Navigating a Pandemic

Australian practices and perspectives on information, services and technologies during the COVID-19 crisis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a monumental global disruption. It has required people to adopt new behaviours as circumstances change and adapt to government-enacted measures. Australians have experienced more restrictive pandemic-related mandates than many other countries, as demonstrated by Melbourne becoming the most locked-down city in the world. In addition to limiting mobility, restrictions have prompted individuals, families and communities to develop new daily routines in public and at home.

Members of the ANU Justice and Technoscience Lab (JusTech), which is based within the School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet), interviewed 40 Australian residents in 2020 and 2021 to better understand how they have managed the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's objective was to acquire a more detailed understanding of how people went about trying to obtain critical support during a large-scale health crisis and how they perceived and interpreted the information and resources they obtained. Interviews explored how participants navigated systems in the pursuit of information, resources and services and how they adapted their everyday activities as public health and regulatory measures changed.

This report presents key findings from interviews to provide a comprehensive overview of how participants have coped during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they have sought out resources during periods of disruption, isolation and quarantine. It also captures how practices and strategies varied among individuals and groups. Findings offer insights that may enhance service provision and systems design decisions to better support Australian residents as they seek information and services.

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Australian government measures have responded to health risks by instituting formal orders that limit activities in affected areas. Mandates have restricted mobility, including confining people to their homes, for extended periods of time. For instance, in Victoria, Melbourne residents underwent 15 weeks of lockdown because of escalating infection numbers and deaths. Restrictions included nightly curfews, a five-kilometre travel radius, permits for work and childcare, remote schooling, banned home gatherings, closed retail and hospitality venues, and indoor and outdoor mask requirements, with a limited number of permitted reasons for leaving home.

While Victorian restrictions received attention for being stringent, other states and municipalities employed preventative approaches and methods. Regulatory responses engendered a diversity of lived experiences during the pandemic, presenting a unique opportunity to understand how people navigated changing circumstances.

Acknowledging early research that illustrates tensions between individual needs and collective problem solving intensify during crises (Møller & Bjørn, 2011; Starbird & Palen, 2011), the Justice and Technoscience Lab (JusTech) in the School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet) at the Australian National University (ANU) undertook an exploratory qualitative study to understand how diverse groups of Australians adapted their everyday activities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic response measures.

The study's objective is to provide an in-depth understanding of the navigation practices that people have enacted during periods of disruption, isolation and quarantine. The term 'navigation practices' denotes what people have done to access information, resources and COVID-19-related services as they adapt to changing circumstances and pandemic response measures, including their everyday family, social, and work activities (Gui et al., 2018).

This study proposed three key questions:

1. What sociotechnical navigation practices are people using to acquire information, resources and services during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How are people adapting to changes in everyday life amidst the pandemic and measures enacted to address it?

3. What opportunities exist to assist individuals' navigation during the COVID-19 pandemic and potential future crises?

Data was collected through forty interviews with a range of people living in Australia. This report summarises the results, analysis and conclusions from those interviews, which highlight that:

1. With some exceptions, participants expressed largely positive attitudes regarding the accessibility of COVID-19-related information, services and technologies, and in their capacity to adapt to and navigate new procedures resulting from pandemic responses, even in situations where they were experiencing hardships.

2. Views of governing approaches to the pandemic, particularly around lockdown messaging and related

regulatory measures, were more complex. Perspectives on experiences varied by location, though they were mediated by dynamics at home, financial situations and the extent to which participants followed and related to developments beyond Australia.

3. Participants frequently sought and accessed information on the virus, infection rates and government restrictions, finding information readily available overall. Participants tried to weed out misinformation by sourcing information from experts, government authorities and trusted news sources. However, many participants mentioned that some specific information on lockdown restrictions could be vague and difficult to keep up with. They also noted awareness of social media misinformation and disinformation and attempted to avoid it.

4. Participants expressed mostly positive feelings about government services offered during the pandemic, including JobKeeper and Jobseeker, as well as about the accessibility of telehealth services and information provided via public briefings. Others mentioned ease of access in terms of withdrawing funds from superannuation.

5. Most participants acknowledged an increase in technological dependency, often using it as a substitute when out-of-home activities and services were restricted. Participants rarely, however, reflected critically on the role that technology played during their pandemic experiences. Video conferencing tools, particularly Zoom, was a notable exception; it was a significant topic of discussion, even though participants noted increased use of delivery service apps and at-home digital entertainment.

6. 'New normals' developed when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted routines at work and in the home, particularly around cleanliness and risk management in public areas. Although participants identified new domestic routines once lockdown restrictions were in place, they largely identified these routines as disruptions or poor substitutes for pre-pandemic activities, highlighting difficulties in achieving and maintaining any sense of normalcy when confined at home.

7. Participants often drew on experiences outside of their own, reflecting on their knowledge about the actions, behaviours and ordeals of others to inform their own attitudes, understandings and conclusions on the impacts of the pandemic and local government strategies.

This report provides details of these observations, shedding light on participants' navigation practices and perspectives. The consequent goal of this study is to compare findings as part of a cross-country collaboration with a US-based research team led by A/Professor Kathleen Pine (Arizona State University). A core aim of the partnership is to leverage insights from the data to enhance systems design decisions so that they better support participants seeking information and resources (e.g. Pine et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory qualitative study involved data collection on how different groups of Australians navigate and adapt their everyday activities amidst COVID-19 pandemic response measures. Interviews were selected as the best data collection method for understanding personal practices, strategies and attitudes in managing daily activities during the pandemic. Forty participants were interviewed via Zoom or telephone, depending on their preference. All interviews were semi-structured, conducted in English, and each one lasted between 45-90 minutes. The study took place from October 2020 through 2021.

The research team carried out semi-structured interviews, which followed an interview guide that consisted of standard questions. They also allowed pursuing branching lines of inquiry that may arise throughout the interview process (Young et al., 2018). Members of the study team asked participants about their use of and perspectives on pandemic-related information, services and technologies, as well as general changes in their day-to-day lives and how they have adapted.

Members of the study team recruited participants with the assistance of academic, professional and public health networks, including through social media channels, participant referrals and exposure on the RegNet website. To capture as diverse experiences as possible, the study sampled a range of adults from 18 to 80 across Australia who navigated containment and/or illness prevention efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figures 1-3, p. 8).

While the ages of participants reflect a wide range, it is worth noting that this study primarily captured data from Australians living in urban areas, with only three participants living in regional Australia.

Participants were notified before the interview that they could decline to answer any questions, refuse to be audio-recorded or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were de-identified during transcription, with any identifying information coded and stored separately. All transcripts were analysed using NVivo with interpretation agreed upon through regular meetings and discussion amongst the research team.

Ages

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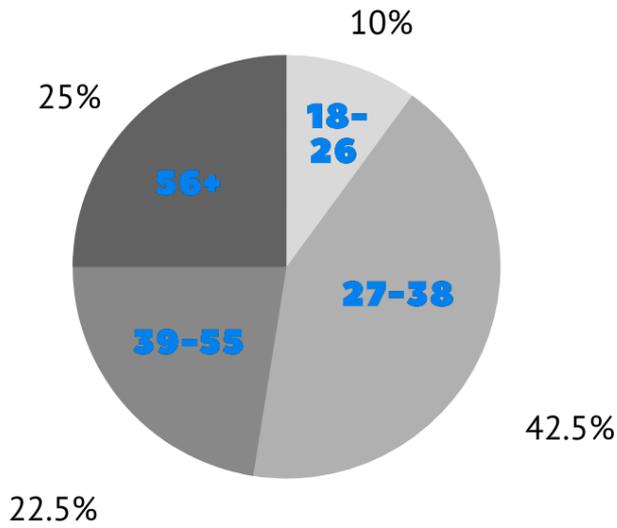
18-26

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42.5%

22.5%

Figure 1

Gender

30%

MEN

WOMEN

70%

Figure 2

Location

7.5%

7.5%

QLD

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ACT

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Figure 3

DEMOGRAPHICS
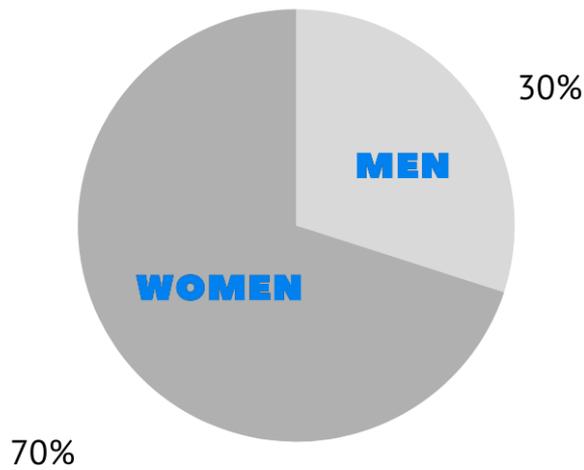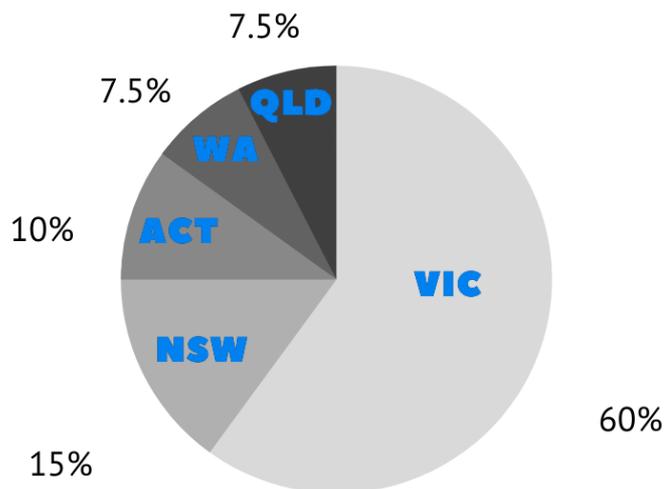
INTERVIEW DATA

The study was motivated by the need to understand Australian experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in relation to how participants used and leveraged resources, including sources of information, services and technologies, for support. The interviews focused on the following key areas:

Navigating Information

One area of focus was how Australian residents were accessing and using information on the COVID-19 pandemic, including in relation to preventative measures and government mandates. Participants were asked to describe what and how information on the pandemic was sourced, to recount when they heard of the virus and when (and if) they developed concerns about it and to reflect on any challenges that they encountered in acquiring information.

During the initial periods of the pandemic, participants relied on the media channels they previously held in high regard, with news channels ABC, 7News, 9News and BBC most often cited. These channels were accessed via social media, directly through their websites or, less frequently, by television. Participants also mentioned listening to COVID-19-specific content through podcasts like Coronacast, BBC News and The Quicky. During the height of the pandemic, government sources became the primary source of information, largely influenced by the desire to track case numbers and to keep up to date on restrictions.

Participants' concerns about the virus originated from a variety of sources. Many participants identified secondary reports on pandemic developments overseas (e.g. in Wuhan, Europe or the United States) as prompting their concerns about the virus. Eight participants, however, attributed their concerns to circumstances in Australia — for example, border closures, viral transmission on cruise ships or new restrictions in workplaces and schools. Participants also cited discussions with family, friends or work colleagues as heightening their awareness or influencing their unease regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, in terms of developing an awareness of the virus, participants stated:

> … maybe at the beginning of March we start[ed to] worry about it because Japan is locked down. China is in lockdown. All the close countries – close to Taiwan – is in lockdown so people start to worry about that and the government closed the border and they realised how serious it is and they start to worry about that at the time.

> … the cruise ships was probably one of the main things that became a bit of a worry… the cruise ship that had people with COVID cases and they came off the wharf in Sydney and they just let them off into Sydney and then it sort of created a bit of a worry. It was on the news all the time.

Only one participant noted they had little to no concern about the virus, even as case numbers rose. Another participant felt the media sensationalised early stages of the pandemic, which heightened their suspicion of its actual severity.

Although most participants utilised social media, particularly Facebook, to access specific sources, five of them noted that their use of social media platforms decreased, citing that they believed misinformation on the virus was more widespread on those platforms or because social media increased their anxiety:

> Then there started to be a lot of panic on Facebook and social media… Just about conspiracy theories about how it started, about if it was actually a lab in China or [if] it was through the markets… Then there was conspiracy theories about it was not true and it's not real. So yeah, there was a lot of different very conflicting information out there, and so I started to focus on more New South Wales Health being one main area where I would find my information.

> I feel like a lot of the sources on Facebook tend to be quite dramatic and not very reputable.

> I wouldn't want to call it [social media] reliable, but I also wouldn't want to call it unreliable. I kind of took everything I saw on social media with a grain of salt.

> I've closed Facebook. For me it's a bit of protection mentally. I found that I was upping my news intake.

Despite these observations, participants often expressed high confidence in their own information-seeking capabilities, including their capacity to weed out misinformation. When asked how they were able to discern good information from bad information, participants noted they either sought out accredited sources, including health experts, or drew on 'common sense' or their own experience.

> I didn't really categorise the information I was reading as good or bad… I kind of just took it with a grain of salt and educated myself to know that there were different

perspectives out that and then the research behind it. I guess most of the information that I did read had research behind it… if it's somebody speaking, like [Dr Anthony] Fauci from America, you know that he's I guess, a legit resource cause he's the epidemiologist from the White House…

> … if you can't trust the government, we're all screwed really. And common sense, and not tapping into the hype and the hysteria of it.

> I guess some of it was common sense stuff: like yes, wearing a mask is helpful, and even if it's not, it's not going to hurt anybody… But I guess when I saw things that were coming from government sources, or doctors, or things like that, I was definitely taking that stuff more seriously than just Joe Blow down the street telling me what to do in a pandemic.

Most participants expressed positive views around the availability and ease of access to information related to the virus and its impact. A few participants, however, expressed that some information about pandemic-related mobility restrictions was unclear or hard to find. This was specifically identified by Victorian residents who, at the time of interviews, were navigating the early stages of the lockdowns and looking for details on restrictions.

> When it came down to restrictions and some of the rules and some of the - what you can and what you can't do - I thought it was quite difficult to get hold of really quite specific information. There was a lot of - the general information was fine, but when - drilling down to can I do this, can I do that, or what do I need to do that? For example, was someone allowed to look after my daughter? Was caregiving allowed at some point during level four?

> So, it was quite difficult in the beginning to find an actual set guide to the lockdown. It was more recommendations I found. I guess I really like explicit instruction. You actively had to seek it out to begin

with. Whereas come the second lockdown and the case spike it was a lot easier to access. It was everywhere.

I think the messaging has been somewhat unclear at times, and they chop and change the plan and the requirements. And I think there was multiple times that I don't think people really understood what the restrictions were and why.

One participant, although describing the state government's messaging as "excellent", conveyed that they felt there was too much information, which complicated their attempts to find what was relevant.

As reporting and communication channels on the COVID-19 pandemic matured and participants identified sources they trusted, they noted adopting more passive information-seeking routines compared to their earlier attempts to actively find information and carry out research to assess its validity. Participants came to rely on various trusted sources to deliver information (e.g. app or social media notifications) or through scheduled updates (e.g. press conferences).

No, I'm so lazy… usually, he [the trusted source] gets the main five points summarised in the Facebook posts. So yeah, I wait for the Facebook posts.

We used to tune into the major press conferences. We still do, we do it on the Sunday. But more watching it through YouTube live. And the DHHS website that gives you the roadmap for instance and what the actual rules are. A couple of days after the press conference, we checked that.

The press conferences, I was - probably at the start, the government website and the press

conferences, right at the start of the pandemic probably wasn't - maybe once or twice a week. But I found that when we were looking at - when the government was looking more so at the restrictions and that social restrictions [were] in place - that's when I started listening to the press conferences a little bit more.

I probably did get my sources of news from those conferences. I was one of those people that watched it every day. That sort of – that didn't necessarily give me a sense of normalcy, but sort of a sense of control, a sense of consistency in this time of chaos and I think that was what the government was trying to convey to Victorians.

Perspectives of government messaging and communication performance were mixed. Though more than half of participants appreciated the constancy and directness of state government messaging, a few participants expressed views that state messaging was overly negative or 'paternalistic':

I thought it was quite… robotic and mechanical, so, I mean, we never once heard about how to look after ourselves… it was more so about a targeted messaging, killing the virus and controlling the virus and, you know, honing in on the people who are sick, and I just don't feel like it was very positive.

The state level, the line has been quite paternalistic. There was a lot of blame put on the people when the government really were the people who put us into the predicament that we found ourselves in for the second wave. The hotel quarantining, the messaging straight after that wasn't, "We did this, we're sorry"; it was, "You need to do this, people are too complacent", or, "It's your fault", or blah-blah-blah, when really they messed up.

I found the government's messaging to be wildly arbitrary and very hypocritical in its application. For example, you know,

events were allowed to happen like, the fish markets in Sydney, which is incredibly dense, yet anything with a dance floor of like a tenth of the size wasn't allowed to happen. I found that very … yeah arbitrary and unfair to certain industries.

Criticisms of state messaging focussed on the behaviour, tone and perceived value judgments communicated by the messenger or as interpreted within the message. Many participants did convey neutral or positive attitudes alongside a recognition and appreciation of the scale and novelty of the pandemic, acknowledging the increased strain it put on authorities:

> There's been a lot of backlash. I felt very sorry for [Victorian premier] Dan Andrews, certainly some of the stuff that people have been saying about him. He didn't want this pandemic as much as anyone else… All I know is that it would be a hard job, that job that he's doing and trying to keep all of Victoria safe and happy. You can't do it. Not everyone is going to be happy.

> I think they're doing good, because there might be some complaints over - but this is a first for everyone, and at least they're doing something about it. They want to be responsible about it. So I think what they're doing is good enough. I don't have better solutions, so I think what they're doing is good.

Those with more positive attitudes addressed outcomes of the lockdowns as informing their views on governments' messaging and approaches. For example:

> Look, I tried not to take part with his team or with the opposition, because being in that position is really hard. I think what they did was okay compared with things they are doing all around the world, and we can see the results now. We are almost free of infection in Australia.

This perspective contrasts with sentiments about the Commonwealth Government's communication and response. Ten per cent of participants stated they did not know of or follow federal communication while more than one third of the sample size expressed highly negative opinions about the federal government:

> I personally think it's been pretty shambolic, to be honest. I think that the state governments are by and large doing the heavy lifting and I think that the federal government is trying to get in their way, more than helping them. I see a lot of pressure from the federal government to stop it, open things back up… I think what they're doing in Victoria has worked incredibly well, and I think that had they not done that and they had a listen to what the federal government was telling them to do, we would be in a much worse position than we are… I think the priorities are different, and I think that the federal government is too concerned with the economy and not concerned enough with the population.

> But the federal level I think was disgraceful. Victorians were struggling, battling, and the last thing you needed was the constant undermining, second guessing and sniping that took place from the Prime Minister and the Treasurer, and really the Health Minister.

> Oh, they have been trying to put everyone against the state government. So I don't support that because that's like – the way that Australia has been saved from going to a bigger crisis is by what the state governments have been doing. And having the federal government saying that that's not good is like – I don't know what they want.

Over the course of the pandemic, participants shifted their information-seeking practices towards receiving continuous details on the virus and related directives. While they sought information from previously trusted media sources, they also looked for new

sources that provided regular and specific updates on COVID-19 pandemic outside of those platforms. They included pandemic-specific podcasts, government press conferences, science and academic experts, foreign media sources and mobile applications.

Navigating information became routinised as participants identified trusted sources and platforms. During periods of lockdown, their information-seeking practices stabilised, with participants noting that they reduced tracking information on case numbers, mobility restrictions and mandates. The way that governments communicated information was polarising, however, with many participants scrutinising them even while noting government sources as the most reliable and important for information, especially in Victoria. Nonetheless, they conveyed sentiments that demonstrated trust in this expertise and high levels of reliance on their messaging.

Figure 4

Navigating Services

For the most part, participants responded positively to services and support specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, many interviewees characterised government subsidy support programs, such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker or early superannuation access, as critical for those who used them.

> But, yeah, I mean I don't know who came up with the idea of JobKeeper and doubling JobSeeker, it certainly wasn't out of Scott Morrison's office. It probably came out of the upper echelons of Treasury, and they all deserve a medal for it, because that's been remarkably effective policy.

> So I was expecting to be working immediately and working all year, and I didn't. I had three or four months with no work. My accountant organised JobKeeper for me, which went for a couple of months. So that was very helpful, but without that, I probably would've been probably struggling.

> … yesterday I did apply for the early release of super. So, yes, I applied for that to access $10,000 of my super… It was really simple, actually. It took literally one or two minutes. And that's just for a - just a kind of safeguard, just in case type of thing. And if it so happens that it's not - I don't need it - we don't need it - we're planning on putting that $10,000 back into the super, but, yes, we just decided to access it, just in case.

> JobKeeper really saved [us]. Sales were down by 40 per cent for a couple of months, but JobKeeper helped.

Some participants mentioned having issues determining how to access funds or being unable to qualify for them.

> I would say that it's not, it wasn't very easy to access. It wasn't straightforward, and intuitive. However, I think a lot of people

would have struggled and I wouldn't say it was easy, but I did access it.

I wasn't a hundred per cent sure on how to use it, and how to go about it. So, I reached out to a MP who sort of broke it down in terms of like the paths, I guess, you can take. And then, another thing was you had download the app, the Sidekicker app, which I think doesn't really work for me on a PC computer. So yeah, I was just applying that through my phone, which was something I've never done before...

So initially, when everything started, I had less than one year in the office. So I couldn't apply for the JobKeeper. But then they released a new version of the JobKeeper about one or two months ago and for that one, I had already got my year working in the company. So yeah, we applied for that one. I'm not sure about if my boss is receiving or not, but I know that I applied, yeah.

[on accessing early Super] Yeah, really smoothly. I was actually shocked for once.

Participants who were not Australian citizens desired more support. Two participants who were international students reflected on not being able to access programs that others could:

I think school doesn't support me a lot or doesn't support international students. I think they do some support for students, but not specific [to] international students. Like, I get some free food from school. Yeah, they provide for all students. If you want to join, you can join, but not for international students, and I think it's unfair because I know that our tuition fee is much, much, much higher than local students.

Not enough, because my – I work as part-time and I usually earn $500-ish every week, and I got $4000-ish from [university]. It's not enough, but if I save more and I eat less food, it is.

Most participants recounted their experiences with medical services, such as COVID-19 testing and telehealth, in positive terms:

Yes, it was simple. It was literally just a phone call. Yes, I'd just do it by phone consultation... I found it more convenient actually. Just for times when you don't really need to go to a face-to-face appointment. It might just be a script or renewal or something like that. I found it more convenient.

No, it's actually been great. Well, normal doctor appointments, you've got something wrong with the kids or a rash or something, normal doctor appointments which have been easy...they're just phone consultations and then they send you the script electronically, and you can go to the chemist... Yeah, easier. It's amazing when a pandemic happens, all these things that we've been told that, "No, that can't happen, you need a piece of paper for that", suddenly can just magically happen.

More than half of participants indicated that they utilised telehealth (22/40), with most using It for basic services (18 out of those 22). One participant, who sought care for tonsilitis, recounted their telehealth experience as "weird", as they did not understand how they would be diagnosed and were having difficulty communicating with their doctor over the phone. These preliminary findings suggest there may have been difficulties had participants required more complex health care.

In relation to the use of non-government services, childcare services were a considerable talking point among participants with families. Those who were able to access childcare through essential worker exceptions expressed relief; those who could not described a more disruptive domestic situation.

> Just having her around so close I suppose, it had its challenges of her living within our house, having to cook for another person. It was good in that she was secure, but yeah, you sort of lose your privacy I guess as well, and it was just ongoing. Because you were home a lot with each, so that could have its problems as well.

> It was difficult, certainly when you're getting constant interruptions about how to spell something or check my maths homework. It is quite difficult.

Participants also increased their reliance on online shopping during the pandemic. Some participants used click-and-collect or delivery services due to its ease or to mitigate the virus transmission risk of going into stores. A few participants indicated that they avoided using these services because grocery shopping was one of the few avenues available for being out in public or because many items were listed as unavailable online.

> But I think there's more to shopping than the actual transactional part of shopping. It's just being around people. For example, I'm going shopping with my mum: we might not buy a single thing, but we spent the whole day window shopping, I guess you could say, and were able to look at things and talk about things, and I think that's such a normal, everyday thing for a lot of people to just do, to be able to just walk around and look at things, and see different surroundings…

> So I gave up on that. But I've used the click-and-collect during the service – but it's not - I like going to the supermarket as well, it gives me an hour away from the kids. If I just go and pick up the groceries, there's my hour gone.

> Because I did look at the online click and collect but a lot of the items that you were looking at were all sold out, sold out, sold out and not available, so there was no point in doing online. You had to go into the shops.

> My mum tried click and collect for a bit. But then we found that we relied so heavily on actually walking up and down the aisles to figure out what we actually needed.

Participants mentioned food delivery services, such as UberEats and Deliveroo, frequently, with some indicating that they utilised meal kit services, including HelloFresh and Dinnerly, as well.

Many participants did not seek financial support services either because they did not qualify for them or because they were able to maintain financial security. Participants who did use or discuss economic services identified them as critical, demonstrating the importance of being able to access material support during the pandemic, especially as it disrupted specific industries. For example, our small sample of international students interviewed felt precluded from support from the government and their universities. They also conveyed that they suffered disproportionately—both in terms of their finances and education—as a result. Other participants whose livelihoods were affected or who knew others who had their livelihoods affected identified and reiterated the importance of these financial support services.

During participants' discussions of adopting new services during the pandemic, they conveyed appreciation when it was easy to access these services through digital means. COVID-19 testing services also received positive feedback on their ease and availability. During interviews, participants did not frame these services as critical components for navigating the pandemic. Instead, they

tended to characterise them as conveniences that highlighted how many in-person services could be delivered through technological means.

Figure 5

Navigating technologies

Technological devices and digital platforms were the primary mechanisms for accessing information and services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although technologies have been integral and interwoven aspects of society prior to the pandemic, the nature of the virus and the subsequent response measures meant that many Australians were confined to their homes, particularly in locations with high case numbers. With limited mobility, technologies at home and for work became integral to everyday life.

Participants cited Zoom and other video conferencing platforms (e.g. MS Teams, FaceTime, Skype, Webex) as becoming an essential part of post-pandemic lives. All but one participant reported using some video conferencing tool to maintain contact with family and friends or for work. Views on these tools, however, were mixed. Some participants expressed gratitude for having the capability to connect to friends and family, which, in some cases, helped them manage the lockdowns:

> But during the pandemic I found we were using these video calls a bit more because we wanted people interaction, even if it was just on video.

> Certainly my wife. She'd catch up on Zoom with girlfriends probably once or twice a week by Zoom, come out into – this is my office pod, come out here and disappear for an hour and a half or so with – or late at night, could go and have a really good chat and keep that social cohesion component.

> We're still using Zoom. Not just Zoom, but there are multiple other ones. Yeah, we still do it to catch up with our friends. And when we haven't talked to each other for a couple of weeks, we all get

together and have a group chat. Yeah, I guess that was a good way to keep everyone in contact and to make sure everyone's happy and healthy and that sort of thing.

I don't know, I'm not the most tech-savvy person. But I feel like – and things like this, like Zoom, it's easy to use and it seems to work pretty fairly consistently… I think definitely through the pandemic, my ability to use and access technology has increased. Things like Zoom, I never heard of Zoom before the pandemic, but now I'm using it like every week.

But then with Zoom it was like, "Oh my God, I don't even have to leave home. You know, this is so good".

Video conferencing technologies were often served as a substitute mode for doing restricted activities, such as exercise, dining out and skills training:

My gym ran classes at certain times on Zoom every day and they just brought a coach and they put up a workout on the chat and then they would take you through each work out and they, it was kind of just more sort of accountability, just classes throughout the day.

I know that there were people who did choirs were doing it through Zoom, and stuff like that, but I wasn't really into that. And I would just use YouTube to, you know, different art techniques that I was interested in, and I would just use those.

And then my [old] pilates studio in New York contacted me immediately and said that they were going online, and I immediately took that up and I went from three days to five days of pilates online. Because I knew that exercise is very important for mental health.

Participants did not plan on maintaining these online substitutions post-pandemic and felt they would taper off once restrictions ended. Six of our interviewees described ambivalence or fatigue from the adoption and uptake of technology, anticipating a 'return to normalcy' where social interaction no longer required as much technological mediation.

Other participants did not view Zoom positively, providing a variety of reasons. For example:

So, after our class we would go to pub, to talk or meet new friends - like, new friends. But during the pandemic the activity becomes online too, but I only join[ed] once because I think it's awkward during Zoom… If you go to a pub, you can talk to anyone you want, and no one notices you. Not all of the people look at you, but in Zoom, if you want to talk, everyone looks at you. So, yeah, I only join[ed] once and after that I didn't.

Yeah, because when that - when everything started, if you remember everyone jumped to Zoom. Let's do Zoom drinks, Zoom dinner, Zoom table games - oh, man. I can't stand that.

I'd say the biggest challenge I've had is fostering rapport and relationships at work without face-to-face contact. That's a huge challenge in, especially starting a job, maintaining the kind of relationship that you would have and the indirect and unplanned conversations that you have with just naturally when you work side-by-side with someone and I think that has been fine if the organisation has existing relationships that you can draw down on over this period, but it's really hard to build that in the first place over phone or Zoom.

> Some of them you've got to talk through on the phone, and sometimes you can use a Skype or a Zoom, if you need to see them face to face. But also, having said that, then you do miss out on some work, because the older people, some of them can't do all that stuff, the Zoom, or they don't want to try it, or whatever, don't feel confident with it.

> We tried - Playgroup Victoria as well did a lot of - prior to the pandemic, young children could go to a playgroup locally and play together and mums can all meet up. But during the pandemic they moved that online, so a lot of things moved online. But yes, I didn't find it that worthwhile. It's just too difficult with children that age that last about 10, 15 minutes on a Zoom call.

> No, I don't really like Zoom very much. I haven't enjoyed that. I find it, I've just found it not the best way to have meetings and things… with the GP and team meetings and things, I'd much rather meet my team face to face and have these meetings, than I would over Zoom.

While online conferencing tools became important ways to connect with others, they also appeared to act as reminders of the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including physical separation from family, friends and colleagues.

> So family is overseas so I was trying to maintain contact through email, through WhatsApp and Skype or Zoom so it was not that difficult but knowing the fact that I could not go and visit them was the most difficult part.

Most participants described increasingly relying on communication technologies and digital platforms but did not convey satisfaction from using them. Participants with families were especially cognizant of how technological use increased among

their immediate families. They often found it difficult to supervise their children's use, particularly as those technological distractions helped them to manage other obligations at home and at work.

Technologies featured prominently in participants' daily lives, often socially, at work or at school. Participants framed video conferencing as something that was novel or that was initially novel or before its use increased in scale during the pandemic. Some participants did note they planned to or hoped to continue using Zoom more in the future. This was especially true when it came to study or work, as a few participants noted they appreciated the ability to do the work remotely from home:

> Well, I think the way that everybody jumped on board with Zoom, and that all of the sudden it became acceptable to be home, to work from home. See, before when I worked from home, people always thought they could drop in anytime, because I'm working from home. But I think now people realise it's a bone fide thing to do, to work from home. It's fine to use Zoom rather than seeing each other in person. So yeah, yeah. I like that change. I really do like that change.

> Coronavirus has been great, because the expectations have changed, and I no longer am expected to visit clients in their home. I still do visit some clients, where they are local, and it's appropriate to do so. However, the expectation has moved, the default has shifted to it's expected that I do not. It's expected that I work by Zoom, or phone or email. This has allowed me to expand interstate easier… The other thing it's affected is an attitudinal thing amongst other professionals. It is now acceptable, social status wise, to be working from home… I'm able to work out of my garage, converted garage. Now, I'm on Zoom meetings with politicians

with laundry in the background of their Zoom meeting.

Yes, I find, I found, like Zoom is really excellent, since the pandemic began. Also, too, that people – not myself, but other people – were able to work from home. Which I think has a really good effect also for the environment.

Some participants described work experiences becoming more negative due to teleconferencing tools:

We moved to 100 per cent online environment, but I think it was a bit too much. We had three meetings a day during the whole time. This means since February, even at this time, my co-workers, they are having three Zoom meetings a day and that is too much. That is too much.

Others noted the value of digitally connecting to social groups, such as through online gaming platforms.

… there was also a moment in time where me and my friends we would play like online, Mario Kart, so we could all play together, that was a social interaction for us, we definitely did the whole, what's it called, trivia things on Zoom and just a bunch of different things that we tried to adapt to.

So we've transferred a whole lot of social stuff to online stuff. So one of my sons does gaming, what they call gaming, role playing gaming, not Dungeons and Dragons, but something a bit different, but similar. You know what I'm talking about. They used to meet at someone's house, and instead of meeting at someone's house, now it's done online. With very specific software to facilitate it. They've developed skills in that software to make it work and it's actually in some ways a superior system for them.

Yeah, a few of my friends also video gamed a lot, turned to video gaming and we just sort out of hung out in that way.

Overall, attitudes towards technologies were mixed, with some participants expressing fatigue from needing to rely on platforms and others expressing appreciation for having technology available to connect with others. Older participants especially expressed the latter sentiment. As they were disproportionately felt the risks of being in public, they also felt compelled to adopt and learn new technological ways of connecting to family and friends. Many of them expressed gratitude for having technologies, such as Zoom, available.

When asked about pandemic-related government technologies, such as the COVIDSafe app, participants indicated that they either did not utilise them or did not rate them highly:

And I also used Australia COVID app, just at the beginning, and then I noticed that it's useless, so I didn't use it anymore.

I realised that I don't think the COVID app has done all that much and I don't think it's being used very well but I think it has the potential to be very effective for dealing with this kind of thing.

The few participants who spoke of the COVIDSafe app deemed it ineffective or were unaware of its existence. When discussing other pandemic-related technologies, such as the QR code system for checking into public venues, participants mostly conveyed indifference, describing QR Codes as a necessary nuisance.

By far the most positive outcome expressed around the use of technology was how it enabled work to be accomplished remotely. Many participants felt that reducing commutes was a benefit of the forced adoption of certain technologies. They also acknowledged the speed and convenience of some technologically mediated services. Beyond those observations, though, many participants perceived technologies as inadequate when it came to substituting or simulating many physical activities that were shut down during the lockdown. For example, Zoom could not replicate or replace in-person socializing, and YouTube exercise videos could not replicate or replace the benefits of visiting the gym in person. When recounting the necessity of technologies as a substitute for pre-pandemic social practices, participants often expressed a desire to 'return to normal'.

While communication technologies helped to mitigate some feelings of separation, participants emphasised how the technologies adopted directly because of the pandemic acted as reminders of the disruptive impact on everyday life, particularly what was restricted or denied as a result.

Figure 6

CONCLUSION

Navigating a wide range of information, services and technologies has been integral during the pandemic. While interviews revealed a diverse set of experiences, practices and views, participant reflections convey some shared sentiments about how the pandemic disrupted their day-to-day lives. These dynamics have continually necessitated novel or adjusted behaviours, outlooks and routines as new information, services and technologies became essential in navigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the purpose of this report is to broadly explore and document how Australians were navigating these domains, the study captures other findings of note.

The significance of demographics: Social location informed many participants' practices and understandings. For example, international students and persons living alone described more precarious day-to-day experiences and conveyed higher instances of dissatisfaction towards government approaches. On a more positive note, participants over 55 identified some struggles with using technologies, but they were especially appreciated learning about new technologies and conveyed plans to continue using them, particularly for accessing services and social networks. This finding suggests that this group would benefit from more support and training with digital technologies to overcome difficulties they may experience.

A relational understanding of the pandemic: Similarly, geographic location factored heavily into approaches and perspectives, but it was not confined to their area of residence. What was happening elsewhere—in other households, industries and countries—influenced participants' views of the pandemic, both locally and globally. For example, some Victoria-based participants would often draw on situations and outcomes in Europe or the United States to justify responses in their own state. Interviewees who were born overseas frequently compared Australian responses and support to those provided in their home countries, particularly when they viewed their home country's response as deficient or the Australian one as more appropriate by comparison. Participants who viewed themselves as fortunate often contrasted their situations to others who they identified as being in more difficult situations, particularly economically. Broadly, though with some exceptions, participants who related their own experiences to their perceptions of others' experiences tended to display more positive attitudes in relation to circumstances in their own home, state and country. In addition, they discussed government approaches to the pandemic in more positive terms. These participants also actively sought or followed more substantive information beyond local updates and appeared more outcomes focussed.

Rethinking the role of technology for work and service provision: Most participants were amenable to technologies substituting some pre-pandemic practices related to work

tasks and services. They perceived some benefits to reducing time and costs associated with commuting and other daily work activities that could be done remotely. They did, however, characterise technologies as poor substitutions for many activities and social situations. While digital technologies may not replace face-to-face work or service provision, findings suggest the continued need for human-centred designed digital services and infrastructure so that technology can serve as a better tool for resource provision and social engagement, especially if other disruptions occur.

Attributes of leadership as central to perceptions of government: More adverse views of government approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic often centred around leadership behaviour and personality traits rather than on policies implemented. This pattern emerged through comments made about State Premiers as well as the Prime Minister. This observation was particularly pronounced among participants who lived alone, as they expressed notable difficulties in navigating lockdowns, which appeared to negatively affect their overall opinion of government preventative strategies. More positive attitudes around government performance tended to focus on the novelty of the situation, public benefits and outcomes at home and abroad. While leadership was a focus for participants with more positive views, they tended to adopt a more forgiving and understanding stances toward leaders, often citing the scale and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relationships between compliance and perceptions of government: Although interviews captured different perceptions of governmental action, all participants explained their efforts to actively sought to comply with most COVID-19 pandemic measures. They described locating and utilising relevant information, services and technologies despite some expressing misgivings about the messaging and personal impacts of pandemic-related mandates. There were limits to compliance, though. For example, one interviewee noted they were performing only the bare minimum of what was expected during lockdowns to avoid scrutiny and not break the law. More generally, participants consistently described the pandemic as a temporary disruption, suggesting that there may also be a time limit to their proactive compliance.

Overall, participants expressed confidence in their ability to identify and use accurate information, found pandemic-related services useful (if not critical) and were able to navigate various technologies at home in a manner that allowed them to endure, and in some cases thrive, during the pandemic. Coming out of 2020, interviewees generally described high levels of compliance and trust in and reliance on institutional approaches to the pandemic. Follow-up interviews in 2021, however, suggest that these consistent practices and perceptions had eroded as new COVID-19 variants prompted new and different responses to managing the pandemic in many parts of Australia, and vaccination became an increasingly polarising issue. Other states and territories, such as New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, underwent extended lockdowns, while Melbournians experienced four more lockdowns and protests over vaccination mandates ensued.

Further research on these changing circumstances, including in relation to the significant spike in Australian COVID-19 infections in late 2021 and early 2022, may shed light on how these developments and government responses to them affect individual practices and perspectives. As the pandemic continues and navigation practices adapt, long-term effects of these emergent shifts are likely to become clear over time. Continuing to study them can elucidate lessons, as well as the opportunities, for better supporting or streamlining services to assist individuals in navigating future crises.

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