

## The Author



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## Technology and its role in building social connections among older adults: A community-academic research partnership

Social isolation and loneliness among older adults have long been recognized as having a negative impact on their health and well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic brought these issues to the fore as in-person socializing was severely restricted. Before the pandemic, older adults across Ontario participated in person in social connection and physical well-being programs offered by organizations serving older adults. For many, attendance at these programs was their primary social contact with friends with whom they had developed, over time, trusted, deep connections. Public space closures disrupted traditional activities precipitating fear, anxiety, and depression.

Digital technologies rose to prominence as a way to fill the gap. This surge in the use of digital technologies, however, shone a light on the speed with which both individuals and organizations had to pivot to new ways of connecting if older adults were to remain engaged, informed, active, and mentally and physically healthy. It also shone a light on how structural inequities, including immigrant status, race, income, education, disability, rural versus urban residence, and relationship status, restrict digital access and use and result in a widespread lack of digital literacy among some older adults. There is also the fact that most digital devices are not older adult friendly with touch screens difficult to use and user interfaces confusing. A cautionary note is necessary here. The concept of a “grey divide” belies the complexity of access and use with age being one intersecting variable. Internalized ageism and gradations in age with younger “seniors” more likely to be tech savvy than older “seniors” is often overlooked.

Recognizing the need to pivot to online program delivery and cognizant of the uneven access to and use of information and communication technologies among older adults, Noor Din, founder and CEO of Human Endeavour (HE), an organization serving the needs of older adults in the Greater Toronto Area, initiated the Technology, Access, and Support for Seniors (TASS) project in May 2020. Along with his community partners, he obtained grants from the United Way of Greater Toronto, the Allan Slaight Fund York Region, and the governments of Canada and Ontario to purchase over 400 easy-to-use, remote-access, integrated android tablets preloaded with apps, data, and security, which were distributed free to vulnerable older adults. In addition, he provided support and training through a multilingual helpline and instruction booklet. Tablets were also adapted to meet the needs of older adults who were blind or deaf.

In January 2021, HE asked York University’s Department of Sociology to examine the benefits older adults derived from participating in the TASS program, in a small pilot project. This allowed the research team to test the survey and interview instruments. Following the presentation of findings in February 2021, the partners decided to expand the research study to include a larger sample of older adults and organizations. Its main purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of the TASS project in bridging the digital divide for a broad range of older adults who had participated in the project. Specifically, our objective was to evaluate the economic, social, and health and well-being outcomes for 105 older adults between the ages of 80 and 97, 85% of whom were female and 48% of whom lived alone. We used a survey and in-depth interviews conducted by phone/Zoom. Feedback was also obtained from managers of 11 organizations participating in TASS. Noteworthy among the findings was the lack of connectivity among older adults living in rural or remote areas who expressed frustration with how frequent

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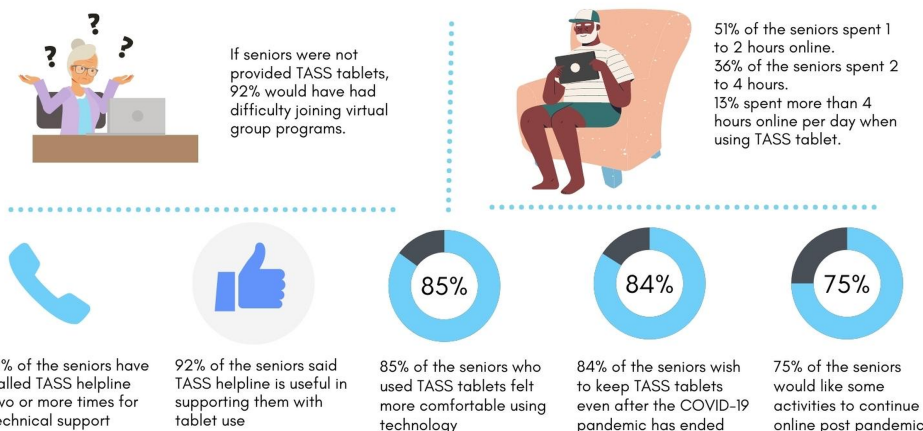


gaps in internet service impacted their use of the tablets. It is time, perhaps, to consider both telephone and internet access a basic human right.

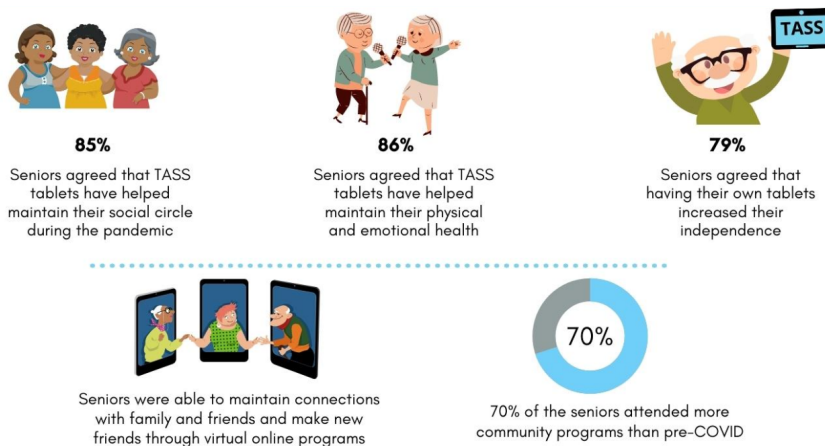
The data obtained indicated that TASS lessened material barriers, improved digital literacy, and enabled strong social connections mediated through technology. Isolation and loneliness were reduced, well-being was maintained, even enhanced, and our understanding of social connections, community, and belonging shifted to include the virtual. Results also identified the need for further research and development. Currently, over 600 tablets have been distributed, and HE's research and development team are in the scale-up phase. They have developed and are testing TASS technology for use by older adults with early Alzheimer's and other dementias.

TASS represented an innovative approach to program delivery during COVID-19, with the lack of access to technology emerging as a social determinant of health. It played a crucial role in improving seniors' quality of life. It also marked a change, post-COVID-19, in how organizations serving older adults provide programming, the skills their staff need to have, and the resources organizations need to acquire to offer hybrid programs in the coming decades. If there is a silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is our increased awareness that, going forward, technology will play an expanded role in ensuring the health and well-being of older adults and the effectiveness of the sector serving an aging population.

### TASS impact on digital literacy



### TASS impact on social connections, physical and emotional health



Noor Din and Ben Zhang graphics