Mobilizing social support: New and transferable digital skills in the era of COVID-19
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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global crisis that has had profound impacts on people’s lives. Under these circumstances, social support can buffer against pandemic-related stress. Yet, the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic with its stringent health guidelines have created unique challenges to the mobilization of social support. These challenges particularly affect vulnerable groups with limited digital life skills. Based on a qualitative study of 101 semi-structured interviews with East York residents in Toronto, Canada conducted in 2013–2014, we investigate what new and transferable digital life skills are needed in the pre- and post-pandemic era to mobilize social support. Our findings reveal that East Yorkers easily transfer their digital skills to many spheres of their lives, which help them to organize their busy social lives and coordinate events and gatherings as well as to flexibly socialize online. When needed, East Yorkers adapt and expand their digital skills to substitute for in-person contact, often overcoming communication barriers. One of the key benefits of developing digital life skills is the ability to mobilize social support (i.e., companionship, emotional aid, large services, and technical support), whereby individuals employed different digital skills to mobilize different types of support. The findings demonstrate what new and transferable digital life skills are needed to navigate social support in a post-pandemic era. The study has implications for the development of age-specific interventions to strengthen much needed digital life skills that will aid individuals in mobilizing their social support during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and help mitigate the negative effects of stress.

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Introduction
Social support is the sum of resources “accessible to an individual through social ties to other individuals, groups, and the larger community” [1]. Research has consistently shown that a network of social support has positive impacts on a range of outcomes including happiness (Jiang, et al., 2018), lifelong health (Thoits, 2011; Unicho, 2009), and life expectancy (Ross and Mirowsky; 2002; Yang, et al., 2016). Jiang, et al. (2018), for example, found older adults’ supportive networks not only increased happiness, but also reduced stress; thereby having an additive beneficial effect on mental and physical health. The importance of social support in an individual’s life is most apparent in times of need or crisis when kin, friends, neighbors, and workmates provide assistance, care, and emotional aid — from cooking meals when a person is ill to providing companionship in case of loss of a loved one (Ozbay, et al., 2007). In these difficult times, social ties occupy a vital role in buffering the negative effects of stress; this is known as the stress-buffering hypothesis (Raffaeli, et al., 2013). Therefore, being able to mobilize one’s personal network during a time of crisis is a critical life skill that promotes well-being and builds resilience.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis with impacts on a global scale, such as high uncertainty, increased health risks, and economic hardships (Mueller, et al., 2021; Simon et al., 2021), creating a real need for people to rely on their support networks. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unique challenges for support mobilization because of health regulations such as stay-at-home restrictions (Ritchie, et al., 2020), which have disrupted in-person gatherings and social activities that pre-pandemic promoted the exchange of support. These challenges particularly affect vulnerable groups with low digital life skills (Robinson, et al., 2020). This raises important questions: how are individuals seeking and giving social support during the COVID-19 pandemic? What new digital life skills are needed to exchange support in a post-pandemic era? Past research shows that digital media can help individuals reach into their networks for social support (Quan-Haase, et al., 2021; Quan-Haase, et al., 2017; Hampton, et al., 2015). This suggests that digital media can be an important tool during the COVID-19 pandemic to activate personal networks for much needed social support. What remains unclear is what new life skills need to be developed and which ones are easily transferable into a post-pandemic era.

To fill this gap in the literature, the present study investigates 101 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2013–2014 with East York residents of Toronto, Canada, to learn about digital life skills linked to social support mobilization. These interviews are part of the fourth wave of data collection in East York, a longitudinal study focusing on social support in communities that spans back to the 1960s (Wellman, 1979). We examine life skills across the life course by looking at the mobilization of social support, particularly what types of support are exchanged and the mediating role of digital media. We find that in a networked society, East Yorkers transfer their digital skills flexibly to many spheres of their lives, apply their digital skills to organize and socialize on- and offline, and expand their digital skill set to supplement and substitute in-person contact. By expanding their
digital skills, East Yorkers mobilize different types of social support via different digital media channels, indicating that having a wide range of skills is key for reaping the benefits of exchanging support via digital media. The study findings have implications for data-driven policy as to what new life skills are needed to mobilize social support during the COVID-19 crisis. The findings also aid in the development of age-specific interventions to strengthen much needed digital life skills that will help individuals in mobilizing their social support during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate the negative effects of stress.

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**Review of the social support and digital life skills literature**

Early research conceptualized social support as a “single commodity” [2], yet a growing body of evidence has suggested that social support is multidimensional (see Hlbec and Kogovšek, 2013; Williams, et al., 2004). For example, the second East York study deconstructed support into five types: emotional aid (e.g., support after a break-up), small services (e.g., household chores), large services (e.g., caretaking responsibilities), financial aid (e.g., tangible, monetary aid), and companionship (e.g., visiting social ties) (Wellman, 1979; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). To better understand the mobilization of support, particularly amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we review three key bodies of literature: theory and findings on the role of social support over the life course, social support mobilization in times of crisis, and the role of digital media in support mobilization.

**Social support mobilization over the life course**

The life course perspective provides a framework for understanding how the network composition of individuals varies across life stages, which, in turn, influences what types of social support are given and received. Life stages refer to the age-related sequence of roles, opportunities, and constraints individuals experience from birth to death (Shanahan and Macmillan, 2008). While life stages are not biologically determined by a number on a birth card, milestones and culturally expected life events do occur in different stages.

In early life stages (i.e., childhood, adolescence, young adulthood), individuals receive an immense amount of social support, particularly from their parents (Bucx, et al., 2012; Uchino, 2009). But as individuals grow and mature, supportive exchanges tend to shift whereby individuals rely on their “… constellation of social ties” [3] for many types of support, such as helping to buffer transition-related stressors (Lee and Goldstein, 2016). During middle-age, with more formalized obligations (e.g., marriage, child-rearing, parental caregiving), individuals tend to provide high levels of social support (Morgan and Kunkel, 2011). This often results in much more support given than is received (LaValley and Gage-Bouchard, 2020), which may enhance stress, and create conflict (Antonacci, et al., 2014; Heinz, et al., 2015). This has led to this group being described as the “sandwich generation” (Grundy and Henrietta, 2006). Moving into older adulthood (i.e., age 65 and older), social support networks often transform due to significant life events, such as geographical dispersion of social ties, retirement, disability, and loss of loved ones (Cornwell and Laumann, 2015). As a result, with shrinking social networks (Cornwell and Waite, 2009), older adults tend to put more emphasis on maintaining existing social relations that provide higher levels of support rather than seeking new relations (Carstensen, 1992; Bailly, et al., 2018). Despite evidence that older adults receive more support than they give (Brommel and Cagney, 2014), they often do offer support to their intimate ties, particularly their children and grandchildren (Morgan and Kunkel, 2011). Through their supportive networks, the exchange of social support is instrumental for older adults as social support has been found to have many health and social benefits (i.e., increased well-being, decreased loneliness, empowerment) (Ashida and Heaney, 2008). In sum, life course effects cannot be ignored when looking at how social support is mobilized and what types of support are given or received.

**Social support mobilization during times of crisis**

To better understand how social support can be mobilized during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is useful to look at the extensive literature on support mobilization during times of need or crisis. Scholars have examined a wide range of crises, including micro-social events, such as loss of a loved one (Stroebe, et al., 2005), or disease management (Brashers, et al., 2004), and macro-social events, such as acts of terrorism (Moscardino, et al., 2010). While each is distinct in how it affects individuals and societies, crises have in common that they increase levels of stress, requiring a range of coping mechanisms (Umberger, et al., 2010). Based on an extensive review of the literature on social support, Taylor (2011) concluded that maintaining a network of social support decreases depressive and anxious symptoms during times of stress, particularly in the aftermath of a traumatic event. The ability to mobilize social support in times of crisis is a necessary life skill that is integral to ensuring protection against stressors, and inhibiting adverse health outcomes (Ertel, et al., 2009; Umberger, et al., 2010). Moreover, mobilizing specific types of social support during a crisis requires the activation of specific social ties, given that different ties provide different forms of support (Wellman and Wortley, 1990, 1989). For instance, weak ties — such as immediate kin — are relied upon to vent during times of emotional distress (e.g., Wellman and Wortley, 1990), weak ties — such as work colleagues — are helpful to access diverse sources of information (Granovetter, 1973). Therefore, maintaining a diverse network of social support during the COVID-19 pandemic was essential to not only access necessary emotional aid (e.g., Usher, et al., 2020), but also to increase informational exchanges that enhance the efficacy of public health mandates by reducing hesitancy toward common strategies such as social distancing, mask use, routine handwashing, and vaccinations (e.g., Forsyth, 2020).

The type of social support mobilized is also diverse during times of crisis, and depends upon the stressor experienced (Taylor, 2011). For instance, in a study of young adult breast cancer survivors, Snyder and Pearse (2010) found that emotional support was the most received type of social support, followed by tangible and informational support — the simple act of strong, intimate ties ‘being there’ was described by survivors as immensely beneficial to their navigation of stress. This is in line with other literature on emotional support suggesting that having a ‘confidant’, or individual(s) to which you can share experiences of emotional distress with (e.g., a spouse, parent, or friend) is vitally important to buffering the negative effects of stress (e.g., Collins and Feeney, 2000). Similarly, following a natural disaster, emotional assistance was the most exchanged form of social support, while receipt of tangible aid (e.g., financial assistance, or small and/or large services) was largely linked to the relative impact of the disaster on victims, with those experiencing greater impact receiving more tangible assistance (Kaniasty and Norris, 1995). This suggests that the individuals who were most at risk of experiencing adverse health outcomes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic were likely to receive more diverse types of support from their social networks — particularly via their strong network ties — to insulate against the threat that the virus posed (e.g., helping with shopping).

**Social support mobilization and the role of digital media**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world enacted stringent health regulations including physical distancing guidelines
and stay-at-home orders (Ritchie, et al., 2020), making it difficult for people to exchange social support in-person and through social gatherings. We review the literature on digital media and social support to provide context in terms of how digital life skills that were utilized to exchange social support can be transferable to the post-pandemic era.

Scholars have examined the role of digital media in the exchange of social support, focusing both on the facilitating and constraining factors (Quan-Haase, et al., 2021; Quan-Haase, et al., 2017; Lu and Hampton, 2017). Digital media provide opportunities for building larger, more diverse social networks composed of a mix of bridging, bonding, and maintained connections (Ellison, et al., 2007). It also increases the awareness of what support is available in the network (Lu and Hampton, 2017; Luo and Hancock, 2020). For example, Lu and Hampton (2017) found that on Facebook features such as ‘status updates,’ ‘likes,’ ‘comments,’ and ‘direct messages’ represent signals that make Facebook Friends aware when assistance is needed and enable assistance to be provided swiftly through the platform. This shows that pervasive awareness is a social affordance of social media (Wellman, et al., 2003), which increases individuals’ perceptions of available resources in their networks. Thus, digital media can facilitate the mobilization of social support by engendering supplemental contact at a reduced expenditure of time and energy (Rainie and Wellman, 2012).

Yet, digital media — despite all its bells and whistles — can also constrain the exchange of social support. Much of the literature to date suggests that digital media is a good tool to signal a need for support (Lu and Hampton, 2017) but is not adequate for exchanging some types of support. For example, in a nationally representative study of U.S. adults aged 19–32, Primack, et al. (2017a) found that increased social media use — as measured through leisurely time spent on social media and frequency of use — was associated with an increase in perceived social isolation. In a study of U.S. older adults (age 50 and older), Mashi, et al. (2019) reported similar findings. This suggests heavy use of digital media negatively influences perceptions of connectedness with a social network, which affects perceived social support and detrimentally affects a person’s well-being and mental health. While it remains unclear what the underlying mechanisms are that link digital media use to decreased well-being, or if the relation is causal, a lack of media richness and non-verbal cues, social comparison, and flaming are often identified as potential causes (Primack, et al., 2017a; 2017b; Quan-Haase, et al., 2021).

As restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic have required people to socialize at a distance, having digital life skills to signal a need for support and mobilize support online may be important for maintaining well-being and building resilience to stress. However, a person’s ability to mobilize social support through digital media may vary across the life course and with digital skill levels. Much evidence suggests that resources flowing through digital media provide support for emerging adults — often these studies are based on university students (Ellison, et al., 2007; Hampton, et al., 2015). For younger adults, who are tech savvy and spend much of their leisure time online (48 percent of U.S. adults aged 18–29 report being online constantly; Perrin and Atske, 2021), mobilizing social support through disclosive behaviors, such as status updates, posts about preferences, and selfies, provides positive returns with respect to decreasing loneliness and depressive symptoms (Kim and Lee, 2011; Valkenburg, et al., 2006; Zhang, 2017). Additionally, some research suggests that younger adults may be self-disclosing more frequently online (e.g., Desjarlais, et al., 2015), with older adults preferring to use digital platforms more passively (Van House, 2015). The active and frequent engagement of younger adults on digital media may be providing social rewards, while lurking may reap fewer social benefits but can offer informational returns. However, this may be mediated by the embeddedness of digital technologies in the lives of young adults (Perrin and Atske, 2021), and the challenges older adults often face in navigating an online presence (Schreurs, et al., 2017).

Methods

We used qualitative methods consisting of semi-structured interviews because of the subjective nature of understanding social support exchange (Thoits, 2011), particularly who gives and receives support as well as how it is exchanged with whom. Interviews provided rich descriptions of supportive exchanges with various social ties and the role of digital media.

Case study: East York, Toronto, Canada

We use a case study and data collected from a single neighborhood in Toronto, Canada, East York. The case study was part of a longitudinal project that started in the 1960s and this comprised the fourth wave of data collection (Wellman, 1979). Building on the earlier studies, the fourth wave focused on the network structure and composition of East York residents, the impact of digital media on connectivity, and the exchange of social support (for study details, see Wellman, et al., 2020).

East York is part of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), one of the largest metropolitan areas in North America with about 7.65 million residents (Brinkhoff, 2021). East York itself houses 120,000 residents, composed of mostly working- and middle-class families living in small houses and high-rise apartment buildings (Toronto City Planning, 2018). In 2018, East York residents reported an average income of Can$113,802 (Toronto City Planning, 2018), which is higher than Canada’s average income of Can$61,400 (Statistics Canada, 2020). Looking at age demographics, the median
age of East Yorkers is 41, with 13 percent of East Yorkers older than age 65 (Statistics Canada, 2019).

**Sample**

Our sample consisted of 101 adult respondents ranging in age from 27 to 93 years of age ($M=60$; $SD=15$). There were 55 women and 46 men. To better understand life course and age-based differences, we grouped respondents into groups: 1) young adults: under 35 (6 participants); 2) middle age: 35–50 (22 participants) and 51–64 (32 participants), and 3) older adults: 65 and older (41 participants). Much like the rest of Toronto (Toronto City Planning, 2018), our sample was culturally diverse and nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of respondents were born outside of Canada in places such as Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. Forty-nine percent of East Yorkers held full-time employment, 5 percent worked part-time, and 9 percent were unemployed. The remaining East Yorkers (38 percent) were retired, but not all those retired were seniors, as 21 percent of those 65 and older were employed. In terms of living arrangements, 57 percent of respondents lived with their spouse and/or children, 29 percent lived alone and were never married or divorced, and 15 percent had alternative living arrangements (i.e., with children, siblings, relatives, or shared accommodation). Looking at digital device ownership, nearly all respondents owned a laptop or computer (96 percent), landline (95 percent), mobile phone (90 percent), and some had tablets (37 percent). East Yorkers communicated via a range of digital channels including e-mail (92 percent), texting (54 percent), video chat (46 percent), and social media such as Facebook (57 percent) and Twitter (17 percent).

**Data collection**

After the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board approved the study, we contacted Research House, a Toronto-based list-services company, who made a list of 2,321 randomly sampled East York households available. We contacted 304 households randomly selected from the initial list, of which 101 individuals agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews, yielding a response rate of 33 percent. After the interview guide was pilot-tested and refined, data were collected via open-ended, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted by trained social science students and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. During the interviews, respondents were asked a range of questions along with probes and follow-up questions that covered diverse topics including social networks, digital media use, and social support (et al., 2013). With permission from East Yorkers, each interview was recorded and later transcribed. One-third of the interview transcripts were checked for accuracy by research assistants. To protect the confidentiality of respondents, we use pseudonyms and annotate direct quotations with participant ID numbers, gender identity, and age.

**Data analysis**

To stay close to the data, we were guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic approach, which employs a combination of open and selective coding. The first step in the data analysis process was to become familiar with the interviews by carefully reading and rereading the transcripts. Then, we coded all transcripts with our two main themes in mind: 1) digital life skills and 2) social support mobilization. To examine life course effects, we conducted axial coding, the process of interrelating codes and themes — life phases, digital life skills, and social support (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Following this initial identification of themes, codes, and relations, the team reviewed the coding, and discussed any unusual findings with the goal of clarifying themes and identifying additional themes originally missed. Once the initial codes were established, all 101 interviews were then analyzed systematically. In the final stages of coding, meaningful quotes were selected to highlight key findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We use thick description of respondents’ contexts and everyday life circumstances to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Houghton, et al., 2013).

**Findings**

We begin by looking at what digital life skills East Yorkers had pre-pandemic era, what role the skills play in their social connectivity, examine what skills are transferable to the post-pandemic era, and how digital media are used to mobilize social support. To do so, we draw upon four major themes present in our interviews: 1) the transferability of digital life skills across the life course; 2) the application of digital life skills to organize and socialize online; 3) the learning of new digital skills for substituting in-person contact; and, 4) the expansion of one’s digital skills to mobilize social support.

**1) Transferring digital life skills across the life course**

For many of our younger adults, and for some of our younger middle-aged East Yorkers, they perceived their digital skills as being innate, which they attributed to having grown up with digital media and feeling confident in their skills (see also: Calderon, et al., in this issue). For example, James McFinley (P24, M, 32) reported he is a very skilled digital user because digital media had been part of his life since he was a child.

Well, I mean it’s partly just age. I’m born in 1981 and since I was seven or eight there’s always been a computer in my house, even when it was an incredibly primitive laptop and so part of it, is just familiarity because of my age, but as I have become older, and my interests have changed, the ability of the Internet to inform those interests has also made me more and more familiar with it.

For these younger East Yorkers, their digital skills were developed since childhood, and they are transferable to other spheres of their lives — their digital skills are a part of their personal and professional spheres. They seamlessly weave many types of digital media into their lives for many purposes (i.e., for maintaining personal relationships, social connectivity, professional networking). For instance, James used a variety of digital media — both for work and for personal use — which helped him to build and maintain his social network.

I certainly have no problem connecting with people ... These friends that I have made from Twitter, arranging some sort of a social gathering together, and I’ll meet new people there as well.

This transferability, however, was not just seen among our younger age groups. Rather, some of the middle-aged and older adult East Yorkers reflected on using digital media earlier in their lives, which has provided them a foundation for adopting and using newer forms. For example, Dorothy O’Neil (P65, W, 69) stated that unlike others in her generation, she was not afraid of digital media because she has been a long-time user.
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.

While digital media was not always part of their everyday lives in comparison to younger generations, older adults are not fearful of trying newer technologies. By having established digital skill sets, East Yorkers feel more comfortable and confident in expanding their digital skills to newer digital channels — they have basic knowledge available from which to build upon. For example, Thomas Bailey (P13, M, 55) said that unlike some of his contemporaries, he is less fearful of digital technologies, seeing the potential opportunities associated with their use.

I don’t mind trying. I don’t think my computer is going to explode if I get it wrong. And that’s what holds back most of my friends of my age. It’s because they’re afraid of doing something wrong.

While this open sentiment was present in most younger adults, not all older adults shared it. Instead, some older adults were more reluctant, feeling as though the digital skills they had, if any, were basic. Their hesitancy was because they often compared their digital skills to those of younger generations, which reinforced their perception of lack of skills, expertise, knowledge, and technical know-how. For instance, Benjamin Jones (P31, M, 80) was not as comfortable using digital media because he lacked basic, foundational digital skills.

I don’t have, by any means, all the skills ... I’m not really knowledgeable about it, I’ve taken little courses trying to figure out how to do it ... It takes a while to pick up the skills and kids can just play with it like crazy.

Without basic skills — like typing — already established, older adult East Yorkers found it challenging to use and integrate digital media into their everyday routines and practices. They felt they needed to spend more time learning than those with already established digital skills to become more familiar and comfortable with the ins and outs of digital media. This signals that in a pandemic era, having the ability to transfer digital skills from one sphere of life to others, even if those skills are basic, is instrumental.

2) The application of digital life skills to organize and socialize online

Many respondents reflected on the ways they use digital media to organize and arrange in-person gatherings. For instance, East Yorkers who are active members in social groups such as sports clubs, volunteer organizations, and church groups used digital media, particularly e-mail, to disseminate information, schedule meetings, and share updates on group-related activities. For example, Mary Orbison (P40, W, 67) reported that communication with the group she runs at her local YMCA is strictly e-mail based, which is how the group organizes classes, shares schedules, and communicates updates.

By e-mail and they e-mail me. And they also e-mail schedules to all the members strictly by e-mail.

For the most part, if digital skills are needed, they are often more basic, such as being able to e-mail or phone call rather than video chat or knowing how to use social media. However, with COVID-19 health guidelines, physical distancing has limited group gatherings and events are no longer taking place in-person to the same capacity as pre-pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021; Hanson, 2020). As a result, being able to adapt digital life skills (e.g., socializing via video chat like Zoom) can provide alternative ways of socializing to in-person gatherings. An example is how participant Julie Lee (P99, W, 64) had integrated a variety of digital media to share her Reiki healing. Julie reported that she had e-mailed updates and newsletters to clients and posted schedules of classes on Facebook and LinkedIn. She was also readily available via e-mail, texting, and Facebook Messenger for those who wished to use her services or just to connect. When clients are not available for in-person sessions, she used video calling as a substitute. She also used video calling to stay connected with those at a distance.

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.

As we see with Julie Lee, expanding one’s digital life skills to facilitate more socializing online is a good life skill that can be useful during the pandemic. Doing so requires transferring the digital life skills one has beyond organizing events. Individuals can make use of their digital life skills to extend connectivity and socialization to digital alternatives so people can keep in touch, maintain group relationships, and organize meetings and gatherings while adhering to public health guidelines.

3) The learning of new digital skills for substituting in-person contact

Having expanded their digital skills, East Yorkers expressed how they reaped many benefits provided by the features and affordances of digital communication channels. Building a digital skill set to learn how to use video chat applications like Skype and FaceTime allowed East Yorkers the ability to hear and see their loved ones. As a result, respondents felt better connected — video chat with its sense of mutual presence facilitated more meaningful contact than a text or phone call. For instance, Olga Kurt (P37, W, 66) preferred having conversations via digital channels because she saw texting as a poor substitute for real, meaningful conversations.

I like to hear the person talk and have a real conversation, and to me, if you’re doing it with texting, it’s still not the same as a real conversation.

This was especially true when loved ones were geographically distant. For example, Harry Jones (P42, M, 40) reflected on how learning to use Skype was a major benefit because it provided more copresence than his cellphone could: the ability to connect more frequently with loved ones by seeing and hearing them.
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.

East Yorkers viewed video chatting as supplementary to other forms of interaction, still preferring in-person communication. However, it was the best alternative when being there in-person was not possible often because of distance or limited mobility. This was because these applications, much more so than more traditional channels (i.e., phone calling, e-mailing), helped individuals feel copresence, (i.e., they felt like they were there without physically being there). For example, Imogen Jones (P67, W, 44) says using video chat, like FaceTime and Skype, has allowed her and her children to keep in touch and maintain relationships with relatives overseas with whom in-person contact is limited.

I started to use Skype a little bit more ... because it’s easier for us to communicate with our relatives in Ireland. Like we have, I have three nephews over there and [my] two little kids, and they haven’t met them ... We let the kids Skype each other so that they can see each other and talk and sort of get to know each other a little bit more.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, using platforms like Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp, and Zoom, when in-person contact is severely limited (i.e., social distancing measures, only same house contacts) and sometimes non-existent (i.e., travel bans, geographical barriers), could serve to substitute, not supplement, in-person contact. Without the ability to physically see, hear, and hug loved ones, expanding digital life skills to use video chatting has become the next best thing to feel connected in a time that has been physically isolating.

4) Expanding digital skills to engage in media multiplexity to mobilize social support

During the interviews, we learned that one of the main benefits of using digital media, and a motivating factor to expand one’s digital skill set, was the ability to exchange social support. Across all age groups, East Yorkers discussed the exchange of companionship, emotional aid, large services, while financial aid was rarely exchanged (see also Quan-Haase, et al., 2021). Use of a variety of digital media were key in mobilizing support; however, different digital media provided different affordances that were either beneficial or constraining for exchanging varied types of support. To take these affordances into account, individuals relied on their digital skills to mobilize various types of support.

Companionship: A variety of digital media were used among East Yorkers of all ages to strengthen social relationships by facilitating connectivity with those who are physically distant. Expanding their digital skills to integrate more forms of digital media, such as combining phone calling, e-mail, video chat, and some social media like Facebook, allowed for copresence — the breakdown of geographical barriers — and helped to bridge gaps between in-person visits.

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. (Bethany Cobbler, P25, W, 40)

It’s made it easier to communicate with people that I care about ... To maintain my relationships and my friendships because after a while you don’t talk to people for so long, it’s kind of sometimes awkward to come back in and pick up where you left off. (Rebecca White, P21, W, 30)

For many East Yorkers, media multiplexity — the use of multiple media channels for communication (Haythornthwaite, 2005) — allowed them to be more in touch with their social ties. They are no longer restricted to annual in-person gatherings, but rather, by integrating digital media and actively developing their digital skills, East Yorkers were able to reach out and turn to their ties in more ways than just in-person or via the telephone should they need anything, even if just to chat.

Emotional aid: Exchanging emotional support was important to East Yorkers. Yet not all media were considered equally suited. Respondents often compared media in relation to media richness (Daft and Lengel, 1986): the extent to which a medium transmits social cues that give a sense of copresence. For East Yorkers, rich media such as in-person visits, the telephone, or video chat were valued more than texting and e-mail for exchanging emotional aid. For example, for Pierre Rennie (P84, M, 81), online exchanges of emotional support through social media posts were not as rewarding as speaking to someone on the telephone.

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.

Like Pierre Rennie, most respondents, regardless of age, preferred phone calling and video chatting for exchanging emotional aid because it afforded them the ability to feel more connected to the other person, which was considered a necessity when exchanging emotional support.

Despite the potential of digital media channels as conduits of emotional aid, there was no replacement for in-person encounters. Rather, phone-calling, and other digital media channels, like texting, helped to mobilize support by arranging supportive exchanges in person. For example, An Dung Tran (P15, M, 71) told us of a time when a friend was having some family problems and needed support. They conversed over the telephone, which eventually led to them meeting in-person.
Mobilizing social support: New and transferable digital skills in the era of COVID-19

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.

When in-person exchanges were not possible, East Yorkers saw the benefits associated with phone calling and certain digital media channels because they helped to create stronger, more personable connections. This suggests that media richness intersects with support exchange. In addition, learning to use various digital channels increased respondents’ social accessibility and provided more ways to be there for their social ties, which was particularly valuable in instances when in-person communication was limited or restricted.

Large services: Large services were characteristic of taking place between family members and sometimes close friends because they included bigger favors such as child sitting and caregiving. For these supportive exchanges, East Yorkers used a combination of digital and non-digital communication channels, including phone calling, e-mail, texting, and some social media, such as Facebook Messenger. For example, Maggie Darling (P22, W, 60) detailed a time when she had a medical procedure and some of her loved ones, whom she would first turn to for support were not available, so she was able to phone one of her children to ask for support. Signaling that support was needed was critical for Maggie who may have otherwise been left on her own during a time of need.

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. My brother was working on a cruise ship at the time, so he wasn’t here, and my boyfriend had to go ... he had a business trip lined up where he had to go for work and he couldn’t get out of it, so 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.

For larger services like these, while support was often organized to take place in-person, digital media was critical to mobilizing support by allowing respondents the ability to signal support was needed. Digital media were a key tool in pervasive awareness (Lu and Hampton, 2017; Wellman, et al., 2003), where East Yorkers could use these media to notify that support was needed and identify what their ties’ needs were. As well, digital media allowed for greater accessibility and reachability for the purpose of exchanging support.

Technical support: Laced throughout our discussions with respondents, particularly expressed by older adults, was how family members offered technical support to help them expand their digital skills to reap the affordances associated with being active digital users. For instance, Duncan Robertson (P33, M, 83) said that after a push from his grandson, he now saw the benefits associated with digital media use and was working toward becoming more digitally skilled.

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.

By exchanging technical support, it helped ease older adults’ fears around newer forms of digital media. These East Yorkers, for the most part, were encouraged and motivated; they actively worked toward strengthening their own digital abilities because they recognized that using digital media allowed them to exchange support in a variety of forms, which may have otherwise been limited.

A note on life course differences: Among East Yorkers, younger adults were equal in the amounts of companionship and emotional aid they gave and received. When exchanging this support, these younger adults engaged in more media multiplexity (i.e., integrated more forms of digital media into their communication routines) and used these digital channels to exchange support less reluctantly than middle-aged and older adults. Younger adults viewed digital media as a key means to mobilize the exchange of support without hesitation, often because they grew up using digital media and they already had the skills to seamlessly integrate a variety of digital channels.

Like younger adults, middle-aged adults were often split, giving and receiving nearly equal amounts of companionship. Where they stood out, however, was among the 51–64-year-old respondents who gave more emotional aid than they had received, which was attributed to their range of responsibilities across varying types of social ties (i.e., children, parents, workmates). Unlike younger adults, middle-aged East Yorkers were not as keen to exchange support digitally, despite actively using multiple forms of digital media. They preferred in-person contact and phone calling for exchanging support but were willing to turn to digital media when in-person exchanges were not possible. Middle-aged East Yorkers primarily relied on digital media such as e-mailing and some texting with others learning to use and integrating video chat and social media.

Older adults gave more support than they often received. For them, they gave support with the expectation that it may be returned — support was viewed as reciprocal. However, they differed in how support was mobilized. Older adult East Yorkers preferred in-person exchanges. Some failed to see how digital media could ever substitute in-person exchanges of support, viewing digital media as unable to maintain a personable connection that was key for support. But not all shared in this sentiment. Rather, while they preferred in-person exchanges, they saw the benefits of using digital media. For most, their digital skills were basic, and it took them more time to learn and integrate a variety of digital media. Nevertheless, they were actively working to become comfortable with digital channels like texting, e-mail, video chatting, and some social media, with some relying on their social ties to provide technical support. Older adults recognized how digital media could be used to exchange support and were excited to reap the benefits they provided them, particularly when in-person exchanges were few and far between.

Discussion and conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we connect — people from around the world have had their lives disrupted to comply with lockdown
restrictions such as physical distancing and stay-at-home orders. There has been also a rise in COVID-19 related stress, anxiety, and feelings of uncertainty (Li, et al., 2021). To combat these negative feelings and cope with limited in-person contact, people have had to adapt and find new ways of connecting with their social ties (Riberio, 2020). People are relying increasingly on digital media to foster connectivity, bring communities together, and mobilize support (Chamberlain, 2020). This makes expanding one’s digital life skills essential. Rather than being limited to one communication channel, like the telephone, it is beneficial for people to engage in media multiplexity (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 1998; Haythornthwaite, 2002). Integrating more digital channels during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, could help to increase the frequency and richness of communication with ones social ties (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 1998). We find that different digital media provide different types of social support, creating benefits for individuals who have media multiplexity with their social ties. This may be particularly essential for older adults who are likely to have experienced a reduction of important social ties as a result of life transitions associated with aging or loss of a loved one (Wrzus, et al., 2013). While East York respondents across all age groups preferred in-person contact over digital media for the exchange of support, they perceived digital media as a good substitute when in-person contact was not available because of barriers such as geographic distance or mobility. This willingness for substitution may also apply in cases of prolonged periods of social isolation, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. We found one exception: for East Yorkers exchanging emotional aid was critical but only possible in-person because of the need for copresence, empathy, and deep conversation.

What is challenging is that not all individuals have the same level of digital skill to be able to integrate digital media. This finding follows an extensive body of literature on the second-level digital divide by which digital skills are found to be unequally distributed (Hargittai, 2002), with those who are younger and socioeconomically privileged having higher skill levels (e.g., van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014; 2011). But even when looking at older adults, there is much heterogeneity in skill level (Hargittai and Dobransky, 2017). In our research, we found that those who have established digital skill sets, or who were trying to become more digitally adept, transferred these skills to other spheres of their lives, such as utilizing digital technologies for arranging in-person meetings and facilitating connectivity with loved ones who were non-local. Thus, the transferability of their digital skills would make it easier to adapt to the pandemic and perhaps cause less of a disruption to their lives and the maintenance of their social networks. By integrating and using the skills they had, these individuals could buffer the negative effects of the pandemic by integrating and using digital media for virtual meetings, strengthening their social relationships, obtaining mutual types of support, and participating in social activities (Marzouki, et al., 2021).

For those who were less experienced with digital media, owing to limited, or no digital skills, there was a much greater learning curve associated with acquiring new digital skills, or expanding upon existing ones. For them, having the resources to help build their digital skills was a necessity. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic getting technical support from family and friends was complicated because of public health regulations. Phone calls to provide instruction is one option, and technical support is often perceived as real social support by recipients, so they benefit from receiving both technical help, and companionship (Quan-Haase, et al., 2017; Micheli, et al., 2020). On a larger scale, to combat isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, programs like Seniors Can Connect! have been implemented, and their aim is to equip older adults with digital devices and connect them with mentors to learn digital skills to feel more comfortable integrating digital media within their lives (HelpAgeCanada, 2021). Having the resources available for those in need is a way to provide various types of technological and social support for those who may not have loved ones readily available to offer these tools and/or skills. What is critical, then, is how expanding one’s digital skills could empower individuals to navigate the pandemic to reap that support that would have otherwise been impacted by physical distancing and stay-at-home orders.

Digital media is a key and alternative way for individuals to mobilize a variety of types of social support in times of crisis. What is less known is how different types of ties are activated to provide different types of support (Wellman and Wortley, 1990; 1989). Research on social support exchange during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that there are variations. For example, a study on social support during the pandemic in China found that older adults reported declining social support from non-kin relations, whereas familial support remained constant (Li, et al., 2021). In another study of Jordanians and the effects of an imposed curfew to combat COVID-19, Naser, et al. (2021) found stronger connectedness among close family members who provided support to cope with the pandemic. We suggest future research further investigate how different types of ties are providing and giving different types of support and how digital media is being used across types of ties to exchange support. Additionally, given that East Yorkers of all age groups showed a preference for in-person exchanges of support, future research can examine if the support exchanged via digital media during the COVID-19 pandemic was perceived as real support. We pose this line of inquiry knowing that for some East Yorkers, particularly seniors, digital media was not a preferred substitute for exchanging support such as emotional aid and companionship. Additionally, lacking the digital skills necessary to mobilize support via digital media makes reaping the benefits more difficult.

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Notes

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