

Seniors emerge from COVID-19 pandemic with more confidence; perceived risk of infection down from 40% to 27% at the end of Phase 2

SMU's Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA) examines the importance of social integration on the well-being of older adults in Singapore during a pandemic, through its research brief series, "Staying Connected".

Singapore, 21 December 2020 (Monday) – Older adults refer to those aged 55 to 75, a demographic in Singapore that is expanding exponentially. The Singapore Management University (SMU)'s Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA) published a series of research briefs which examine the importance of social integration for well-being among older adults across several contexts, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of their political participation, and finally in terms of their social networks.

The research series leverage data collected from the Singapore Life Panel (SLP), a population representative monthly survey with a monthly response rate of about 7,500 respondents, tracking the lives of Singaporeans aged 55 to 75. The SLP is ongoing and has been running since July 2015. Several modules specifically examining the perceptions and attitudes held towards COVID-19 were fielded from April 2020 to better understand how older Singaporeans were responding to the pandemic.

In addition, a module specifically examining respondents' views on GE2020 was fielded in August 2020. Questions on social networks were fielded in August 2020 to better understand the social networks of panel respondents and its relation to their well-being.

Singaporeans have lived through the COVID-19 pandemic for close to a year. As the nation prepares to ease into the third phase of COVID-19 restrictions, it is vital to examine how older Singaporeans have responded to changes in their daily activities since the onset of COVID-19 and its accompanying restrictions, and to identify vulnerable groups which have been slower to recover. A third of respondents experienced financial difficulties arising from the pandemic, with the most common feedback being a need to lower one's standard of living. For older Singaporeans who were not as digitally literate, their reliance on traditional forms of communication led them to perceive the risks associated with COVID-19 to be higher.

According to Professor Paulin Straughan, Director, ROSA, "The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the fear and anxiety of individuals towards health, livelihoods and how we go about our daily activities. As we move forward into phase 3 of Singapore's recovery, we must do all that we can to reassure older adults and not leave them behind in our transition to a new normal. This can be achieved through promoting the well-being of our seniors and sustaining their meaningful engagement in the community."

Key findings of research titled “Coping in the time of COVID-19: Transitioning from the onset of COVID-19, the ‘Circuit Breaker’, Phase 1, and Phase 2.”

1. *Perceptions towards COVID-19*

Respondents were less fearful of the risks associated with COVID-19 at the end of the year compared to earlier months. Respondents’ perceived infection and mortality risks decreased from 40.4% and 38.9% respectively, in April, to 27.3% and 29.2% respectively in November.

Those with a lower education, who only utilise traditional forms of communication (i.e. phone calls, SMS and email), older age groups and women perceived the risks associated with COVID-19 to be higher.

Fear of COVID-19 has impacted the well-being of older Singaporeans, those who perceived the COVID-19 infection and mortality risks to be higher found it more difficult to cope with their daily activities, maintain a positive mind-set and were less satisfied with life.

2. *COVID-19’s Impact on Jobs and Finances*

The unemployment rate among older Singaporeans improved from to 7.86% in June to 2020 to 6.14% November 2020. However, this remains to be higher than November 2019’s unemployment rate at 5.29%.

A third (33.9%) of respondents experienced financial difficulties due to COVID-19. Most common were the need to lower one’s standard of living, and being forced to use one’s savings or liquidate one’s investments, with 25.17% and 16.98% of respondents doing so respectively.

3. *Communications Technology Usage*

Generally, older Singaporeans who were able to utilize non-traditional forms of communication were better able to keep in touch with their friends, felt less socially isolated and more satisfied with their social life.

However, the use of the various forms of communication was found to be associated with age and education, with older age groups and those with lower levels education being less likely to adopt non-traditional forms of communication.

4. *Social Engagements*

During the circuit breaker, many seniors drastically reduced the frequency at which they participated in various social activities. Since the end of the Circuit Breaker, most seniors have gradually resumed their social activities and have since returned to their pre-COVID-19 routines in November.

Report recommendations

Survey findings suggest that older Singaporeans have been adjusting to living life amidst a pandemic and their well-being has been improving since the end of the circuit breaker.

However, the older groups, the less educated, those who rely on traditional forms of communication and those who do not keep informed on COVID-19 through various sources of information have been slower to adapt. Thus, to safeguard the well-being of older Singaporeans, specifically that of the former groups, the following is recommended:

1. Setting up grassroots initiative to keep older Singaporeans invested and informed on the latest COVID-19 developments. Such initiatives can target less technologically savvy older adults in community spaces to keep them updated on information on COVID-19
2. Create new channels to disseminate up-to-date information on COVID-19 which would be accessible to all Singaporeans regardless of digital literacy (e.g. Via SMS and digital display panels at HDB estates)
3. Empower seniors with the digital skills to keep informed themselves

Key findings of research titled “Voter efficacy, political engagement, and well-being among older adults in GE2020”

1. *Voter efficacy and political engagement*
A large majority of respondents (85.21%) agreed (slightly agreed, moderately agreed, or strongly agreed) that by voting they would be able to elect a politician or political party whose views they shared, and 89.44% of respondents agreed that their vote made a difference in GE2020
2. *Political Participation*
45.80% of respondents reported having not listened to or interacted with representatives from any political party either online or in person throughout the election, while a majority (81.74%) had done so for 3 parties or less, despite there being a total of 11 political parties contesting for the GE2020

Key findings of research titled “Glimpse into the Social Capital of Seniors Based on the Singapore Life Panel”

1. *Perceived Social Support*
Older age groups (age 65-69 and 70-74) reported higher perceived frequency of social support than the younger age groups (age 55-59 and 60-64), in terms of having someone to talk to, count on in a time of need, and receive love and affection from.

The full series of research briefs can be downloaded [here](#).

The executive summaries can be downloaded [here](#).

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About the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA)

ROSA is a multidisciplinary research centre based in SMU. It was established 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.

About Singapore Management University

Established in 2000, Singapore Management University (SMU) is recognised for its disciplinary and multi-disciplinary research that address issues of global relevance, impacting business, government and society. Its distinctive education, incorporating innovative experiential learning, aims to nurture global citizens, entrepreneurs and change agents. With more than 11,000 students, SMU offers bachelors, masters and PhD degree programmes in Accountancy, Business, Economics, Information Systems and Computer Science, Law and Social Sciences, and executive development and continuing education programmes. Through its city campus, SMU focuses on making meaningful impact on Singapore and beyond through its partnerships with industry, policy makers and academic institutions. www.smu.edu.sg

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