

# Digital Exclusion and COVID-19: Does Communication Technology Usage Correlate With Well-Being Among Older Adults in Israel?

Sharon Goldman<sup>1</sup>, Elaina Delore<sup>1</sup>, Sara Flesh<sup>1</sup>, Tal Mazor-Karsenty, PhD<sup>1</sup>, Danit Langer, PhD<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

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Primary Author and Speaker: Sharon Goldman, [sharongoldmand@gmail.com](mailto:sharongoldmand@gmail.com)

**PURPOSE:** The existing generational disparity in technology usage often leads to the exclusion of elderly individuals from social participation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of communication technology has become more important than ever before, magnifying the issue of digital exclusion. In light of social distancing guidelines, technological proficiency or lack thereof can determine one's ability to maintain social participation. We aimed to explore this troubling trend and assess the implications of digital inequality on the wellbeing of the elderly population. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore the correlation between communication technology usage and wellbeing among adults aged 70 years and older. The results of this study may help to provide a theoretical foundation for occupational therapy's role in wellbeing promotion among the elderly population during this increasingly digital age.

**METHOD:** This cross-sectional study targeted adults 70 years and older who currently live in Israel. 33 subjects (70% female, Mean age = 76, SD = 5) were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling methods. Subjects were asked, via online platform or phone-interview, to fill out 3 questionnaires: (1) a demographic questionnaire designed specifically for use in this study; (2) a questionnaire for respondents over the age of 70 that includes a frequency of use scale of the following communication platforms: phone calls, video calls, social media, emails, and text messages (the respondent marks their frequency of use of each communication platform during the month prior to filling out the questionnaire); and (3) the Personal Wellbeing Index-Adult (PWI-A) (respondents rate 8 items related to their subjective wellbeing on a scale of 0-10). The 8 items inquire about satisfaction with standard of living, health, achievements, relationships, safety, connectedness to their community, future security, and spirituality.

**RESULTS:** It was hypothesized that a positive correlation would be found between the frequency of use of communication technology and self-reported wellbeing among adults aged 70 and older during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results yielded from the questionnaires support this hypothesis. After conducting a Spearman correlation test, a statistically significant medium positive correlation ( $r = .488$ ,  $p = .004$ ) was found between frequent communication use and a higher average score on the PWI-A. Significant positive correlations were found between frequent technology use and health satisfaction ( $r = .377$ ,  $p = .03$ ), a sense of personal security ( $r = .404$ ,  $p = .02$ ), and a sense of future security ( $r = .597$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). Of all the communication platforms, video calls and emails yielded the most significant positive correlations with personal wellbeing as reported on the PWI-A: ( $r = .363$ ,  $p = .019$ ) and ( $r = .309$ ,  $p = .04$ ), respectively.

**CONCLUSION:** The results of this study suggest that frequent users of technology felt greater levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction during the pandemic than non-frequent users. This finding is consistent with current research which suggests that social technology may be an effective tool to maintain social bonds and cope with the fears and anxieties that accompany life during a global pandemic.

**IMPACT STATEMENT:** Due to the rapid digitalization that came as a response to pandemic restrictions, digital technology is becoming increasingly integral to everyday life. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided occupational therapists with an opportunity to consider the intersection of communication technology, wellbeing, and age.

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