

Staying connected

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THE COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented impacts on individual lives, communities, and countries.

It has constrained people's movements and interactions due to travel restrictions, border closures and lockdowns.

As the global health crisis continues to put a strain on everyday lives, social interactions have been amplified through digital connectivity.

I have been conducting a study on how elderly people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds use mobile communication technologies to navigate the pandemic.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1.38 million of the 3.67 million people aged 65 and over living in Australia in 2019 were born overseas.

The study involved remote interviews from August to October with elderly CALD people born in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Macedonia, Sri Lanka, Syria, and India.

At the time, the majority of participants lived with family members and shared their experiences of using a smartphone, social media, and other online channels to cope with restrained movement during the pandemic.

All participants owned a



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smartphone and had access to the internet.

The majority were using Facebook and messaging applications before the pandemic. Facebook served as a tool ageing migrants used to access homeland news, stay updated with the lives of their

family and exchange information with social networks.

Messaging apps were an intimate space for exchanging random messages in a family group chat or sharing information among friends.

Digital connectivity has allowed the ageing migrants to

remain connected to family, friends and community within and outside Australia.

But when the pandemic and lockdowns happened, online interactions became more frequent as a way to manage anxiety and loneliness.

Facebook and messaging

apps were used to express care in the form of personalised messages, religious quotes, funny memes and so forth.

Videoconferencing tool Zoom was also used widely.

A range of activities were performed online.

On Zoom, elderly CALD

people participated in Zumba classes, line dance sessions, breathing exercises, group prayers, and family parties.

These digital practices have been fundamental in providing much-needed connection and facilitating emotional support during uncertain times.

But they came with a spectrum of challenges.

Some participants expressed frustration with slow internet while videoconferencing with family and friends.

Gaps in knowledge or difficulties engaging in videoconferencing also left some participants frustrated and often opting to withdraw from online interactions.

Some participants struggled to manage tech issues because they had to endure long wait times for phone assistance.

Mobile devices have proven their significant role as a lifeline among elderly CALD people during turbulent times.

They have provided an alternative space to sustain connections during lockdown.

However maintaining connections has also been challenging as a result of various barriers in communication.

This highlights how moving interactions into digital spaces to manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed digital inequalities.

As such, there is a need to further address digital inclusion in an ageing multicultural Australian society.