**Can digital technology enhance social connectedness amongst institutionalized older adults?** Computer Science meets Sociology for an Action Research Project

Social isolation and loneliness are emerging risks for older adults (65+), particularly for those institutionalized and frail. Social isolation and loneliness predict cognitive and functional decline, mortality, and social disengagement amongst this population. Since research suggests that opportunities for social connectedness through digital technologies can help alleviate both social isolation and loneliness, we developed an accessible tablet-based app called *InTouch. InTouch* supports asynchronous communication with relatives and friends and has four messaging options: picture, preset text, video, and audio. The user can also receive multimedia messages. It does not require typing, because it was designed for older adults with motor impairments. Its development was based on participatory design and field studies conducted by a team of computer scientists and sociologists.

To test the adoption and feasibility of *InTouch* to increase social connectedness, we conducted a two-month deployment study in a long-term care facility (n=4, 80+) and a three-month deployment study in a retirement home (n=12, 74+) in Canada. These studies included semi-structured interviews with our participants and relatives, field observations, and usability and accessibility tests. Drawing on Rob Stones’ Strong Structuration Theory, our results show that the feasibility of *InTouch* to enhance perceived social connectedness depends on: the involvement of at least one strong tie, perceived usefulness and functionality, adjustment periods, and the management of different intergenerational norms and expectations. For half of the participants, the app had also a positive impact on their perceived well-being, namely in terms of self-efficacy and comfort with technology (digital literacy). It had, however, a negative impact on two participants, making them more aware of their digital “inadequacy” or impairments (speech-related). Our findings further demonstrate that older adults are far from a homogeneous group. We conclude by discussing the critical factors (structural and agentic) for the design and implementation of any similar digital technology.