

Older adults' social support networks before, during, and after covid-19



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Introduction

Social support is crucial for well-being in an aging society.

Slovenia is aging rapidly.

The share of adults aged 65+ is 21% and projected to reach 29% by 2060.

Population aging increases the need for support.

Older adults rely on both formal services and informal social networks.

Many older adults has insufficient informal support.

Previous studies reveal that many older adults have very limited support networks.

Wenger's typology

Wenger (1994) identified five types of social support networks of the elderly population.

**FAMILY
DEPENDENT**

**LOCALLY
INTEGRATED**

**LOCAL SELF-
CONTAINED**

**WIDER
COMMUNITY**

**PRIVATE
RESTRICTED**

Network types differ according to the types of social relationships (e.g., neighbors, friends, relatives) and their spatial proximity.

The type of social support network differs according to demographic and other personal characteristics.

Older adults with different types of social support networks have different needs and vulnerabilities.

Research questions

How did older adults' social support networks change from 2002 to 2025?



01

SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORK TYPES

What types of social support networks do older adults in Slovenia have?

02

DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS

How are network types associated with demographic characteristics?

03

CHANGE OVER TIME

How have these networks changed before, during, and after COVID pandemic?

Plan of the study

The research question was addressed in three steps.

IDENTIFICATION

OF THE SOCIAL
SUPPORT NETWORK TYPES

Hierarchical clustering of ego networks
was applied.

INTERPRETATION

OF THE OBTAINED
NETWORK TYPES

The obtained network types were
described and named by examining the
distributions used in the clustering.

The naming followed Wenger's typology.

DESCRIPTION

OF THE NETWORK TYPES BY EGO
CHARACTERISTICS

The network types were be examined in
relation to gender, settlement type,
education, and marital status.

The correspondence analysis was used to
visualize the associations among all
variables.

Collecting data

Data were collected in three waves among Slovenian adults aged 65 and above.

Pre-Covid

2002

n = 580

A combination of personal and telephone computer assisted interviewing (CAPI and CATI).

Representative for the whole population.

During Covid

2020

n = 605

Computer assisted web interviewing (CAWI).

Web panel JazVem Valicon.

The web panel includes only older adults who are able and willing to complete online surveys; those unable to participate (e.g., due to illness) are not represented.

Post-Covid

2025

n = 904

Respondents' demographics

Higher education levels and the share of respondents from urban areas reflect demographic trends and the data collection method.

	2002	2020	2025	Overall
Average age	72.6	70.0	70.9	71.1
% of men	41.2	48.1	39.2	42.3
% of egos in relationship	50.5	69.3	65.7	62.5
% of egos living in urban area	38.4	61.7	63.4	56.0
Up to vocational	50%	16%	19%	27%
Secondary to undergraduate	50%	64%	63%	59%
Postgraduate	>1%	20%	19%	14%

Measuring social support

Social support was measured by using name generators.



SOCIALIZING

Who are the people you usually **socialize with**, whether in person, by phone, or through a computer or tablet?



EMOTIONAL

Who do you usually **talk to about personal issues** that are important to you?



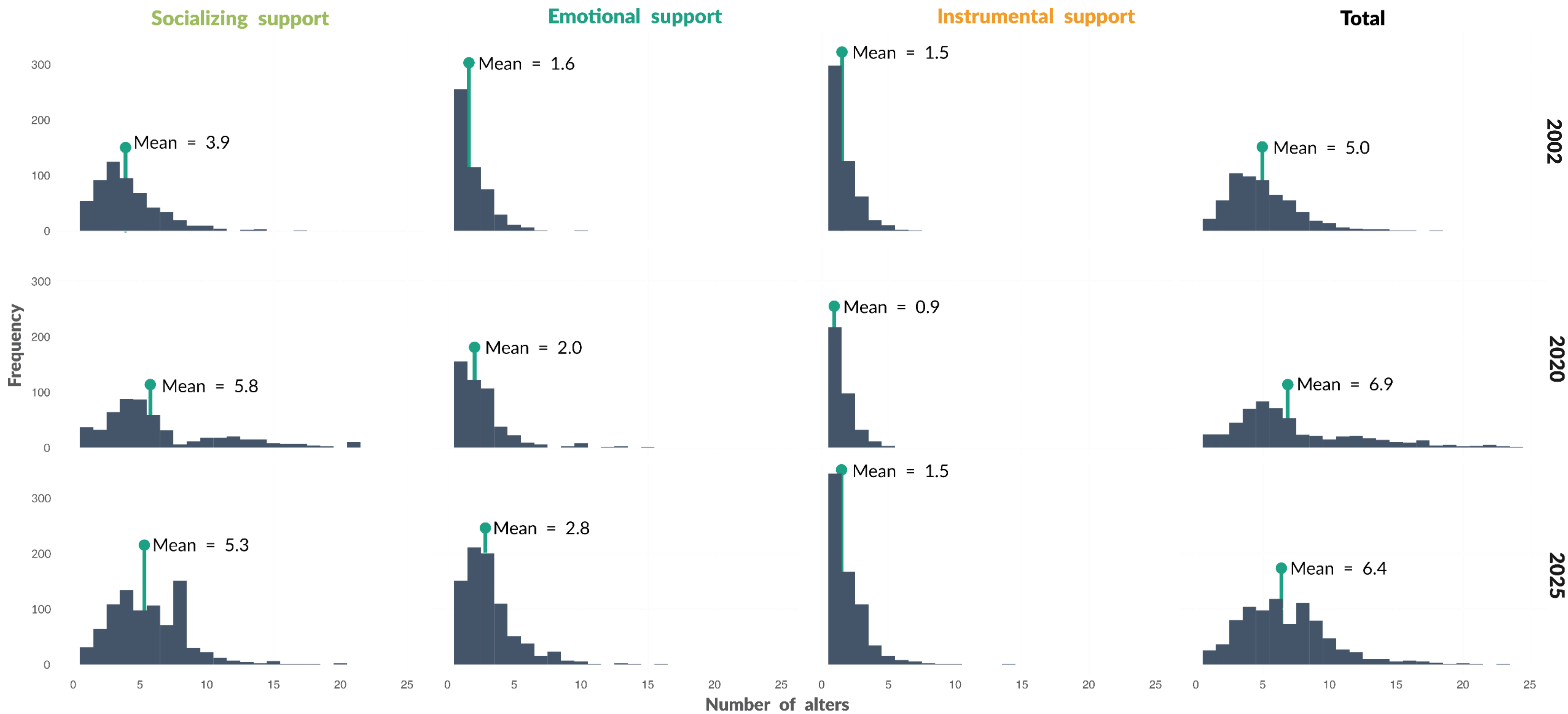
INSTRUMENTAL

Who do you usually **turn to for help with everyday tasks**, such as shopping, picking up medicine from the pharmacy, and similar activities?

Respondents (**egos**) were asked to list the people (**alters**) who provided them with social support. They also reported characteristics of these alters and the type of their relationships with them.

Number of listed alters

The average number of alters is the highest for socializing support.



Clustering of ego networks

To reveal the social support network types.

Clustering of symbolic data

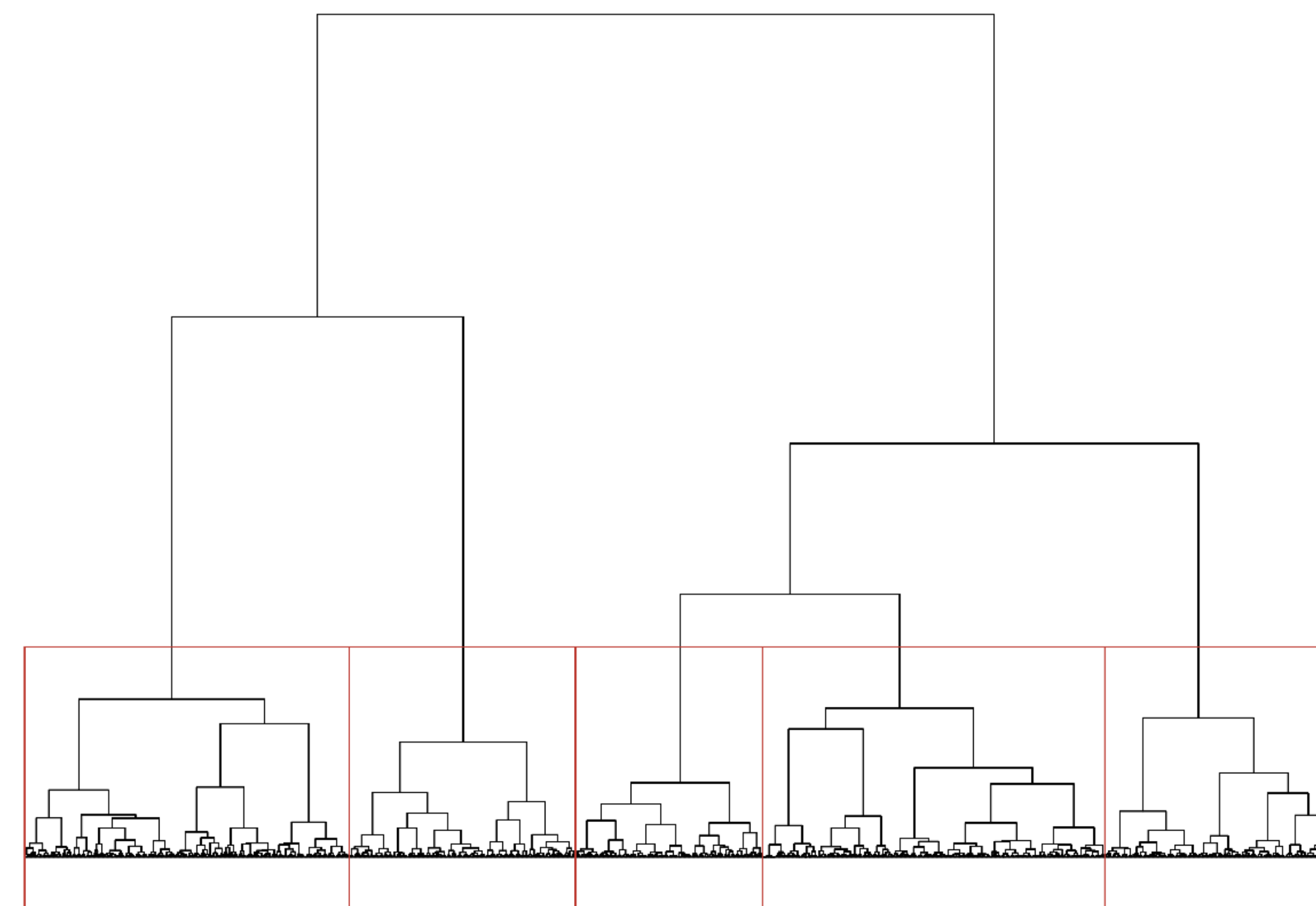
- Usually, ego network characteristics are described by their **averages** (e.g., the average spatial distance between an ego and his alters).
- Instead of averages we analysed the **distributions** (e.g., of all distances between an ego and his alters). Such data are called symbolic data.
- To analyse these data, we used the hierarchical clustering of symbolic data.

Distributions

The distribution of the number of alters:

- by type of social support,
- by spatial proximity to alters,
- by type of relationship,
- by contact frequency with alters.

In addition, the normalized (on the interval between 0 and 1) number of alters was included as a variable.



Notes !

The “clamix” R-package (Batagelj, Kejžar 2019) was used.
A cluster of egos without listed alters was removed before clustering.

Social support network types

Characteristics of six distinct network types.

	NO-LISTED ALTERS 4 %	FAMILY DEPENDENT 26 %	PRIVATE RESTRICTED 17 %	LOCAL SELF-CONTAINED 17 %	LOCALLY INTEGRATED 14 %	WIDER COMMUNITY 24 %
Social support		Instrumental	Instrumental and emotional	Emotional and socializing	Socializing	
Distance		Same household	Distant	Not too close, not too far		
Relationship type		With partner, more neighbors, and children, less friends and other relatives	Partner, less neighbors	Friends	Other relatives, neighbors, children	All types of relationships, but less neighbors
Conract frequency		Daily		Weekly or less often	Weekly or more often	
Average number of alters		4.6	5.9	6.2	7.2	8.5

Socio-network map

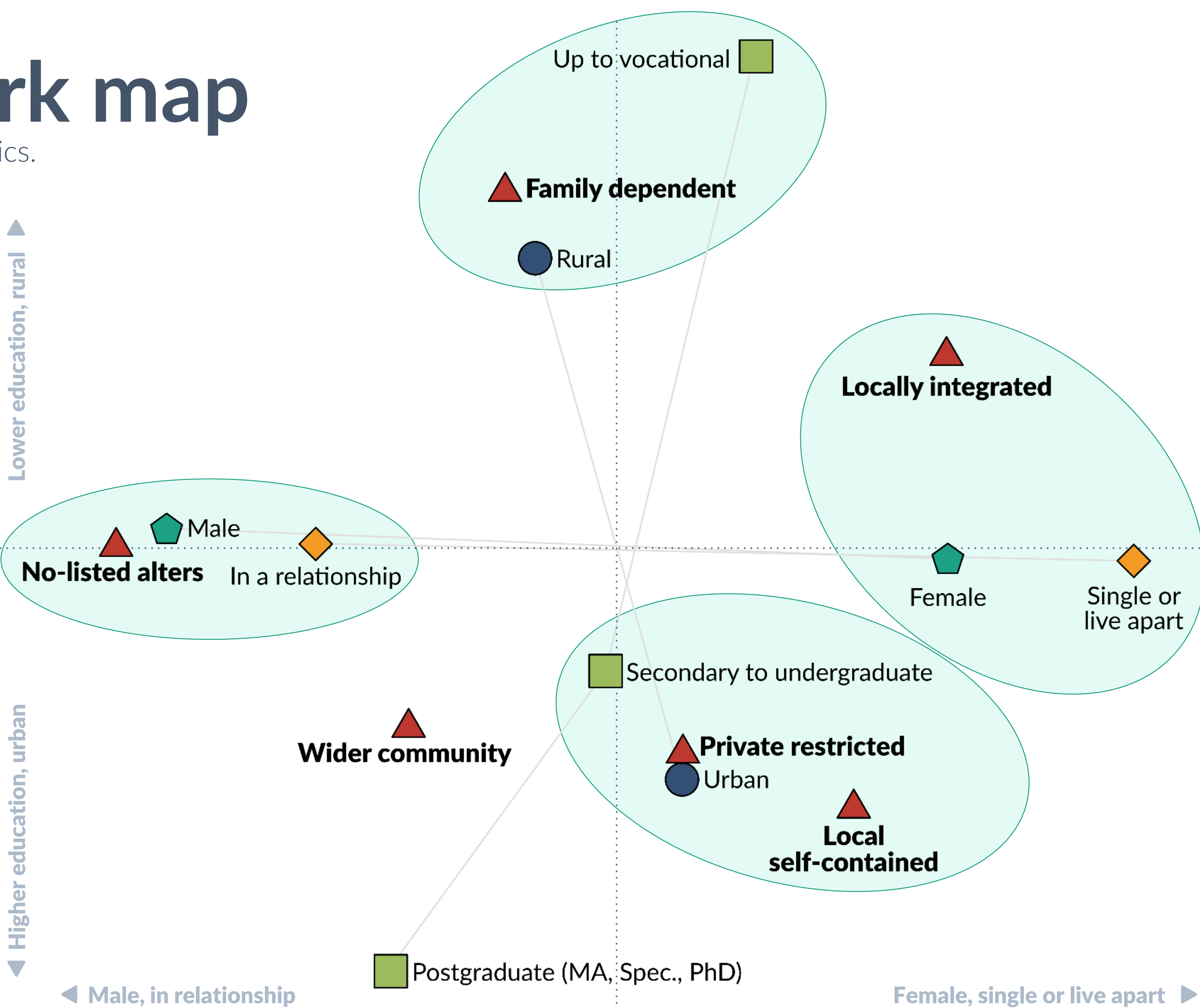
Network types and egos' characteristics.

Correspondence analysis

The adjusted correspondence analysis with symmetric mapping was used to visualize associations between social support network type, educational level, type of residence, gender, and marital status.

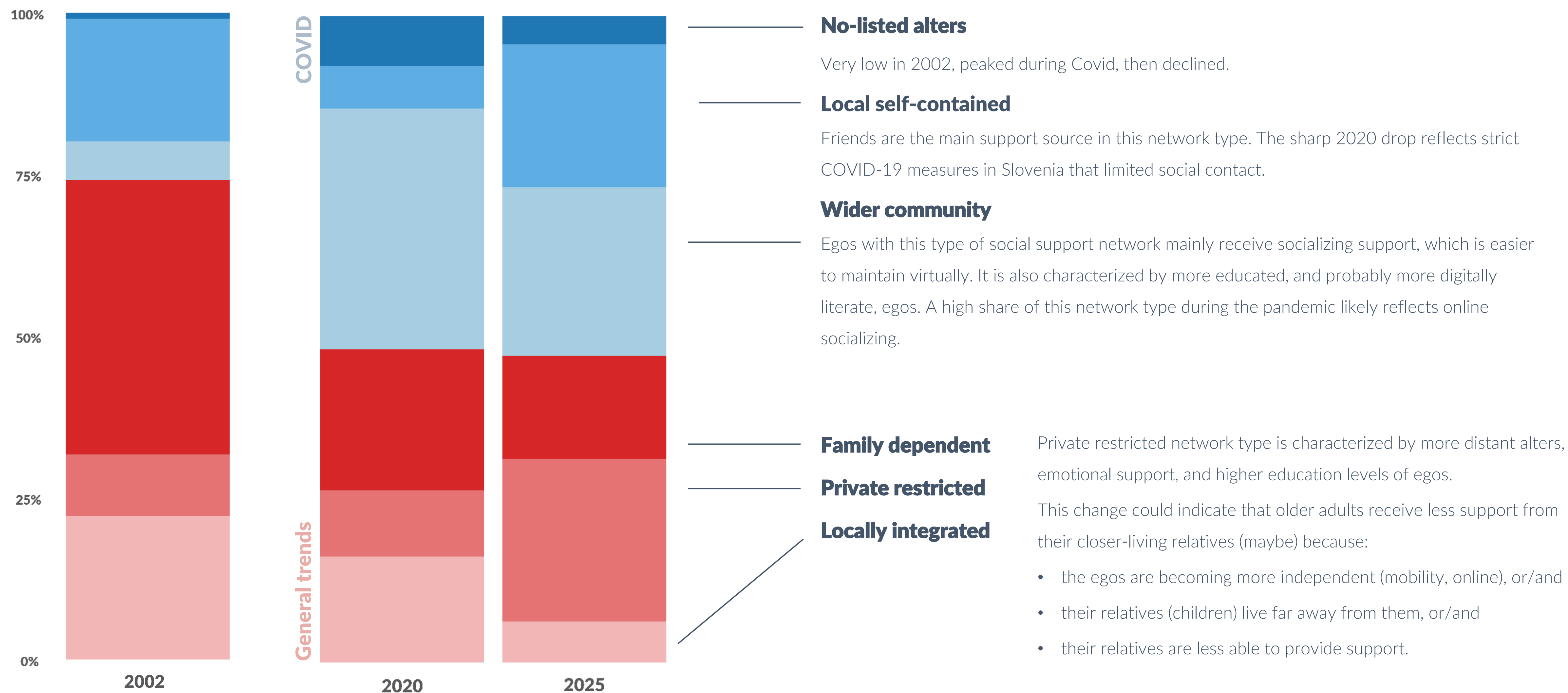
What we see?

The cluster with no-listed alters is linked to men in relationships, whereas the locally integrated type is associated with women and single or live apart. Family dependent type is more common among less educated and rural areas. Local self-contained, private restricted, and wider community types are associated with higher education and urban settings.



Network types over time

Prevalency of social support network types (2002–2025).



HIGHLIGHTS

The five identified social support network types are consistent with Wenger's typology.

COVID caused changes in the prevalence of some network types.

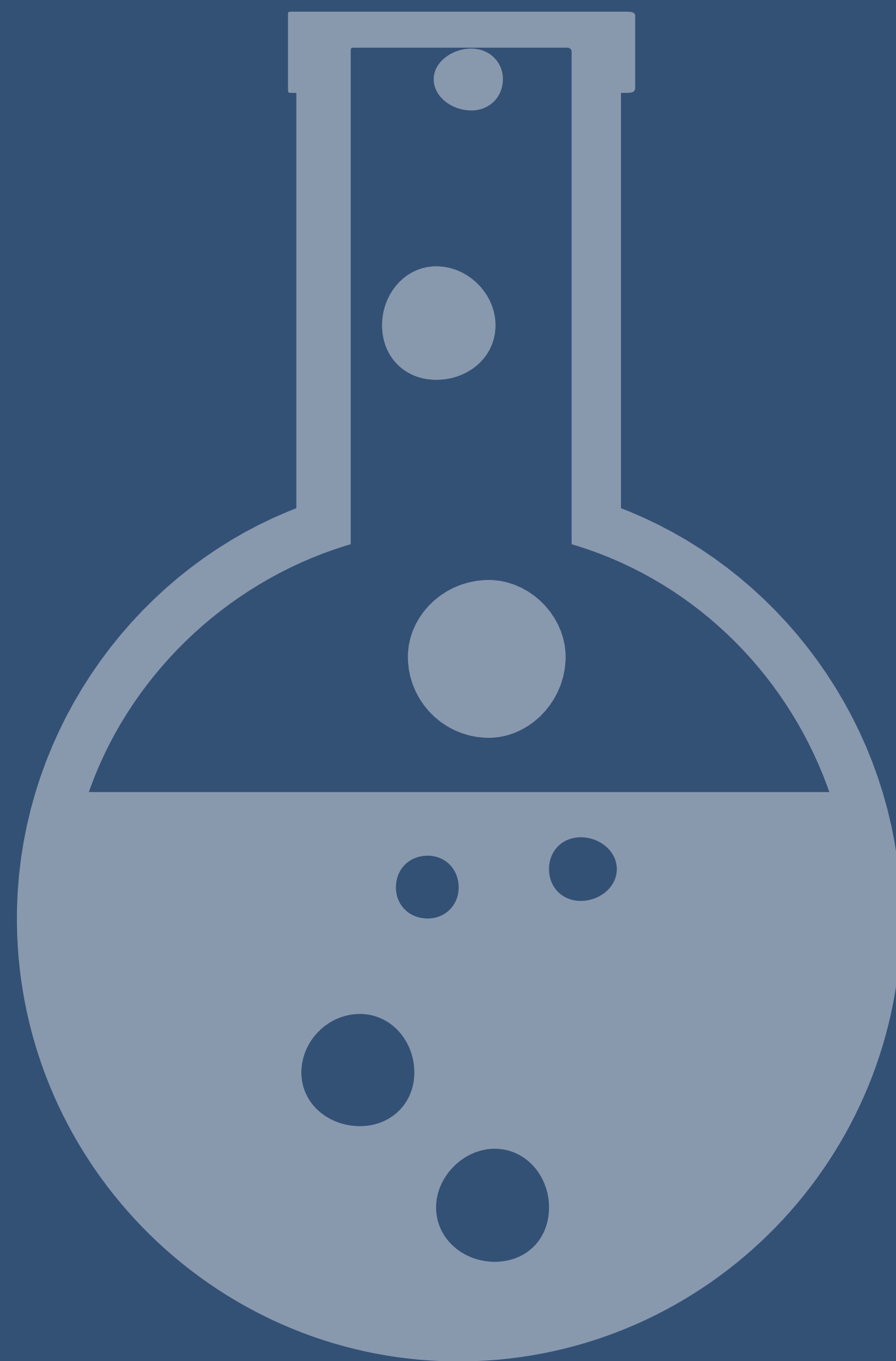
Long-term trends indicate that more educated, urban (and probably more digitally connected) older adults rely less on nearby family members and more on distant friendships.

Different types of social support networks need different support strategies, which highlights the need to adapt social policies and support strategies for a changing older population.



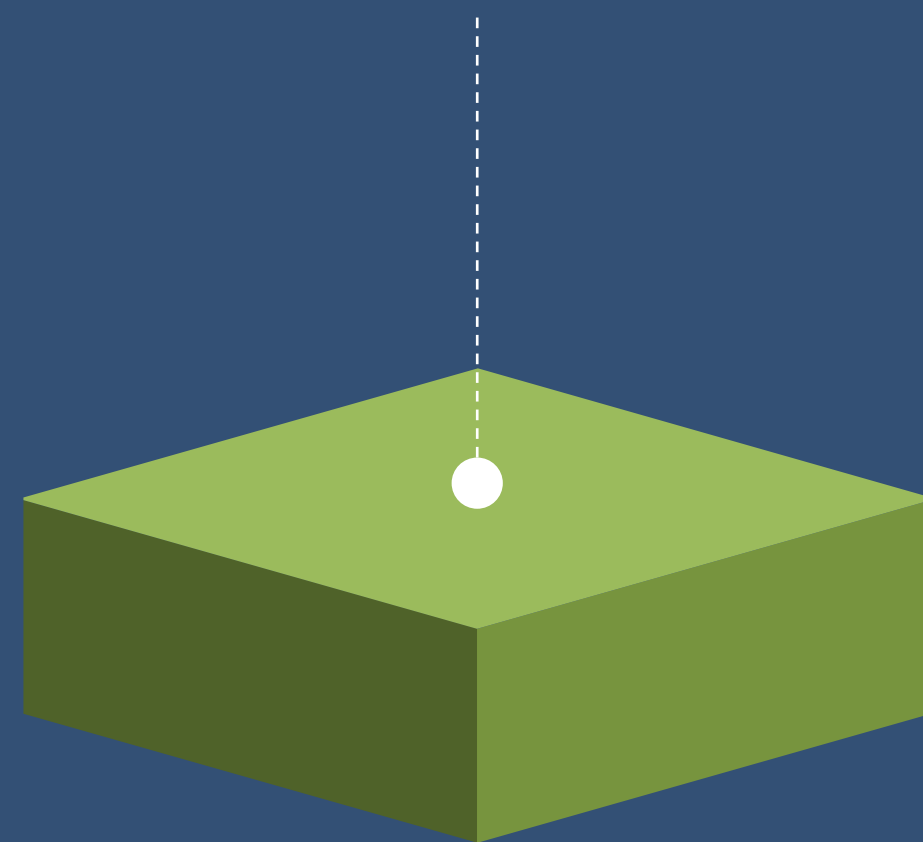
Future work

Towards broader scope and sustained monitoring.



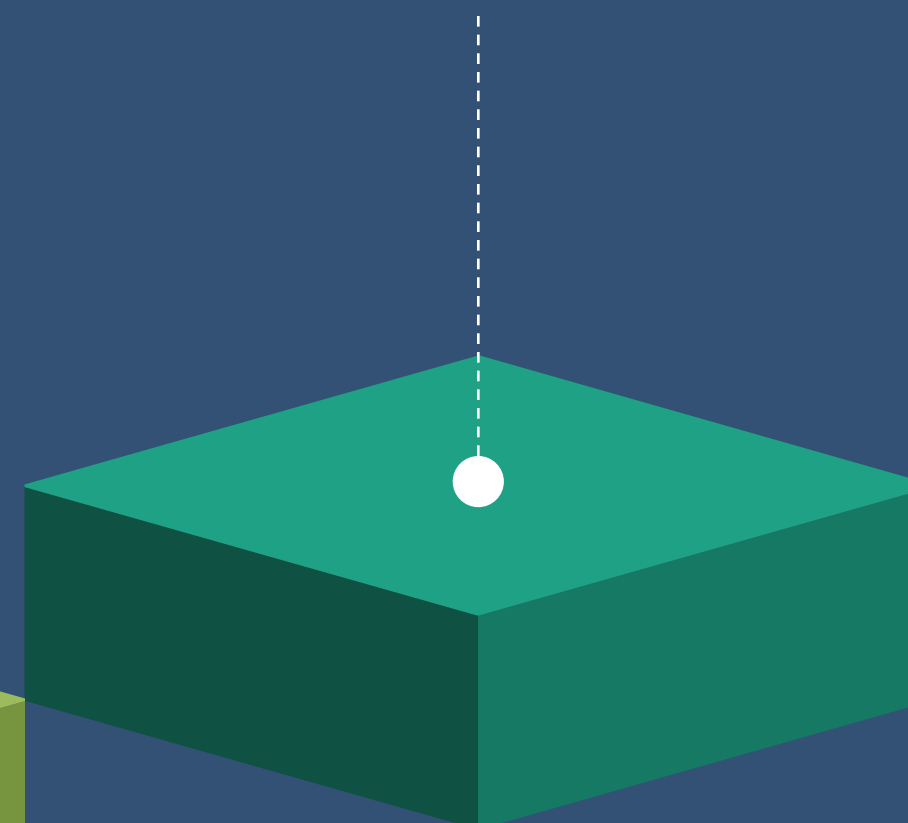
HEALTH

We will study the association between network types and health outcomes.



MEASURING

We will compare our approach to measure social support networks with the one proposed by Wenger.



LONGITUDINAL

We will repeat the study in 2030 to track long-term trends.

