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2-2021

### The psychosocial well-being of older adults in COVID-19 and the 'new normal'

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#### Citation

TAN, Micah; STRAUGHAN, Paulin T.; TOV, William; CHEONG, Grace; and LIM, Wensi. The psychosocial well-being of older adults in COVID-19 and the 'new normal'. (2021). 1-16.

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**Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA)**

**Working Paper Series**

# **The Psychosocial Well-being of Older Adults in COVID-19 and the ‘New Normal’**

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**FEBRUARY 2021**

The **ROSA Working Paper Series** is published electronically by the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

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The **Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA)** is a multidisciplinary research centre based in SMU. It was established in July 2020 with an MOE Tier 3 social sciences research grant, as well as the generous support of The Ngee Ann Kongsi. 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.

## INTRODUCTION

Early research into COVID-19 has focused predominantly on the immediate and direct physical health effects of the pandemic, as compared to the wider, indirect effects of the pandemic on general well-being brought about by the various measures put in place to contain the virus. In terms of policies, focus has also been placed largely on containment and broad based policies for the entire population. As experts increasingly recognize that the pandemic will be a protracted event (The Straits Times, 2021), however, there is a need for stakeholders to place greater emphasis on the indirect effects of COVID-19 that will likely continue to shape well-being in the ‘new normal’. As the impact of these effects has been argued to vary both quantitatively and qualitatively on different groups (Douglas et al., 2020), it is thus important for researchers to make better sense of how particular groups of individuals have been affected, beginning with those deemed most at risk. For these reasons, the present research endeavors to understand how older adult well-being has been impacted during COVID-19, especially during the post-lockdown transitional period into the ‘new normal’. Only by better understanding how such wider effects are impacting older adults can appropriate policy approaches be formulated to adequately ensure for the well-being of older adults.

This paper hence offers an understanding of some factors that have exacerbated the decline in psychosocial well-being experienced by older adults in Singapore during the COVID-19 pandemic and offers recommendations for policy interventions aimed at assisting older adults transition into the ‘new normal’. To provide context, the analysis will begin with an overview of the trends in psychosocial well-being among older adults in Singapore over 2020. Subsequently, the paper will explore in greater detail two significant issues in relation to the psychosocial well-being of older adults during the pandemic: social isolation, and psychological resilience after the circuit-breaker. Finally, the paper concludes by offering brief policy recommendations based on these findings. Findings are derived from the Singapore Life Panel®, a population representative monthly survey that tracks the lives of Singaporeans aged 55 to 75 to better understand the factors that shape the well-being of older adults, with a monthly average of 7,500 responses.

### COVID-19 in Singapore

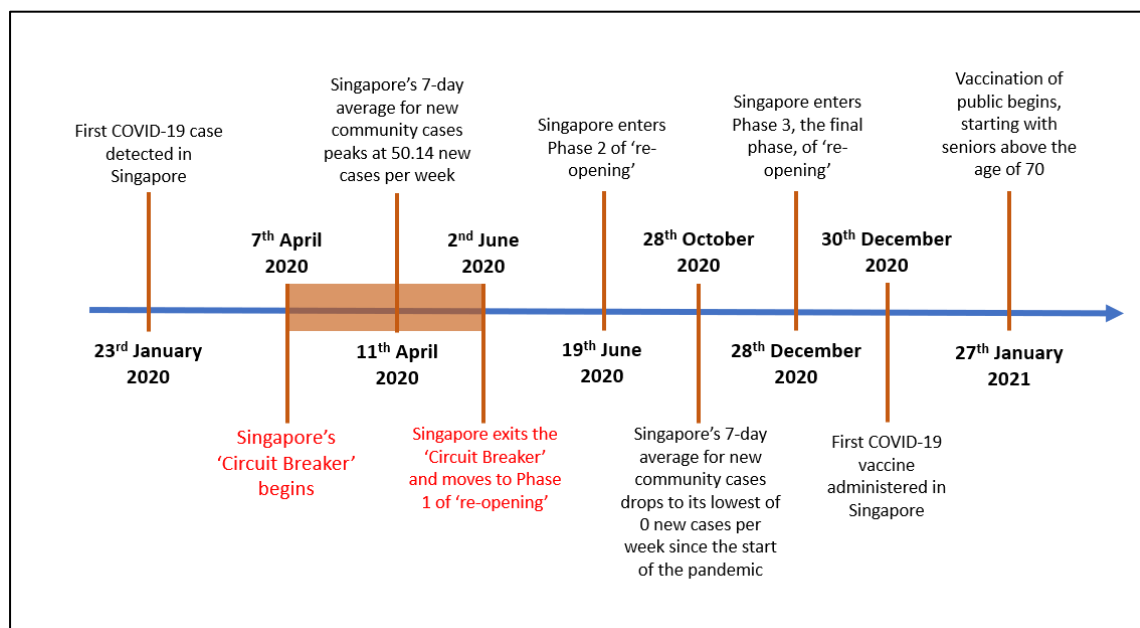


Figure 1: Timeline of COVID-19 Pandemic in Singapore

While Singapore initially struggled to contain the COVID-19 pandemic (especially due to an outbreak of the virus among the foreign domestic worker population), the government's subsequent quick and efficient response has been effective in containing the outbreak. This required Singaporeans to undergo a complete lockdown from the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2020. By October 2020, the weekly average of new community cases recorded in the country had dropped to 0 – its lowest since the start of the pandemic. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December, Singapore entered 'Phase 3' of its post-lockdown reopening which allowed for larger social gatherings and for more social and religious events that had been halted when the pandemic began to resume. While Phase 3 is by no means a resumption of normality, it is what many are referring to as the 'new normal' given the government's anticipation that it would last for a protracted period of time.

These developments position Singapore to be a prime context within which trends in well-being can be studied during the country's gradual transition to the 'new normal'. The findings discussed in this paper hence include an overview of trends in well-being since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as a deep-dive into social isolation and resilience during Phase 2 of Singapore's re-opening in November 2020. As such, this paper provides particular insight into the *transitional* period during which life in Singapore approaches (or perhaps, enters) the 'new normal'.

### WELL-BEING AMONG OLDER ADULTS DURING 2020

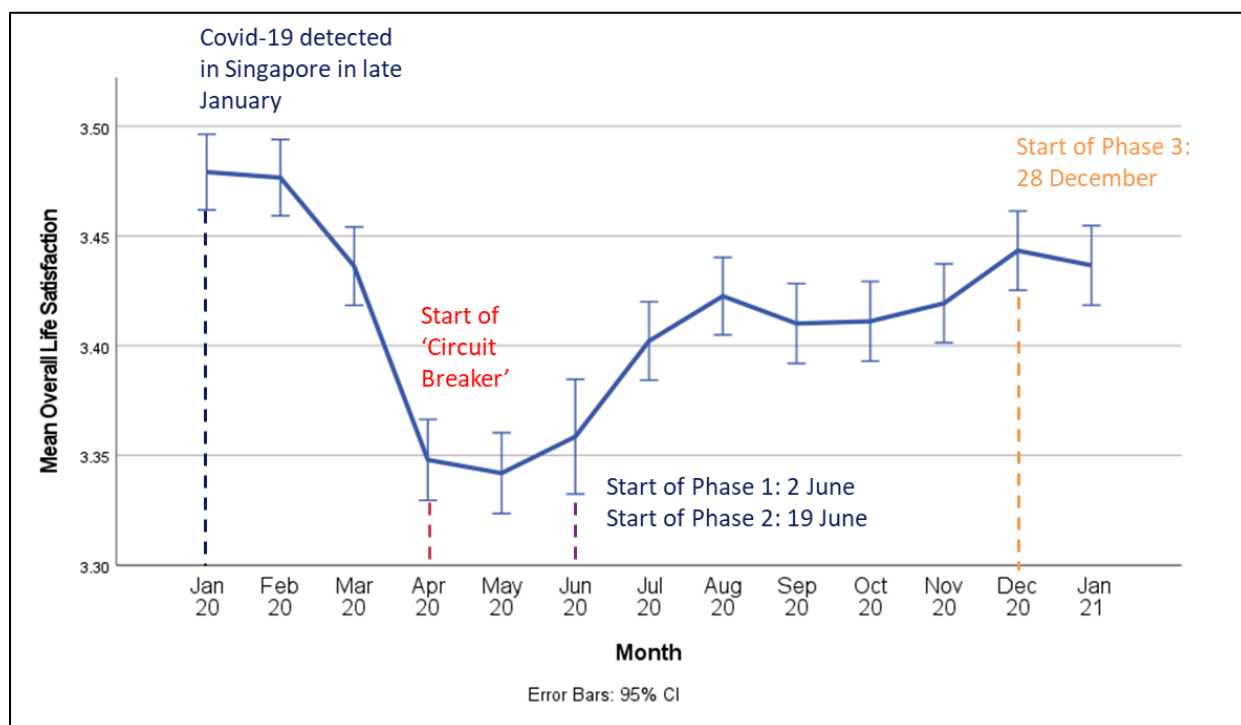


Figure 2: Longitudinal trend in average life satisfaction from January 2020 to January 2021

Beginning with an overview of general well-being among older adults over the past year, from Figure 2 we can observe that overall life satisfaction among the SLP dropped significantly when the 'circuit breaker' began in April 2020. However, following this and as Singapore began to 're-open' we see that life satisfaction has since improved – this was especially so as Singapore moved into Phases 1 and 2 of reopening. Yet, life satisfaction has not returned to pre-COVID levels and appears to have plateaued. This was true even as Singapore moved into its third phase of reopening, which even

resulted in a slight dip in life satisfaction in January 2021. This perhaps indicates that older adults still face several issues even while Singapore gradually reopens that prevent life satisfaction from fully recovering.

For this reason, we attempted to better understand the factors contributing to the lower life satisfaction and well-being of older adults. Based on a review of existing literature, the following factors contributing to or determining older adult well-being were identified:

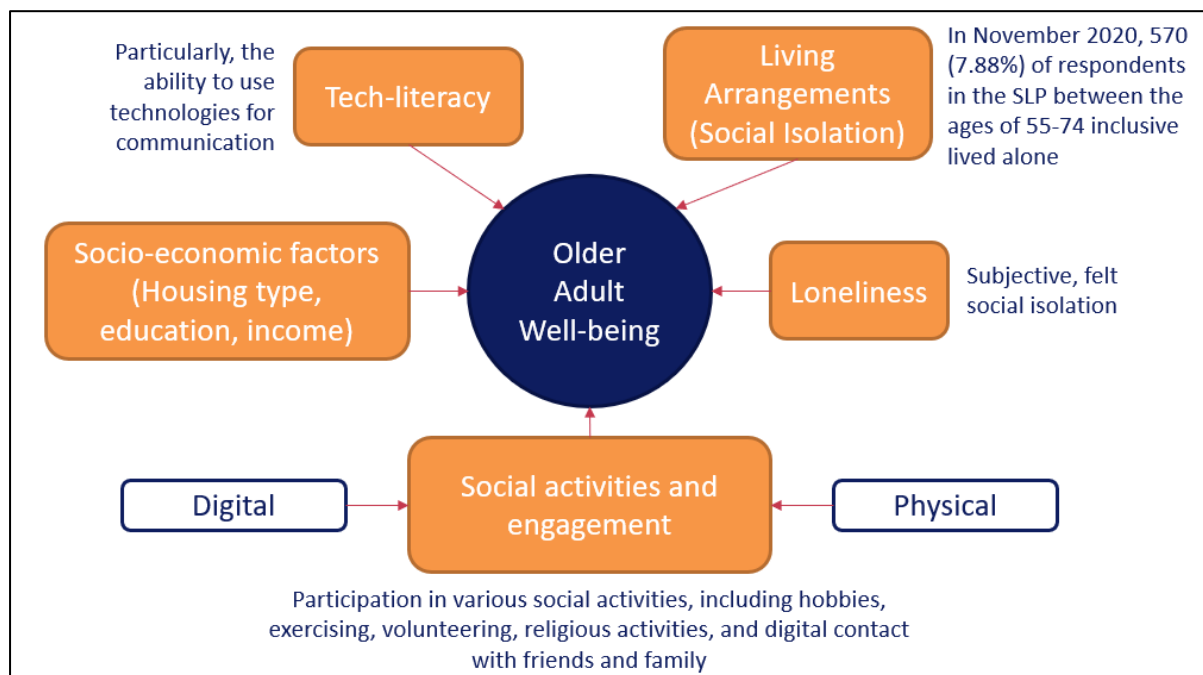


Figure 3: Factors impacting older adult well-being

In particular, living arrangements (in terms of living alone vs not living alone), loneliness (in terms of subjective, felt social isolation), frequency of social activities and engagement (in terms of both in-person/physical engagement *and* digital engagement), socio-economic factors (such as housing type, education, income), and finally tech-literacy (in terms of one's ability to utilize various communications technologies) were identified from preliminary arguments made by commentators with regards to factors that may make older adults more vulnerable to greater declines in well-being during COVID-19.

A preliminary descriptive analysis into the trends of life satisfaction confirmed the importance of these factors. As can be observed in Figures 4-9, individuals who lived alone, used fewer forms of communications technology, and participated in fewer in-person social activities reported lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of felt social isolation during 2020.

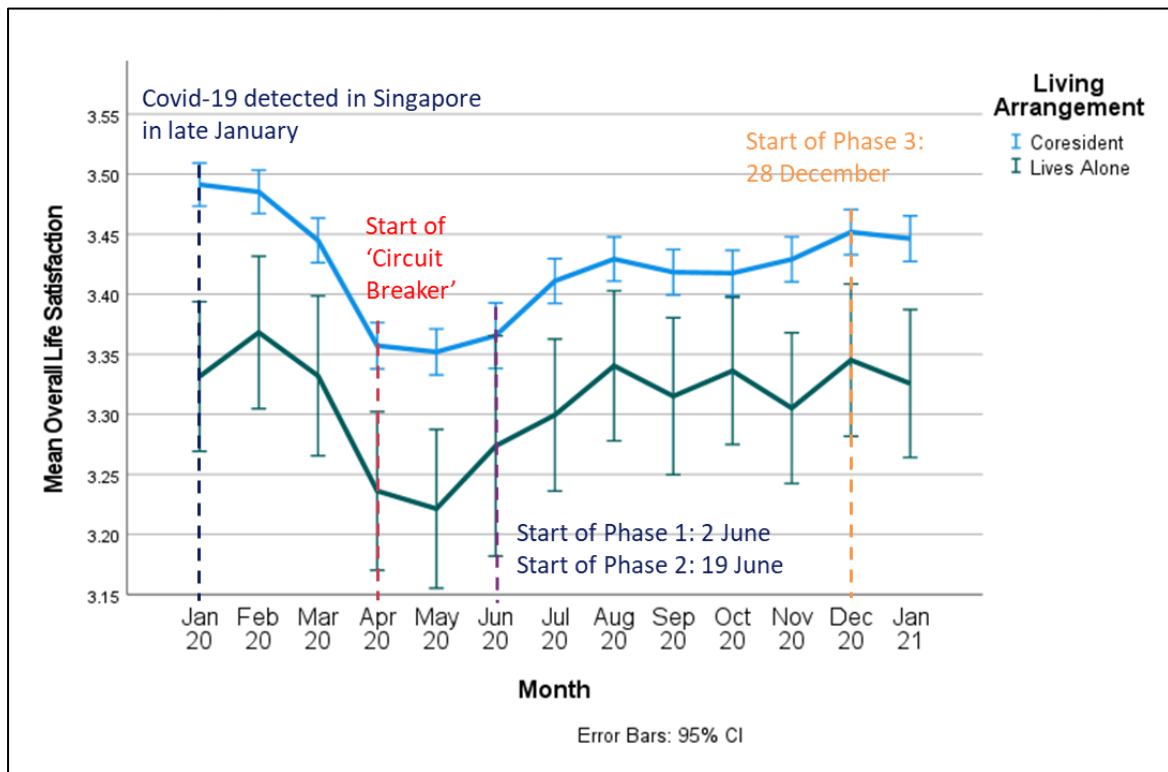


Figure 4: Mean Overall Life Satisfaction by Living Arrangement

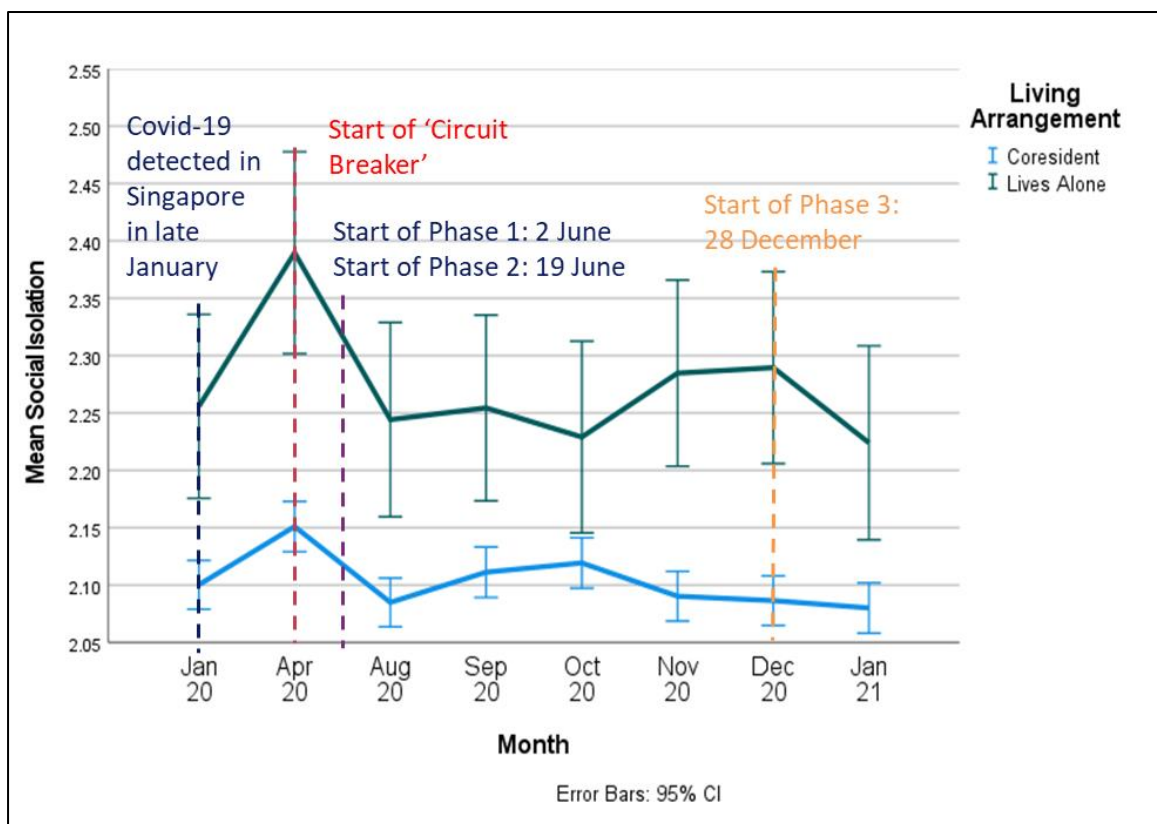


Figure 5: Mean Social Isolation by Living Arrangement

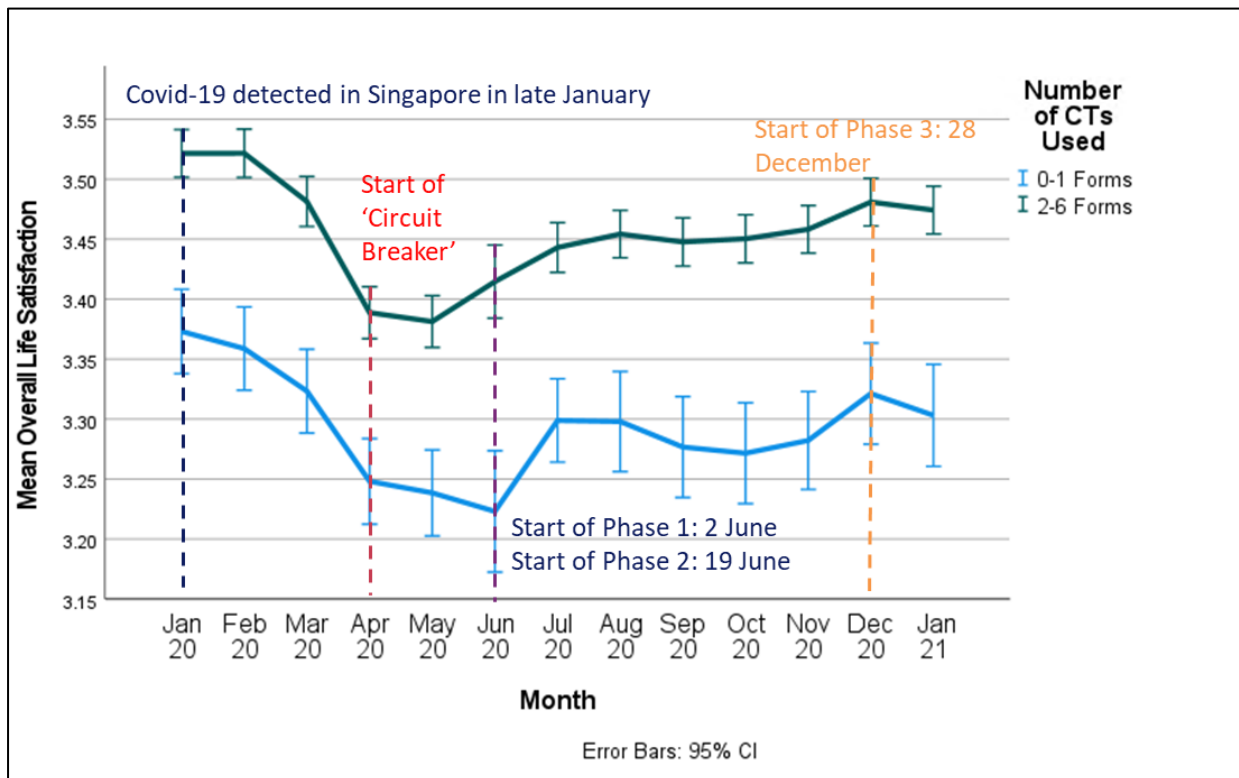


Figure 6: Mean Overall Life Satisfaction by Number of Communications Technologies (CTs) Used

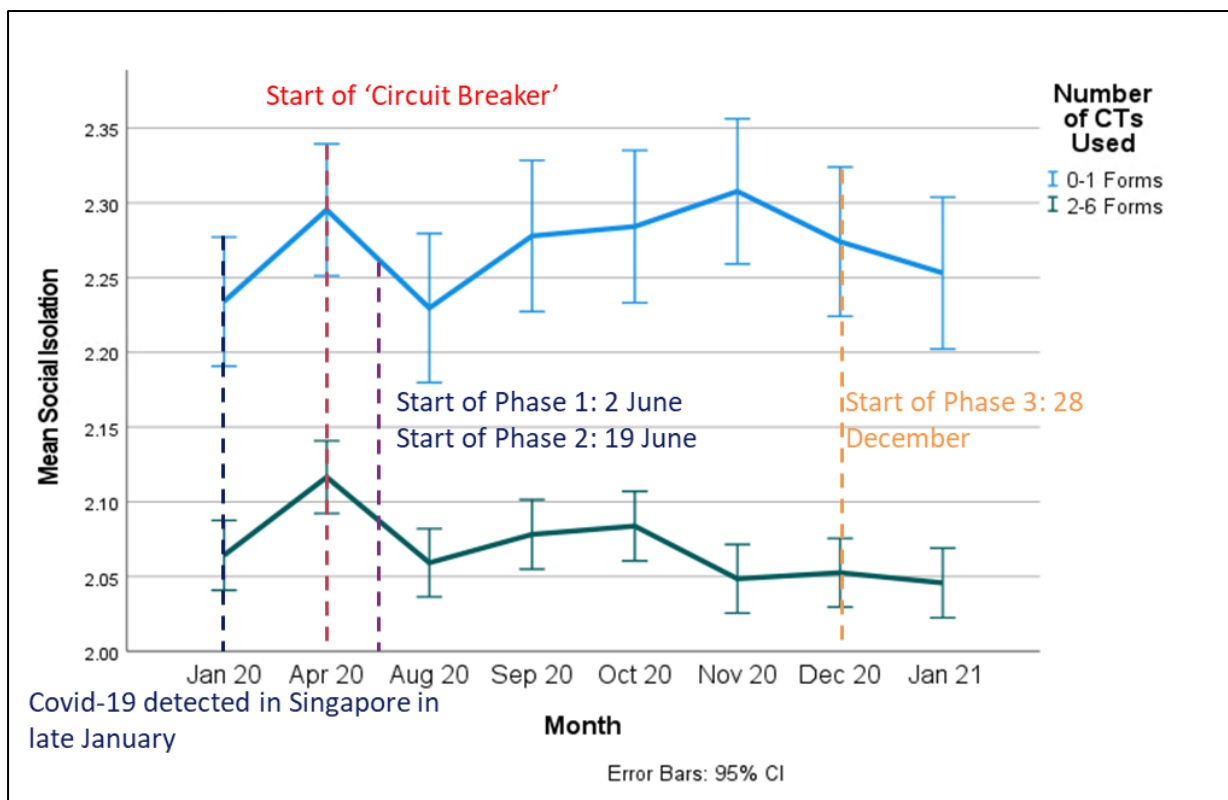


Figure 7: Mean Social Isolation by Number of Communications Technologies (CTs) Used



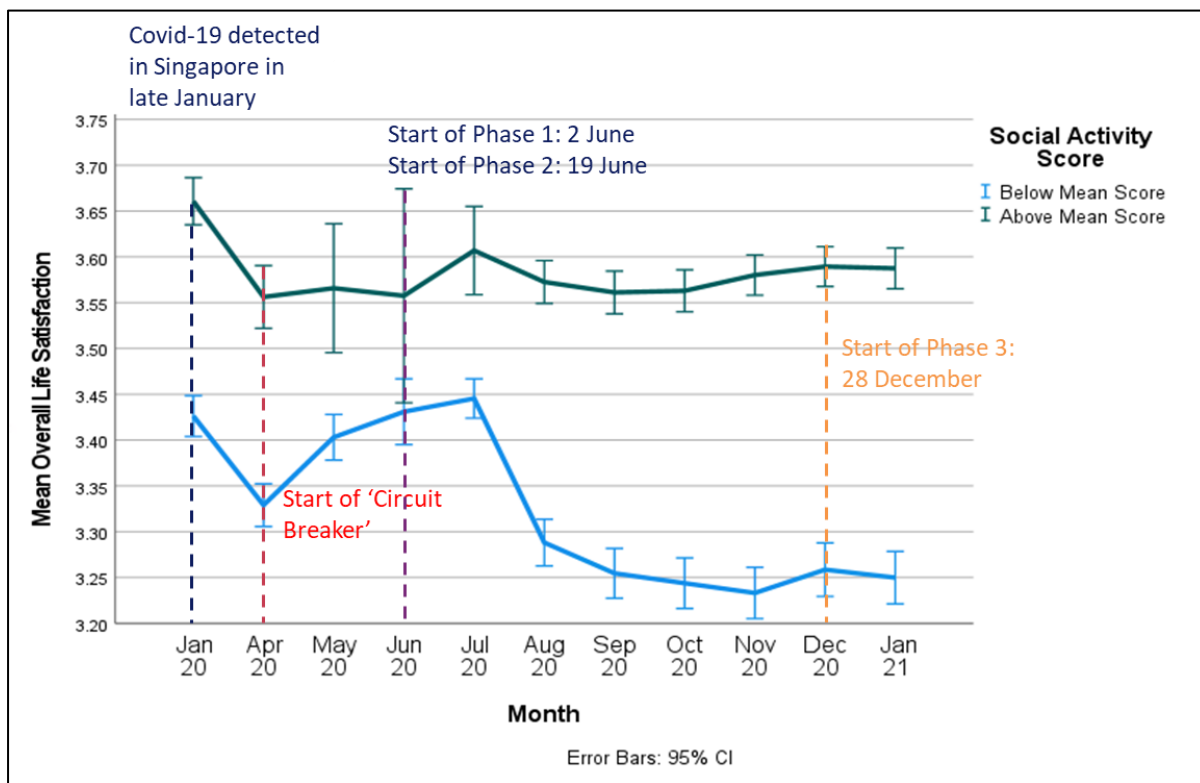


Figure 8: Mean Overall Life Satisfaction by Social Activity Score

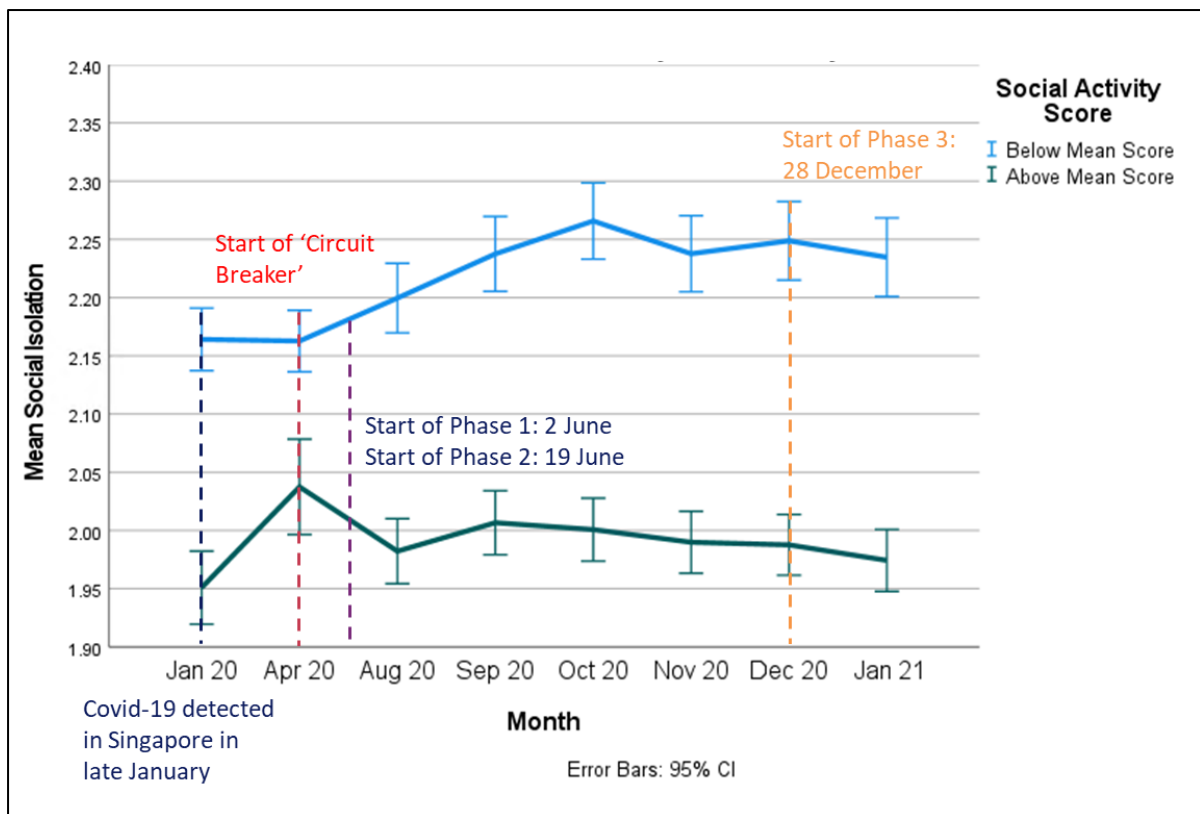


Figure 9: Mean Social Isolation by Social Activity Score

These three factors (living arrangements, frequency of participation in in-person social activities, and frequency of contact with friends and loved ones on digital platforms) were hence

selected as key factors in the construction of a model to better understand the relationship between living arrangements, felt social isolation, and psychosocial well-being during the pandemic. This model is discussed in the next section.

### A DEEPER DIVE INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION

The heightened feelings of social isolation have been a phenomenon documented across many countries through the course of the COVID-19 pandemic (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Particularly, experts have raised concerns over the increased feelings of loneliness experienced among older adults and its implications on their psychological and social well-being (Plagg et al., 2020). In the effort to curb contact transmission of COVID-19, Singapore has set in place strict restrictions on social gatherings and social interactions. This resulted in a reduction in the services and community activities catered towards senior adults, especially those with fewer sources of social support. Further, while younger groups have been better able to leverage on digital communication to overcome physical interaction restrictions during this period, most seniors have faced varying degrees of difficulty in overcoming the technological barriers to digital communication (Seifert et al., 2021). Coupled together, these factors have vastly exacerbated seniors' risk of being socially isolated and heightened feelings of loneliness, particularly among those living alone. This, in turn, has attenuated the overall well-being of older Singaporeans through the COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, to provide a closer examination of the factors associated with the feeling of social isolation, we conducted a path analysis and developed a model which would predict feelings of social isolation and overall well-being through several factors. In particular; living arrangement, frequency of participation in social activities, use of communication technology, and frequency of digital communication.

Figure 10 illustrates our proposed model. We hypothesized that those living alone would feel a greater sense of social isolation, but that these feelings of social isolation could be alleviated through more frequent digital contact and more frequent participation in in-person social activities. Additionally, increased feelings of social isolation and a reduction in social activities would lead to lower life satisfaction.

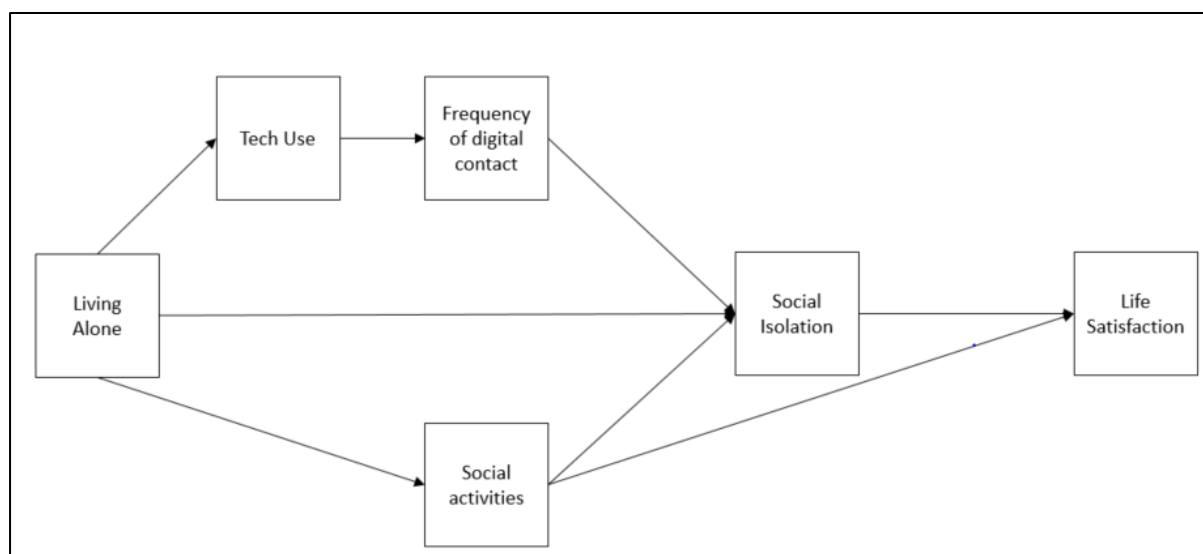


Figure 10: Proposed Path Model

Our analysis suggests that living alone is related to increased feelings of social isolation, which in turn, reduces life satisfaction (Figure 11). This is possibly owed to the fact that their social interactions within the home are likely less than those who live with others, and with the pandemic, social interactions outside of the home would too be limited. However, seniors are also likely able to reduce their feelings of social isolation through more frequent participation in social activities and communication through digital means. Further, greater participation in social activities would also directly improve life satisfaction. Thus, our findings highlight the importance of social interaction in the well-being of seniors which has been well established in literature (Portero & Oliva, 2007). However, it also puts forth the argument that social interaction is equally impactful in reducing social isolation through both physical and virtual mediums. Through our model, we found that more frequent digital contact reduced social isolation by a larger extent than that of more frequent participation in social activities. This suggests that in light of the pandemic, which curbed the possibility for physical interaction, virtual interactions are viable alternatives towards forging connections which would have otherwise been impractical. Hence, tech literacy, particularly with regards to utilizing technology for communication, is an important skillset which would empower seniors to stay connected.

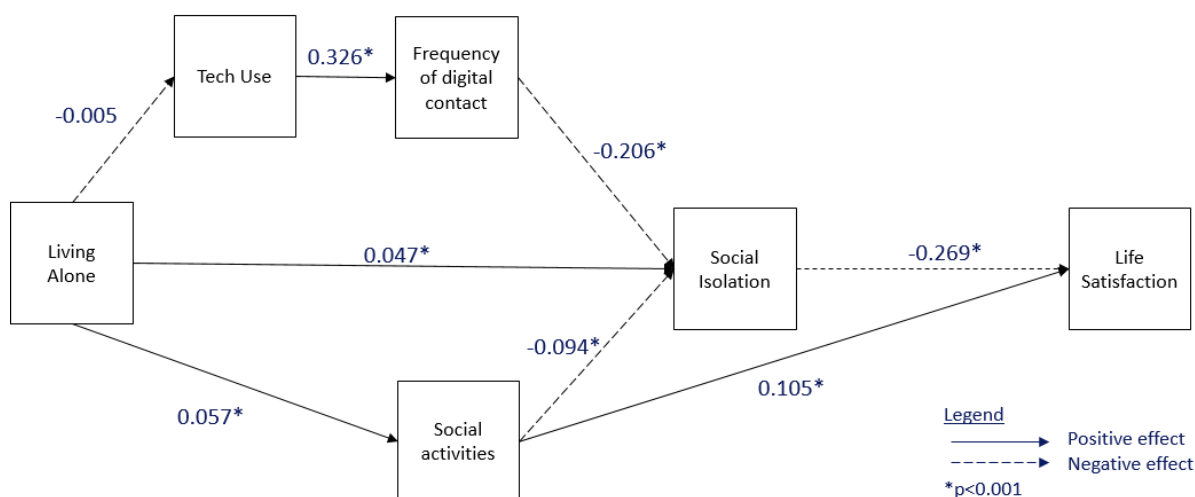


Figure 11. Path Figure Model Results

### IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS FOR RESILIENCE

We also examine respondents' sense of resilience a few months after the circuit-breaker (September 2020). In particular, we examine how well-being in three key areas of life relate to resilience after this period. We computed respondents' average levels of economic satisfaction, social satisfaction, and subjective health during the year *before* the circuit-breaker (from January 2019 to March 2020). These average levels partly reflect the resources available to individuals over the long term. The analyses below show that average levels of subjective health and social satisfaction before the circuit-breaker were strong predictors of resilience. Independently of these effects, respondents' experiences during the circuit-breaker also had an impact on their resilience. For example, the extent to which older adults experienced declines from March to May 2020 had a negative effect on their resilience. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these negative effects are smaller than the effect of long-term social satisfaction on resilience. In other words, those who had adequate social resources and were satisfied with their relationships in the year before the circuit-breaker came away from the experience with higher levels of resilience. These findings speak to the importance of building a stable

network of social support for older adults that can help them maintain confidence in their ability to overcome adversity.

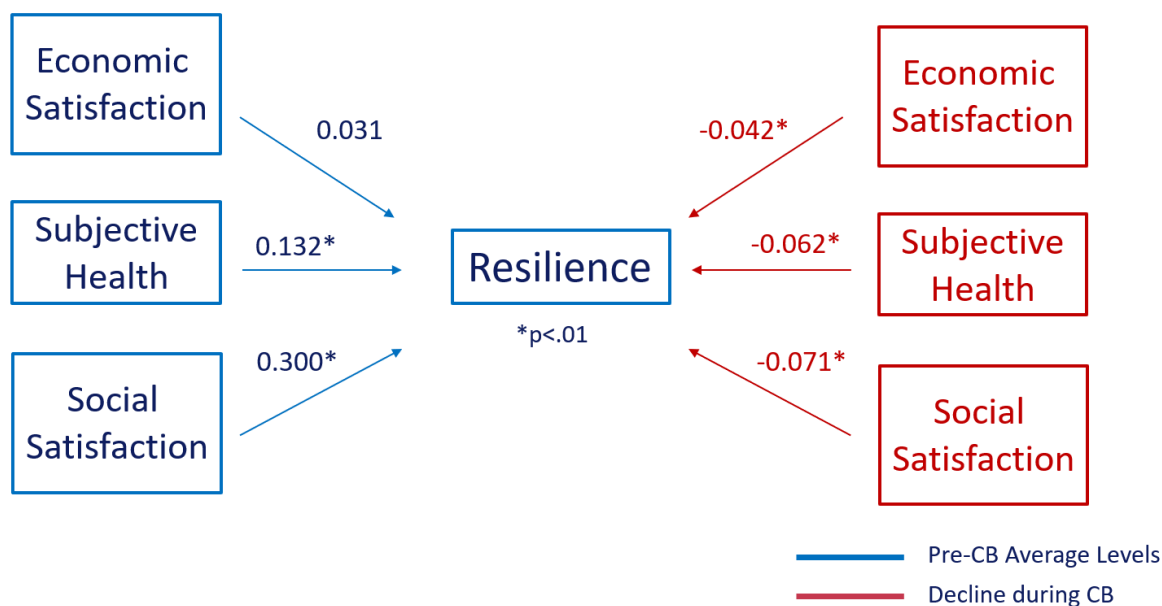


Figure 12: Predicting Resilience (Sept 2020) from Pre-Circuit Breaker Well-being and Declines during Circuit Breaker

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

In response to the pandemic, the Singapore government introduced a slew of policies aimed at both containing the pandemic and addressing the wider indirect impacts of the pandemic. The latter policies, the focus of this paper, included many universal policies intended and aimed at benefiting all Singaporeans regardless of membership to any group, for instance the cash handouts provided to all Singaporeans above the age of 21 as part of the Solidarity Budget announced on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April. Concurrently, the government also implemented several targeted policies aimed at assisting older adults in coping with the drastic changes arising from measures to contain the pandemic in Singapore. These included, for instance, the launch of the Seniors Go Digital Movement and Virtual Digital clinics in May 2020.

Our findings have implications for such policies on two levels. On a more precise level, our findings suggest that in terms of assistance for older adults living alone in the new normal, initiatives aimed at increasing frequency of digital contact with friends and family and in-person social activities among older adults will help to reduce loneliness among these older adults. As social isolation is commonly cited as a mediating factor between living alone and life satisfaction/overall well-being, such initiatives will help in reducing the impact that the new normal has on the well-being of older adults who live alone. One specific example of such an initiative that complements existing initiatives would be to provide older adults with interest groups or neighborhood groups within which they could potentially utilize the digitalization skills they may have developed via the Seniors Go Digital Movement. In short, while older adults have been given the skills to communicate digitally with others, the next step could be to provide older adults with the communities within which they can exercise or utilize these skills.

In terms of ensuring for the psychological resilience of older adults, an important step in safeguarding their mental well-being, the findings of the current research also suggest that it is important for interventions that enhance the social support and resources of older adults to be

implemented so as to improve their resilience. Community based programs that provide older adults with a local network accessible even despite social distancing restriction are thus suggested as a means to improve older adult resilience in this period.

On a more general level, our findings (especially with regards to social isolation among older adults) point towards the importance of targeted interventions in ensuring for the well-being of older adults in the new normal. These findings support similar arguments for a ‘targeted universalism’ approach in public policy responses to the pandemic (Powell, 2020). Such targeted interventions should be tailored to the specific needs of their beneficiaries. This is evidenced by the findings of our analysis that demonstrate the unique nature of both the impediments to well-being that older adults who live alone face, as well as the possible solutions identified that would improve well-being. For instance, while increasing digital communication among older adults may be effective in improving the well-being of those living alone, this may not apply to other groups of older adults who may require other forms of assistance.

The government has indeed implemented such interventions targeted at ensuring for the well-being of older adults during COVID-19. These interventions are likely to have contributed to the uptick in well-being after the circuit-breaker. However, interventions and approaches will need to evolve as Singapore moves into the next stage of the pandemic. Most recently on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2021, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Heng Swee Keat released the 2021 budget for the country. The budget signaled a shift in policy “from containment to restructuring”, which includes a transition from “broad-based support to more targeted ones”. While such a shift is occurring on Singapore’s economic front, the current research suggests that it is also needed in Singapore’s social policies for COVID-19. As was illustrated, certain groups continue to struggle even as the COVID-19 pandemic stabilizes. Thus, we recommend that more targeted interventions are needed to be developed to meet the needs of these individuals.

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## Annex A – Demographic Table of Respondents (Wave 64 – November 2020)

Sample Characteristics	Proportion (%)	Sample Characteristics	Proportion (%)
<b>Age</b>		<b>Household size (including respondent and spouse)</b>	
Median age = 63, Mean age = 63.74, Std. Dev. = 5.45		Median size = 3, Mean size = 3.29, Std. Dev. = 1.46	
55 - 59	26.35	1	7.89
60 - 64	30.78	2	25.91
65 - 69	23.18	3	24.39
70 - 75	19.70	4	23.21
<b>Gender</b>		5	11.69
Male	47.41	6	4.28
Female	52.59	7	1.75
<b>Marital status</b>		8	0.53
Married	77.39	9	0.19
Single (never married)	9.14	10	0.11
Separated	0.53	11	0.04
Divorced	5.42	<b>Educational attainment</b>	
Widowed	7.53	Primary/None	22.93
<b>Ethnicity</b>		Secondary	41.45
Chinese	87.40	Post-Secondary without University	20.44
Malay	5.63	Post-Secondary with University	14.98
Indian	5.05	Others	0.19
Other	1.92	<b>Work status</b>	
<b>Housing Type</b>		Working Full-time	30.62
1 and 2 Room Flat	3.32	Working Part-time/Flexible	14.85
3 Room Flat	16.25	Self-Employed	8.02
4 Room Flat	30.56	Unemployed/Laid off/On sick leave	6.52
5 Room and Executive Flats	32.22	Retired/Homemaker	37.31
Condominium and Apartments	10.90	Disabled/Student/Other	2.67
Landed	6.76		

(N = 7253)

### Annex B - List of Instruments/Measures used

Below is a list of the instruments used in the analyses we conducted.

#### 1. Life Satisfaction – represents respondents' overall life satisfaction

Question: Now, we have some general questions about your life. Taking all things together, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?

Respondents answered on a 5-point likert scale (1 Very dissatisfied – 5 Very satisfied)

#### 2. Subjective/felt social isolation – represents the frequency respondents felt social isolated

Question: How often do you feel isolated from others?

Respondents answered on a 5-point likert scale (1 None of the time – 5 All of the time)

#### 3. Social Activities (Physical and Digital Communication) – represents the frequency with which respondents participated in various social activities

Question: Over the last month, how often did you do each of the following activities?

Type of Social Activity	Daily	Several times per week	Once a week	1-3 times a month	Less than once a month
1. Visiting friends or family	.	.	.	.	.
2. Religious activities (including attending church, mosque, temple or other place of worship)	.	.	.	.	.
3. Group activities (including going to clubs, community centres or Senior Activity Centres, playing cards/mahjong, etc.)	.	.	.	.	.
4. Physical activities (including exercises, swimming, going for a walk, etc)	.	.	.	.	.
5. Hobbies (including shopping, gardening, attending courses, arts & crafts, etc)	.	.	.	.	.
6. Spending time outdoors in parks, green spaces and nature	.	.	.	.	.
7. Volunteering	.	.	.	.	.
8. Contacting people via digital technology (including phone calls, email)	.	.	.	.	.

Respondents reflected their frequency of participation in each activity on a 5-point likert scale (1 Less than once a month – 5 Daily).

**In-person Social Activities (Social Activity Score)** was measured as an index created by summing the scores respondents answered for each of the first 7 social activities (Minimum 7 – Maximum 35, Mean = 13.08, Median = 12, Std Dev. = 4.67)



**Frequency of digital contact** was measured using responses to question 8.

**4. Tech Use – represents the number of Communications Technologies respondents used to keep in touch with friends and family.**

Question: Which of the following technologies do you use to keep in touch with friends and family?

Respondents were asked to select all that applied out of the following list:

- 1 Phone calls
- 2 Voice calls on computer/smartphone apps (such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Skype)
- 3 SMS messaging
- 4 Messaging on computer/smartphone apps (such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook messenger)
- 5 Browsing and posting on social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
- 6 Emailing
- 7 Others (Please specify)

**5. Resilience – represents the respondent's level of resilience**

Respondents' resilience was measured and a composite index of resilience was constructed with the following instruments:

Question: Below are several statements describing how you might respond to difficult times or stressful events. These can refer to any experiences that you might cause you much worry or stress (e.g. a major health issue, financial difficulties, relationship problems, etc).

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Slightly Disagree	4 Slightly Agree	5 Agree	6 Strongly Agree
It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event	•	•	•	•	•	•
Regardless of what happens to me, I believe I can control my reaction to it.	•	•	•	•	•	•
I believe I can grow in positive ways by dealing with difficult situations.	•	•	•	•	•	•
I quickly get over and recover from significant life difficulties	•	•	•	•	•	•

Question: Below are several statements describing how you might respond to difficult times or stressful events. These can refer to any experiences that you might cause you much worry or stress (e.g. a major health issue, financial difficulties, relationship problems, etc).

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Slightly Disagree	4 Slightly Agree	5 Agree	6 Strongly Agree

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I tend to recover quickly after hard times	•	•	•	•	•	•
I have a hard time making it through stressful events	•	•	•	•	•	•
I usually come through difficult times with little trouble	•	•	•	•	•	•
I tend to take a long time to get over difficulties in my life	•	•	•	•	•	•