATION OF THE FUTURE

When asked about perceptions of the risk of infection and fatality from COVID-19, older Singaporeans were reasonably uncertain about the pandemic with respondents rating the risks of infection and fatality at an average of 41% and 39% respectively. Notably, respondents with higher levels of education reported lower perceived risk in both aspects, and perceived risks increased with age while both male and female respondents reported no difference in risk perceptions. However, from April 2020 to May 2020, there was a decrease in the perception of both infection and fatality risks which could be attributed to several factors such as government intervention and acclimatisation.

In terms of respondents' worries for the future, 33% stated that they were very or extremely worried about the health of their loved ones and 29% were worried about the availability of medical treatment if they contracted COVID-19. This potentially illustrates that older Singaporeans are less concerned about their own health (only 22% of respondents reported feeling worried about their own health) but see their loved ones as more vulnerable (see Annex A – Fig. 11). Additionally, respondents reported an increase in expectations for job loss by 5% from January 2020 to May 2020, with older Singaporeans indicating higher expectations of job loss (see Annex A – Fig. 13).

CONCLUSION

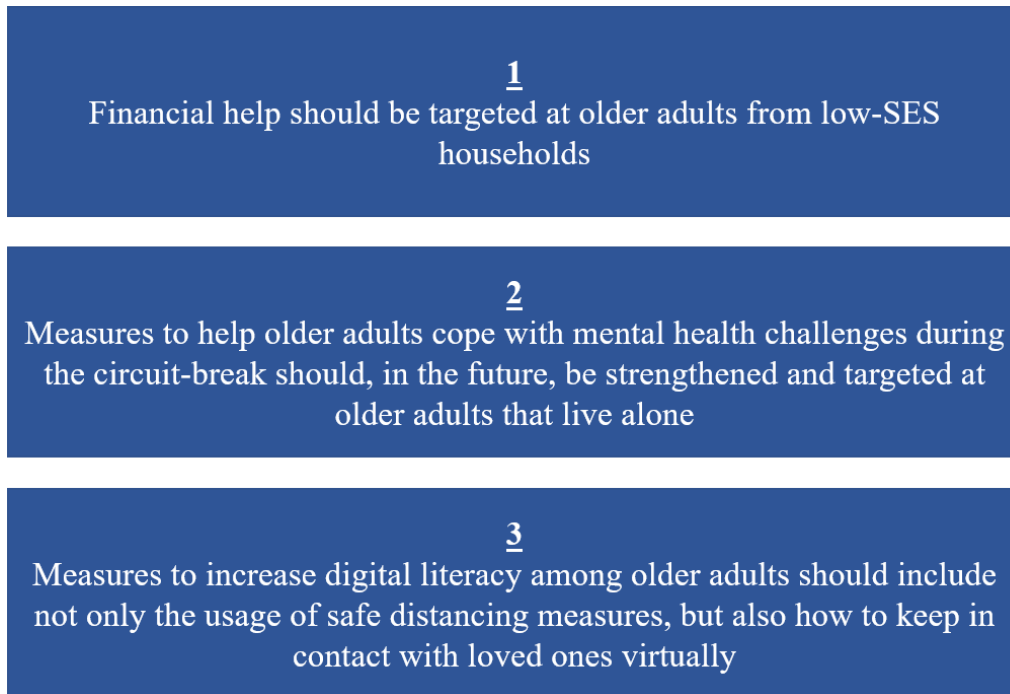


Figure 10. Overview of policy implications

The findings of the study suggest that COVID-19 has had a significant effect on the financial burdens of older Singaporeans and their economic wellbeing. With more studies being done on understanding the well-being of individuals after experiencing major life events (such as pandemics), policies implemented could be better targeted to ensure older Singaporeans recover quickly and those who require more assistance are able to find the appropriate avenues for help. In terms of financial aid, this is especially important for older adults from low SES households as they experience declines more than those from high SES households.

Similarly, in terms of social and mental well-being, efforts to help those in need can be strengthened and more targeted at those who live alone. Social isolation is often associated with negative mental health outcomes (Berg-Weger & Morley, 2020). This association is particularly strong when older adults perceive themselves to be socially isolated (Santini et al., 2020; Taylor et

al., 2018). As mentioned, feelings of isolation increased sharply during the circuit-breaker, especially for individuals who live alone. Many respondents also expressed anxiety about the future, with about a third of respondents expressing being very or extremely worried about the health of their loved ones (33%) and the economy (32%). This gives reason for concern over the mental health and wellbeing of older adults when measures such as the circuit-breaker are put in place. The Singapore government has introduced several initiatives to help Singaporeans with their mental health, for instance the National Care Hotline, where individuals can seek guidance on mental health challenges they may be facing. However, our findings illustrate that should subsequent lock-down measures be needed in the future, such initiatives should be strengthened and targeted specifically at older adults who live alone. For instance, social service agencies aware of vulnerable older adults living on their own could reach out to seniors as currently, individuals are required to seek help on their own. This is a potential issue as individuals may not be able to identify when they are experiencing declines in mental health and when they may need help.

Finally, the increase in feelings of social isolation also indicate that social distancing measures have made it more difficult for respondents to connect with close social contacts. This could be partly due to the fact that less than half of respondents expressed being comfortable with using new technologies to connect with friends and family. Hence, while the Singapore government does currently have several initiatives to enhance digital literacy among older adults, such as the *Seniors Go Digital* campaign, such initiatives can be further strengthened and focus not just on the usage of safe distancing measures (e.g using SafeEntry) and cybersecurity measures, but also on enabling older adults to use technologies to connect with loved ones.

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ANNEX A – Additional Figures

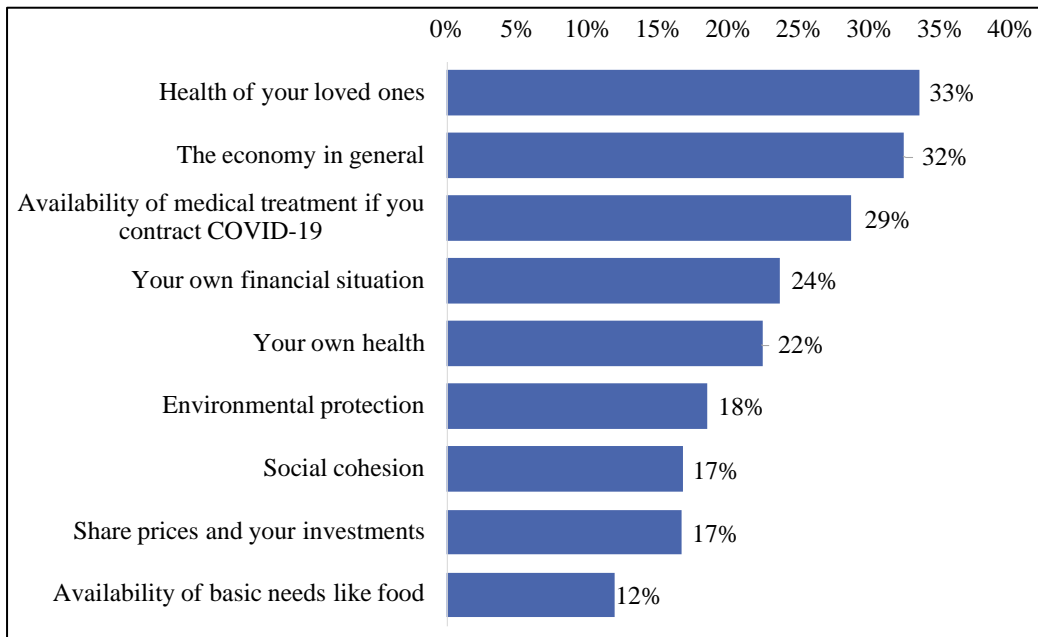


Figure 11. Share of respondents who are very or extremely worried

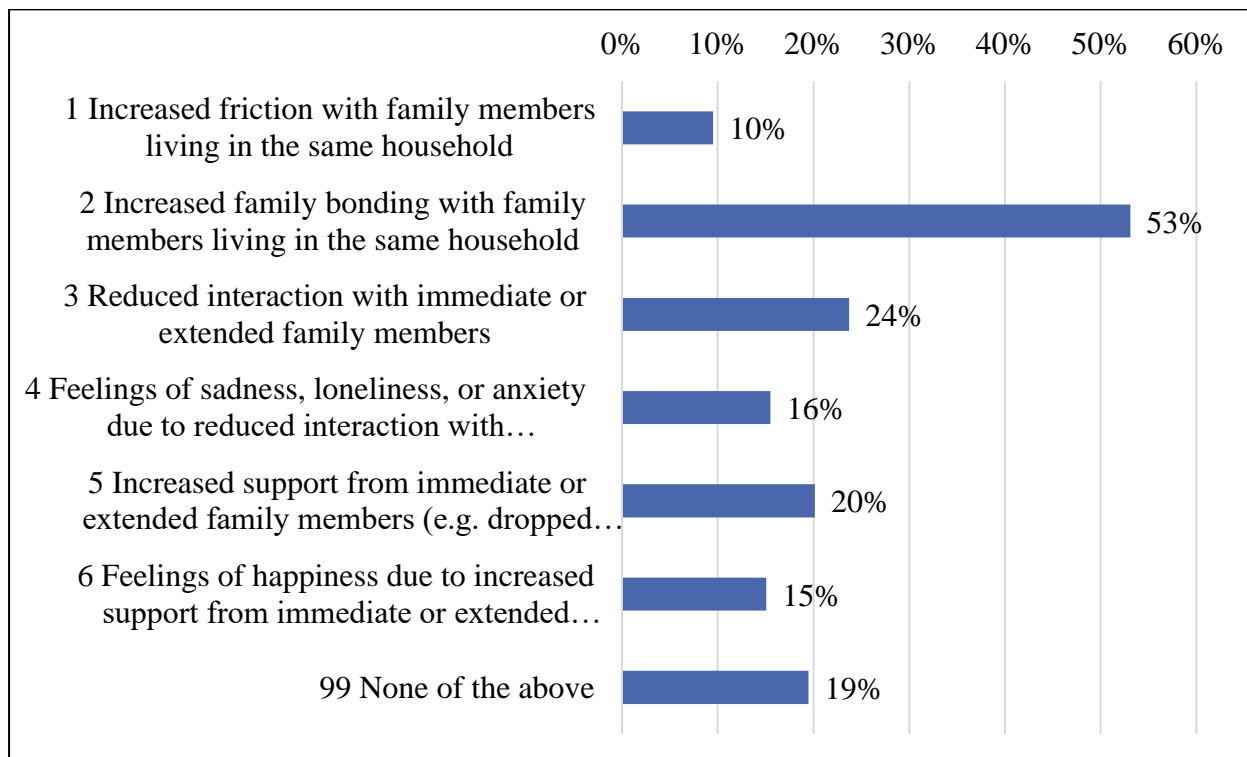


Figure 12. Share of respondents who experienced this during Circuit Breaker

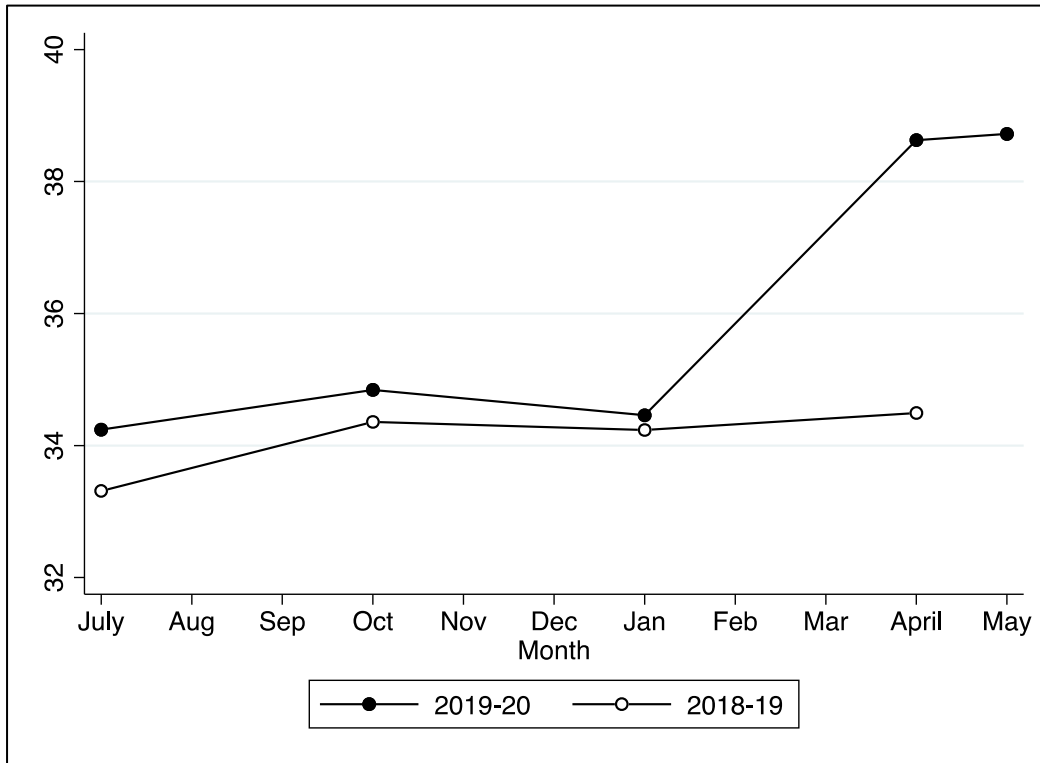


Figure 13. Respondents subjective probability of job loss

ANNEX B – Profile of Respondents

Sample Characteristics	Proportion (%)
Age	
Median age = 63, Mean age = 63.28, Std. Dev. = 5.34	
55 - 59	29.95
60 - 64	30.18
65 - 69	22.65
70 - 74	17.23
Gender	
Male	47.92
Female	52.08
Marital status	
Married	77.71
Single (never married)	9.18
Separated	0.59
Divorced	5.33
Widowed	7.19
Ethnicity	
Chinese	87.28
Malay	5.55
Indian	5.25
Other	1.92
Housing Type	
1 and 2 Room Flat	3.54
3 Room Flat	16.43
4 Room Flat	31.04
5 Room and Executive Flats	31.42
Condominium and Apartments	10.73
Landed	6.83

Sample Characteristics	Proportion (%)
Household size (including respondent and spouse)	
Median size = 3, Mean size = 3.33, Std. Dev. = 1.47	
1	7.62
2	25.18
3	24.74
4	23.43
5	11.57
6	4.74
7	1.74
8	0.56
9	0.25
10	0.14
11	0.03
Educational attainment	
No formal education/Primary education	22.85
Secondary education	41.86
Post-Secondary education	35.29
Work status	
Working Full-time	28.72
Working Part-time/Flexible	14.77
Self-Employed	8.53
Unemployed/Laid off/On sick leave	7.25
Retired/Homemaker	37.78
Disabled/Student/Other	2.96

Table 1. Profile of respondents

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ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON SUCCESSFUL AGEING (ROSA)

ROSA is a multidisciplinary research centre based in SMU. It was established with an MOE Tier 3 social sciences research grant, as well as the generous support of the Ngee Ann Kongsi foundation. Research at ROSA seeks to define and measure a holistic construct of well-being and to identify the factors that impact Singaporeans' well-being as they progress through the later phases of life. Through close collaboration with government and other partner agencies, ROSA also aims to translate research insights into policy innovations that advance the well-being of older adults holistically and promote successful ageing in Singapore. ROSA brings together a diverse team of leading international and local researchers in ageing and age-related issues from various disciplines. Through empirical evidence derived from a longitudinal methodological approach, the multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research team advances propositions that promote successful ageing in Singapore.