"It Opened the World and Created the World":

Experiences of Digital Transformation for Adults Over 60 in Community Education

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A thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the MEd in Adult and Community Education, Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University 2025

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Student Declaration

The material presented here for examination for the award of a higher degree by research has not been incorporated into a submission for another degree. Permission is given for the thesis to be uploaded to Maynooth University Library for general access. I am the author of this thesis, and the work described therein was carried out by myself personally.

SIGNED: Matt Hutnik **DATE:** 27th June 2025

Acknowledgements

This academic year has been rewarding and challenging. I have learned so much about myself, my practice and the field of Adult and Community Education. There are specific people who have made this journey possible who I would like to acknowledge.

To my parents, Daniel and Glynis, for their unwavering support and encouragement in all areas of life, not just educational and secular.

To my supervisor, Dr. Angela McGinn, for her feedback, guidance and encouragement throughout this process. I have learned so much from her and can see the growth in my writing and research skills because of this.

To the lecturing team in the Department of Adult and Community Education, for collectively facilitating a well-structured, supportive and person-centred programme. It has been a joy to attend and learn from you all.

To Daniel Horler, for always being there for me through good and bad.

To my former classmates in my undergraduate degree, Lee Maxwell, Deborah Doherty and Terence McEneaney for being inspirational through sharing your journeys and achievements and listening to mine.

Finally, to the eight participants who offered to be interviewed for this research. Your voices are central to this thesis. They have inspired me and carried me through the research and writing process.

Abstract

As society becomes more digitised, there are increased opportunities for older individuals to be excluded due to barriers such as fear, anxiety and lack of confidence in the operation of technology and the Internet (Yazdani-Darki et. al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2023). This thesis explores the experiences of eight participants over 60 who engaged in Digital Skills education in a Community Education setting in Ireland. Utilising a qualitative approach, it investigates the impacts of this learning experience upon their digital skills, digital confidence and digital motivation to use these tools outside of the classroom environment. It explores the challenges which are implicit to this and if this learning experience was transformational. The thesis seeks to address a gap in the literature surrounding older learners in this context (Pizzul et al., 2024; Flynn, 2025).

A Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1975) and social constructionist approach was employed utilising semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that learned skills were used to make progress towards closing the gap between participants and the technological society they inhabit. Expressions of reduced fear and anxiety accompanied by an increase in confidence in their technological abilities were reported by many. However, barriers persisted for some. Factors such as peer-to-peer interaction and facilitation of a supportive classroom environment aided in mitigating these barriers.

This research highlights that Community Education has the ability to have a transformative effect upon over 60s accessing the digital world and can enable them to participate more fully as active citizens in society.

List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALE	Adult Learning and Education
BTWEA	Back to Work Enterprise Allowance
EU	European Union
FET	Further Education and Training
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TLT	Transformative Learning Theory
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UN	United Nations

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a Community Education teacher, I have witnessed the difference Digital Skills education can have upon older learners and I was inspired to conduct this research. This introductory chapter shall provide context for my research which explores the impacts Digital Skills education has had upon older learners in a Community Education setting. Writers, for example Flynn (2025) and Pizzul et al. (2024), highlight that research on older learners and digital education is scarce in the literature. I aim to address these gaps through adopting a qualitative methodology which has also been identified as being lacking compared with quantitative research in the area (Eustace et al., 2023; Kett, 2015).

Firstly, I outline my experiences as a Community Education teacher and the Digital Skills course which I devised. Next, the scope of the research and its aims are presented. After that, I give the context for the research to include a brief history of Community Education in Ireland and pertinent policy surrounding the topic. My research will discuss the ways in which digital skills acquisition may progress into increased digital confidence which, in turn, may progress into digital motivation. It will explore the challenges implicit to this and what is necessary to facilitate a positive learning experience despite them. This will be underpinned by a Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 1975) framework and social constructionist (Burr, 2015) approach to explore if this experience has been transformative to learners, and if so, in what ways.

1.1 Background to the Research

Throughout my undergraduate degree from 2018-2021, I kept coming back to the positive impact the teaching and learning style of third level education had had on me and the struggles direct school leavers had experienced. After graduation, I made an application to the Sligo LEADER Partnership Local Development Company for funding under the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) Scheme to start an educational support delivery business called Atlas Education. It was my vision to bridge the gap between the two levels of education through providing Introductory Academic Skills workshops to second level schools and first year third level cohorts. In addition, I would provide Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Digital Skills classes to community groups.

Over the past three years, I have been offered more work in Digital Skills teaching than in other areas. In addition to my other teaching work, I have been delivering a self-devised Digital Skills course in the Community Education setting to community groups including the Irish Countrywomen's Association, Housing Associations, Active Retirement Groups, Men's and Women's Sheds and groups affiliated with Community Centres throughout Sligo County.

I designed the course to be relatively flexible in scope and duration fitting to the Community Education setting. Generally, it covers a five-to-10-week session block of two to three hours each week. Groups range in size from five to 10 and generally consist of individuals over the age of 60. Topics covered include: 'An Introduction to the Internet'; 'Internet Safety'; 'YouTube'; 'Emails'; 'Booking Flight and Rail Tickets'; 'Online Shopping'; and 'Artificial Intelligence (AI)'.

Seeing firsthand the differences which opening the digital world was making to individuals has been fascinating. Learners were expressing to me that from gaining skills in class they began to feel more confident in their abilities to utilise their personal devices and navigate the Internet. They commented that this confidence led them to feeling able to try things in their own time, without my supervision, that they previously would not have felt able to do. Some also shared stories of them assisting and educating others on how to operate their devices and the Internet. This was inspirational for me to hear. I felt a desire to probe deeper into the impacts the Digital Skills Community Education classes were having upon these individuals with a specific focus upon digital skills, digital confidence and digital motivation.

1.2 Research Scope, Aims and Questions

My research in the field of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) will focus on learners in a Community Education setting who are aged 60 and over. The overall aim of my research is to explore the impact of Digital Skills education on these learners' ability and confidence in relation to utilising digital technologies and the Internet. Additionally, I would like to explore if this learning transfers outside of the classroom environment into their everyday lives. I am interested in seeing what barriers are associated with this and what factors contribute towards mitigating these. I also want to explore if this has been a transformative experience for these individuals. Therefore, my research questions are:

Research Question 1: How do older adults in a Community Education setting experience Digital Skills education - what impact does this have upon their skills and confidence in relation to digital technologies and the Internet and the motivation to use these outside of the classroom environment?

Research Question 2: What challenges are implicit to this and what factors are necessary to facilitate a positive learning experience?

Research Question 3: Has this experience been transformative to learners and if so, in what ways?

1.3 Research Context

This section will provide an overview of the background of the research topic. The aim is to further contextualise the research as it sits within the Community Education setting, policy, and the importance of bridging divides between generations as regards being able to use digital technologies and the Internet. It begins with a brief outline of Community Education's origins in Ireland and its ethos today. After that, pertinent policy at United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) level with regards to digital skills is presented followed by a narrowing of focus to Irish policy. Finally, the concept of the Digital Divide both generally and in an Irish context is discussed.

1.3.1 Background to Digital Skills Education in Community Education

Community Education had its conception in the 1980s through the means of community-led women's groups (Department of Education and Science, 2000) who wished to "strengthen their confidence, increase their skills and bridge the gap between personal and community life" (AONTAS, 2000, p.5). People used Community Education to achieve skills, self-efficacy, equality, and social improvements. It was seen as beneficial to the group as a whole and could lead to societal change (AONTAS, 2000).

In 2000, Ireland published a White Paper regarding lifelong learning which defined adult education as "systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training" (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 12). It provided a foundation for the Irish Government to give attention to policy and develop a system surrounding the Adult Education sector and lifelong learning (Ward & Ayton, 2019) and underpinned future adult education policy. The White Paper described Community Education as "marginalised groups formulat[ing] a process of user-driven, learner-centred and communal education" (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 28) and "a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level" (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 110). It also acknowledged Community Education's role in providing access to learning for marginalised groups, being a forerunner in community-based education and being foundationally concerned with "the lived experience of the participants" (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 110).

In defining Community Education in the present day, SOLAS (2020) acknowledged that Community Education is an extremely important facet of Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland, but it is difficult to place inside categories. However, SOLAS (2024) views the role of Community Education as "supporting a democratic society" and "fostering social cohesion and active citizenship" (par. 2). It also provides a list of key words by learners regarding Community Education. These being: "Inclusive, Confidence, Hope, Empowerment, Well-being, Accessible" (p. 14) which all resound with the underpinnings of my research. The Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is the umbrella organisation for much Community Education which takes place and funded the Digital Skills education explored in my research. It defines Community Education as "adult education and learning, generally outside the formal education sector, which aims to enhance learning, empower people and contribute to society" (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2024, para. 1).

1.3.2 United Nations and European Union Policy

The UN declared the years 2021-2030 as the Decade of Healthy Ageing which focuses on older persons and their well-being (World Health Organisation, 2021b). Notable goals of the Decade of Healthy Ageing are those of education, specifically a focus upon learning throughout life and Digital Skills education, access to the Internet, and inclusivity in communities and institutions for older demographics. The UN also calls upon Member States to provide digital literacy education and access to lifelong learning (World Health Organisation, 2021a).

The European Commission signals digital skills as being an essential aspect of daily life and functioning in society regardless of age. The European Pillar of Social Rights underpins policy and decision making surrounding the topic of older persons and their digital skills and inclusion in society (von der Leyen, 2021). One of its 20 guiding principles states that all people have the right to lifelong learning which enables them to be active and contributory members of society and that everyone has the right to avail of public services and access to communications technology and support surrounding it (European Commission, 2024a). Additionally, the European Commission (2024b) states that "basic digital skills are a precondition for inclusion and participation in the labour market and society" (para. 2).

The Digital Decade Policy Programme (DDPP) is described as reflecting the EU's pursuit of "a human-centric, sustainable vision for digital society throughout the digital decade to empower citizens and businesses" (European Commission, 2024a, para. 1) by 2030. Each EU Member State created their own roadmap for reaching the goals set out by it (European Commission, 2024b). The DDPP sets the goals of reaching 80 per cent basic digital skills among adults - an increase from the average of 55.6 per cent as of the 2023 report (European Commission, 2024b) - and having key public services available in an online format (European Commission, 2023). However, it has been acknowledged that individuals who do not possess the skills necessary to access these services when digitisation occurs will possibly face societal exclusion (Council of the European Union, 2020; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). In line with this, the EU published a report regarding the exclusion of older demographics from public services when they become digitised as part of the DDPP. It requested that there is a need for non-digital avenues of access to be kept available for people who do not have the requisite skills to access them (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). Therefore, at the EU level, there is recognition of the vulnerability of older individuals regarding not being digitally literate and the exclusion, isolation and inability to partake in aspects of society that can result.

Jarvis (2004) highlights that the more technology-focused a society becomes, the more individuals and groups may become excluded. In the same vein, the UN states that we need to adapt our cognitions, emotions and behaviours regarding older persons to make them more included in culture and society and a concerted effort made on a community-level to acknowledge, foster and grow older persons' potentials (World Health Organisation, 2021b) Linking to this, the Council of the European Union (2020) called for "an age integrated approach including a rights-based and life-cycle perspective to ageing" (p.10) which includes fortifying generational ties and looking after the social wellbeing of older persons. It urged the continuation of developing ways for them to be able to participate in social activism in the technological realm through Digital Skills education.

1.3.3 Irish Policy

Ireland's National Strategic Roadmap states that Ireland needs to increase support for the population to improve their digital skills (Government of Ireland, 2023) which resonates with contemporary research indicating that there is still a need for Digital Skills education in Ireland despite the policy surrounding it (Buckley et al., 2022). As part of these initiatives, the Harnessing Digital Framework aims to ensure digital skills are made available for the population, so that they may "benefit from digital transformation" (Government of Ireland, 2022, p. 24). The overall aim is to reach the previously mentioned EU's target of having 80 per cent of the population attain basic digital skills (European Commission, 2024a; Government of Ireland, 2021, 2022) of which it currently sits at 72.9 per cent as of 2024 (European Commission, 2024b).

1.3.5 The Digital Divide

Discussion surrounding the Digital Divide demarcates it into three levels, according to Ragnedda & Muschert (2018). The first level being that the Digital Divide would be lessened or resolved when Internet connection rates reach the whole populace. The second level states that in addition to having access to the Internet, the skills required to use it are needed. The third level draws attention to the outcomes of Internet usage and the resulting benefits. These three levels link in with the UN's Decade of Healthy Ageing regarding access to the Internet, skills to use it and resulting inclusivity for older demographics (World Health Organisation, 2021b). It is evident therefore that the Digital Divide encompasses access to and skills to utilise digital technologies and the Internet as well as attitudes and outcomes or benefits surrounding it (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). While access to (or lack thereof) hardware is "the most visible aspect of the digital divide" (Baraka, 2024, p. 34), and Internet access is another key player, the "less visible but equally important" (p. 34) component is that of being able to use these tools effectively (Baraka, 2024) and the results of being able to do so which speaks to the aims of my research.

Costa et al. (2019) argue that when older individuals make the effort to learn digital skills, they are attempting to integrate themselves into technologically advanced society thereby attempting to close a generational gap in knowledge and exposure to technology. They posit that although we are bound by our upbringing and our past to a certain extent, we have the capability to incorporate new things which come about during our lifetimes. Therefore, generational gaps in this context are not age-based but knowledge-based and that consideration should be given to the "temporal, social and cultural contexts of individuals' backgrounds" (Costa et al., 2019, p. 10). This corresponds with Jarvis (2004) who argues that learning is transformative and can help people to navigate changeable circumstances in the sociocultural environment as my research is interested in exploring.

1.3.6 The Digital Divide in an Irish Context

Situating the Digital Divide within an Irish context, older people in Ireland have lower digital skills than their EU counterparts (O'Connor & Murphy, 2022) even though a higher percentage of people in Ireland use the Internet as opposed to the EU average - 93 per cent versus. 91 per cent respectively (Eurostat, 2024). However, this is mainly made up of those age 59 and under of which only 2 per cent had never used the Internet. It is in stark contrast to the fact that 41 per cent of Irish people age 75+ had never used the Internet and in the 60-74 age bracket 12 per cent of individuals age 60+ had never used the Internet. In addition, 2 per cent had used the Internet but not within the past 3 months and 85% had used it in the past 3 months. This indicates that older Irish people use the Internet far less than younger individuals (Central Statistics Office, 2024). Contemporary research aligns with this, finding that deficits in access to digital technologies and skills widens gaps between social classes and groups (Accenture, 2022; Baraka, 2024). It also speaks to the EU's statement following the 2020 Council that increased age equates to increased Digital Divide and that the older people are, the less likely it is that they will be able to utilise digital technologies to participate in society and communicate with others. Therefore, my research will be focusing upon the demographic in Irish society who most often lack Digital Skills according to contemporary research, statistics and EU statements.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has served to contextualise my research within my own experiences as a Community Education teacher, the history and policy surrounding the research topic and the demographic the study shall focus upon. It has outlined the specific scope, aims and my research questions which will provide the basis for the rest of the thesis. It has demonstrated that this research speaks of an underrepresented cohort and contributes to an underdeveloped area of knowledge. My research seeks to give voice to these individuals, exploring their journey to learning about digital technologies and the Internet, the struggles surrounding this and the ways in which these can be mitigated.

The following chapters will review the pertinent literature surrounding the topic (Chapter 2) and the theoretical underpinnings of my research, discuss my methodological and philosophical approaches I have employed (Chapter 3), present the research findings (Chapter 4) and offer a discussion of them (Chapter 5). This final chapter shall allow me to interpret and evaluate the Findings of my research. I will do this through discussion, comparisons and contrasts with scholarly literature surrounding the topic and the theoretical framework. It will present the research's implications and its contributions to the existing body of knowledge.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Having provided context for the research this chapter shall present the literature and theory surrounding it in line with my research questions. Firstly, literature surrounding barriers to adult's digital learning and the impacts of Digital Skills education upon older individuals to include skills, confidence and motivation will be discussed. I will then explore the literature around learning and its application in digital skills education using Mezirow's (1975) Transformative Leaning Theory. Finally, I will discuss the stages of this theory and relevant critiques of it.

2.2 Barriers to Adult's Digital Learning

The barriers to adult learning are multifaceted. Adults bring their personal histories into the learning environment. Factors such as lack of time (Boeren, 2011), transportation and memory issues (Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003) as well as internalised negative self-concepts regarding ageism (Barrie et al., 2021; Köttl et al., 2021) can be deterrents. In line with this, I will focus on reviewing literature related to the barriers self-efficacy and perceived lack of skills and fear and anxiety surrounding older adults and digital learning.

2.2.1 Self-Efficacy and Perceived Lack of Skills

Self-efficacy involves the degree to which people perceive themselves as capable of achieving a task or succeeding in different situations (Waddington, 2023). In the context of older adult learners, they may have been out of the educational and work environments for many years. This can make entering an educational setting and the concept of learning new skills challenging for them. Research on adults by (Wilson et al., 2023) revealed the subtheme of "Perceived self-efficacy" (p. 228) as being important in the learning environment. Participants often rated their skills as being low even though they were able to use their devices and navigate social media to stay connected to others. This prevented them from making optimal progress regarding their skills and usage of these tools. Wilson et al. (2023) also noted that the older participants envisioned themselves becoming, the more likely it was that they felt they wouldn't be able to keep up with technology's advancements.

Similarly, research conducted by Geerts et al. (2023) identified how learners' low self-efficacy and esteem coupled with feelings of frustration hindered how they learned.

Additional research along these lines includes a qualitative study by Yazdani-Darki et al. (2020) with participants aged 60-75. Findings illustrated that perceived lack of skills, understanding of how technology worked, and not wanting to make mistakes they could not rectify were barriers to technology usage. This aligns with Knowles & Hanson (2018) who likewise found that individuals aged 66-86 lacked trust in their abilities which tied into their lack of confidence surrounding technology and the Internet.

2.2.2 Fear and Anxiety

In an Irish context, digital skills tutors identified fear to be the foremost barrier for their students in utilising digital technologies and the Internet (Gruben et al., 2025). This aligns with international research conducted by Wilson et al. (2023) illustrating participants' feelings of fear surrounding digital technology usage. These fears revolved around damaging technology, fraud and privacy concerns. Other writers such as Gallo et al. (2024) and Reid et al. (2024) found that feelings of unsurety and being afraid of not being safe online or using technology are common. One study illustrates fear surrounding digital technologies as being rooted in the sense of having an inability to keep up with the face-paced and transitory nature of technology (Pirhonen et al., 2020), while others (An et al., 2024; Reid et al., 2024) indicate that self-perceptions towards ageing and ICT influence levels of fear and anxiety towards them. However, research has shown that participants who were willing to push through this fear due to their desire to remain connected, relevant and as active members of society (Costa et al., 2019) were able to make strides to reduce these fears.

2.3 Impact of Digital Skills Education on Older Individuals

Digital Literacy has been defined as the skills needed to operate ICT (Baraka, 2024). However, it has been argued that there is more to digital literacy than just skills to operate physical devices. It is posited that Digital Literacy requires "the skills of analysing, processing and evaluating digital content" (Biezā, 2020, p. 6). In addition, Digital Literacy can be broken down into three distinct parts: firstly, being able to use digital tools to acquire a mastery of technologies; secondly, to be able to use digital resources to weigh up and apply critical thinking skills whilst using digital technologies; and thirdly, to gain socially-oriented skills which engage reflective thinking about staying safe online and using digital technologies and the Internet in a mature manner (Biezā, 2020). In line with this, the following section of the literature review will focus upon research that has explored the impact of Digital Skills education on older adults' skills, confidence and motivation.

2.3.1 Digital Skills

Contemporary international research highlights the benefits of older individuals engaging in Digital Skills education regarding acquiring new skills. Pihlainen et al. (2021) conducted quantitative research involving 226 participants comprised of learners, peer tutors and ICT teachers in Finland. They identified that following the programmes, learners were better able to use digital technologies and the Internet. Problem-solving skills were highlighted as an additional benefit. This aligns with Garcia et al. (2022) who conducted a review of various Digital Skills education programmes - intergenerational, peer-to-peer and online - across Poland, Latvia, Portugal and the United Kingdon. In these countries, digital skills programmes facilitated skills development across a breadth of domains. These included browsing the Internet, Cybersecurity, solving issues relating to technology and being an active citizen online.

In the Irish context, in 2015, the ETBI released a report called The Wider Benefits of Learning which specifically examined Community Education and its effects upon individuals and community groups through a review of existing frameworks. Findings of the review revealed that there were tangible and impactful benefits in the areas of "health and well-being, attitudes and behaviour, civic and social engagement, independence and self-regulation and family relationships" (Kett, 2015, p. 19). However, there is a gap in the research which examines the specific area of Irish individuals over 60 in a Community Education setting with regards to the specific benefits of skills, confidence and motivation following Digital Skills education. Additionally, contemporary research by Flynn (2025) acknowledges that research surrounding Community Education in Ireland is lacking and Kett (2015) calls for qualitative research in the area to be focused upon.

2.3.2 Digital Confidence

Digital confidence refers to the self-efficacy individuals have in relation to their ability to perform digital-based tasks successfully and in different environments (Paredes-Aguirre et al., 2024). González et al. (2015) conducted mixed methods research in which surveys were completed prior and post training and interviews were conducted. Findings revealed that participants responded more positively in relation to their attitudes surrounding digital technologies and their usage post-training. They also experienced increased self-confidence and self-esteem consistent with contemporary research in the field (Costa et al., 2019; Pihlainen et al., 2021) In addition, Geerts et al. (2023) found that when Information and Communications Technology (ICT) teachers used empathy, understanding, and patience, learners made best progress. Identifying and informing individuals of the benefits of ICT in their lives was seen to be a motivator for learners and contributed towards a mindset shift and greater participation in the digital skills training. Findings also noted that encouragement for individuals to seek assistance from friends and family outside of class time consolidated learning and was a motivator for individuals to use ICT outside of the classroom environment. Recommendations were for instructors to utilise patience, empathy and strategies to boost the learners' confidence and sense of self-efficacy. A further recommendation was for family and friends of the learners to become involved in the digital skills development of the learners outside of the classroom.

In an Irish context, Bailey (2011) found that 85 per cent of Community Education learners reported a positive effect upon their self-confidence. This aligns with Brennan & O'Grady (2022) who inform us that "a common outcome described by … learners in community education is 'confidence'" (p. 57). Pihlainen et al. (2021), mentioned previously, also discuss "increased self-confidence and courage" resulting from Digital Skills education. In their research, learners engaging in Digital Skills education were seen to have gained increased motivation to engage with digital technologies and the Internet because of their increased confidence which leads into the following section.

2.3.3 Digital Motivation

Pihlainen et al. (2021) outline that "motivations for learning digital skills vary, but they are generally connected with expectations of upcoming benefits" (p. 155). In line with this, Deci and Ryan (2000) discuss types of motivation - intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsically motivated learners have goal or outcome-oriented motivation whereas intrinsically motivated learners are motivated for leisure or enjoyment. They state that extrinsically motivated learners can perform actions resentfully or they can perform them with "willingness that reflects an inner acceptance of the value or utility of the task" (p. 55). While I acknowledge Deci & Ryan (2000) were not discussing this in the context of learning digital skills, it can be utilised in this context as a lens for comparing motivation of learners before and after attending the classes.

Regarding the classroom environment, Knowles & Hanson (2018) found through qualitative interviews with retirees that these individuals may have lost out on a resource of co-workers' assistance and training opportunities in relation to technology and the Internet. This indicates the importance of the social classroom environment in helping people to be motivated to engage with these tools. Similarly, research by Köttl et al. (2021) discussed ICT-focused learning environments for older learners as needing to be inclusive and supportive with peer relations fostering optimal learning. Other research by Jin et al. (2019) found that this setting enabled collaborative learning and facilitated social engagement, aligning with Pihlainen et al. (2021). In an Irish Community Education context, Bailey (2011) discussed how an an open and mutually beneficial environment which adapted to learners needs had positive impacts including allowing the space for individuals to be critically reflective aligning with TLT (Mezirow, 1975).

Regarding the sharing of knowledge with peers following Digital Skills education, research is scant (Flynn, 2025; Pizzul et al., 2024), highlighting a gap my research seeks to address. However, in an Irish context, Flynn (2025) conducted a mixed methods inquiry into how peer knowledge sharing plays out in older individuals' digital lives. It was seen that participants assisted peers mainly within the same household or family group and benefited from the social interaction that accompanied it.

2.4 Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1975)

A suitable lens through which to view older adult learners' participation in digital skills education is Mezirow's (1975, 1991) Transformative Learning Theory. I acknowledge there are many theories of adult learning (Mezirow, 1991) as well as theorists contributing to the discussion and boundaries surrounding the concept of 'transformative' learning (Hoggan, 2015, 2016). However, for the purposes of my research Mezirow's (1975; 1991) theory provides a clear framework for analysis of the research interests. After outlining TLT (Mezirow, 1975) and its applicability, I will outline critiques of it which will be justified in the Discussion chapter.

Mezirow (1975) originally conceptualised the notion of transformational learning in relation to a study he conducted with American women who were returning to education in adulthood after a gap. Following this, Mezirow (1978) commented on the types of learning he identified in his research. Since then, the theory has undergone developments and revisions (Mezirow, 2000, 2003). Learning can be defined as "to gain or acquire knowledge of or skill in (something) as a result of study, experience, or being taught" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024) while Taylor (1998) states that "transformative learning offers a theory of learning that is uniquely adult, abstract, idealized and grounded in the nature of human communication" (p. 5). Therefore, transformative learning is said to go deeper than just learning. It involves three key themes – centrality of experience, critical reflection and rational discourse. In tandem, they involve individuals critically reflecting upon an experience and then sharing it with others, engaging in discourse about it and receiving input from others about it. This discourse and reflection are what is said to enable preconceptions to be altered (Mezirow, 1994).

Mezirow (1990, 1994) argued that "meaning making" (p. 2) was integral to transformative learning both through our expectations due to our previous lived experiences as well as through our interpretations and judgements about the way the world works. For Mezirow (1994), meaning making is guided and formed by these "frames of reference" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1) - the previously mentioned preconceived experiential reference points. Many meaning perspectives are unintentionally acquired through early-life and socialisation and therefore go unchallenged (Mezirow, 1990, 1991).

By becoming what is described as a "socially responsible autonomous thinker" (Mezirow 1997, p. 8) and gaining new knowledge, it is argued that adult learners can engage in reflection upon their previously held assumptions about the world. In doing so, they can change their reference point leading to what Mezirow (1978) called "perspective transformation" (p. 100). It involves the ways in which meaning perspectives, or ways of viewing the world, are changed (Taylor, 1998) through becoming cognisant of them through critical reflection. Therefore, learning which is transformational has the potential to influence the way individuals view the world, providing the impetus for change. Mezirow (1994) proposed that perspective transformation can occur through a large-scale intense experience or through the culmination of many smaller, less emotive experiences. He argues that given the right set of conditions, learners could reach a point of becoming more accepting, less prejudiced, more insightful about themselves and gain more from their learning experience(s) (Mezirow, 1997). Ultimately, there could be a disruption of the status quo and a change in perspectives through encountering a learning-based situation which makes us challenge our preconceived ideas. Mezirow (1990) explained this as “our meaning schemes may be transformed through reflection upon [these] anomalies” (p. 13).

Applying the key themes of TLT (Mezirow, 1975) outlined above - centrality of experience, critical reflection and rational discourse - I posit that learners engaging in Digital Skills education can challenge preconceived ideas about themselves and the lengths to which they can engage and participate in society due to their lack of exposure to digital technologies and the Internet in their younger years.

2.4.1 Stages of Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow (2006, p. 94) outlined the stages through which the process of transformative learning progresses:

1. “A disorienting dilemma”
2. “Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame”
3. “A critical assessment of assumptions”
4. “Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared”
5. “Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action”
6. “Planning a course of action”
7. “Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans”
8. “Provisional trying of new roles”
9. "Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships”
10. “A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective”

This transformation could be revelatory due to a major event or happen subtly over time. It may occur out of the realms of consciousness and that in the educational context, the educator can bring this into learners' awareness (Mezirow, 2006).

2.4.2 Critiques of Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow's (1975) TLT has been critiqued by a variety of authors (Hoggan, 2023). These critiques centre around the cognitive elements (Jean Mary, 2019; Newman 2014), a reliance upon stages (Newman, 2014), and the application of it to unfitting contexts (Hoggan 2023; Taylor; 1998). Due to the scope of this research, I will outline the ones most pertinent to the research context. Ways in which I believe I have addressed these critiques will be elaborated upon in the Discussion chapter.

Writers such as Jean Mary (2019) and Newman (2014) argue that TLT (Mezirow, 1975) is too focused upon the cognitive elements of individuals' learning and neglects the whole person view of the adult learner which would include emotions and inspiration to aid learning experiences. Jean Mary (2019) states that this conflicts with the whole-person approach to learning which has been adopted in contemporary times and that it neglects learning which may be ignited through emotive avenues. They argue that pinpointing what has been transformed is not clear.

Concerning the stages of TLT (Mezirow, 2006), Newman (2014) states breaking down transformation through the impetus of critical reflection into a defined stage-by-stage process to be problematic and an oversimplification. In discussing Stage 10 of the theory, he argues that while the individual learner may have had a transformational change, can they really reintegrate this successfully within an unchanged culture. Newman (2014) also critiques the usage of the term 'transformation' as this implies a complete change from one thing to another with no gradient.

Further relevant critiques include Hoggan (2023), who highlights that some research utilises TLT (Mezirow, 1997) when not specifically making application of his theory or applying it to contexts where it does not fit. It is also critiqued for being applied to learning which is not in fact transformational but merely "additive" (Hoggan, 2023 p. 449) and that transformation has been hailed as the pinnacle goal of education yet learning which is just learning is valid and important too. Taylor (1998) critiques the context in which TLT

(Mezirow, 1997) was applied, stating that learners' backgrounds and place in society were not considered so therefore the full conceptualisation of their experiences could not be understood as it was focused too much upon "the individual dimension and not the social dimension" (p. 26).

2.5 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, research that focused upon the transformational abilities of Adult Education in an Irish context state that the underpinnings of Adult Education in Ireland are holistic and whole person with a focus upon equality and accessibility. It has been argued that when Adult Education is transformative, it gives "time and space for learners to overcome dispositional barriers to participation and progression without feeling pressured to submit work for certification" (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022, p. 58). Other contemporary Irish research conducted by McCashin et al. (2022) found that participants expressed in-person classes and workshops which were person-centred and focused upon the needs of individuals within the group would be beneficial in mitigating the issues they faced regarding ICT. Internationally, Gallo et al. (2024) stated that learning digital skills and integrating them into life "has made older adult[s] protagonists of [their own] learning" (p. 10), which has positive effects upon them in other realms of life and personhood. Therefore, my research posits that Digital Skills education can be transformative for older persons and can assist them in navigating the sociocultural landscape which has been shaped by the technological boom that occurred throughout their lifetime.

This chapter has outlined the landscape surrounding various barriers to adult's digital learning and how older adults' skills confidence and motivation can be affected by Digital Skills education. TLT (Mezirow, 1975) was outlined and applicable critiques of it were highlighted. The transformative abilities of Adult Education in the Irish context and research surrounding this was discussed showing the relevance it has for older adults learning and integrating digital skills. Holistically, this chapter has served to further highlight that my research topic is underexplored, particularly in the Irish context from a transformative and qualitative perspective. The following chapter details how I have designed this study to address that gap in my methodological and philosophical design choices.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As a Community Education teacher and Master's level researcher, I bring an academic and experiential approach to my research which has influenced my methodological and philosophical choices. In this chapter, I will situate my research within a specific philosophical position - social constructionism - while acknowledging there are other approaches which could have been employed. I present my research strategy, which is centred around qualitative interviewing, the selection of participants and means of analysis of the collected data. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the ethical dilemmas which emerged throughout the research process. This lays the groundwork for the subsequent Findings and Discussion chapters.

3.2 Philosophy

My academic background prior to this Masters was in Psychology. I have leant towards positivism in my past approaches to conducting research, as this is how I was taught. Throughout this Master's programme, however, I have learned much about the interpretivist paradigm. To place myself on the philosophical axis - according to Creswell (2003) - as succinctly as I can at this time, I would say I am situated between social constructionism and pragmatism. However, in the case of this research, I deemed a qualitative approach leaning towards social constructionism more appropriate than also incorporating a quantitative element. This is due to the type of knowledge I wished to access in my research. I was interested in the experiences and feelings of the participants involved and therefore an interpretive paradigm was most appropriate complimenting my understanding that the linking of study design to epistemological stance allows a cohesive study to result (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). Therefore, factors that influenced this decision were the exploratory nature of the research (Mashuri et al., 2022) as well as time and scope constraints and my research aims. I acknowledge that in future research I could build upon this to incorporate my pragmatist leanings through a mixed methods, post-positivist research approach.

Elaborating upon my philosophical positioning, this has shifted throughout the course of the programme. While I do place value on positivism in the sense that for some research this is the appropriate stance to take depending on the enquiry and research aims, I now understand that a social constructionist stance intrinsically speaks to my viewpoints regarding the concepts of what reality is (Killam, 2013; Mason, 2002) (ontology) and "what is knowledge? How do we know something?" (Couper, 2020, p. 275) (epistemology).

3.2.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontologically, I view reality as existing in a realist form, but I am not overly concerned with this as my focus is, like others interested in social constructionism, on the social (Denzin, 1997; Gergen, 1994; Potter, 1996). However, I would align myself with the view that "our social constructions are nevertheless based on reality as it is actually structured" (Burr, 2015, p. 113). I take the stance that there is a 'real world', but that concepts linked to this are formed through the ways we engage with it in a social manner (Andrews, 2012).

Epistemologically, I align myself with a social constructionist approach. As Andrews (2012) argues, social constructionism in line with Berger & Luckmann (1991) views knowledge as forming through people's social actions. Therefore, I view the participants in my research as co-creators of knowledge and situated within their own spheres of experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). Additionally, the theoretical framework which I have chosen in this research - transformative learning - is inherently based upon social constructionism (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). These factors lend itself to the qualitative methodology utilising semi-structured interviews and the Active Interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) approach which I have chosen to employ in my research design.

3.3 Strategy

3.3.1 Qualitative Methodology

The qualitative approach I have used requires openness with regards to the access of knowledge, enabling the researcher to explore how people perceive things which they have experienced (Hennink et al., 2020). This aligns with my research which seeks to explore how individuals have experienced Digital Skills education in a Community Education setting and the impacts this has had upon them. While this approach provides nuanced and detailed data about a specific cohort of people, it can be criticised for its small sample size and questions regarding its generalisability to the wider population (Scârneci-Domnişoru, 2024).

3.3.2 Interview Strategy

Interviewing is “the most widely used technique of … generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 67). It can be criticised for its time-consuming nature and misconception of information by the researcher (Alsaawi, 2014). However, I have selected to utilise semi-structured interviews in this research as they allow data to be gathered which is focused upon the research questions and aims. They also gave me the flexibility to explore subjects which may have organically been raised throughout the interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). I chose to use self-designed interview questions as this allowed me to gain insight into the areas applicable to the study topic.

The Active Interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) approach I have employed aligns well with my epistemological social constructionist view of knowledge construction and production (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) and the ways I authentically engage in communication. I chose this to elicit richer information pertinent to my interests, research questions and aims of the study. It involves viewing the participants not as vessels to mine for information, but as individuals with valuable knowledge to impart about their subjective experiences. I made the decision to “consciously and conscientiously” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 68) be an active partaker in each interview; not just asking the prescribed questions but “attending to the interview process and product in ways that are more sensitive to the social construction of knowledge” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 68).

3.3.4 Pilot Interview

I conducted a Pilot Interview prior to conducting the interviews which were used as data in this study. I wanted to see how the Interview Guide and Interview Questions (Appendix 1) would work in practice and if any adjustments would need to be made before data collection began (Busetto et al., 2020; Majid et al., 2017). The Pilot Interview was conducted with a 49-year-old woman given the pseudonym Betty. Betty is a member of my social circle who suggested she would like to participate. Although she had not engaged in Digital Skills classes with me in a Community Education setting, we had worked together on various digital projects throughout our undergraduate degrees, and I had often provided her with digital assistance. While Betty did not match the inclusion criteria specifically and therefore data was not included in the analysis, the interview proved to be a worthwhile exercise in running through the process and seeing how the Interview Questions (Appendix 2) flowed. Additionally, it gave me the opportunity to put into practice the Active Interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) approach.

3.4 Participants

The sample were required to fulfil certain inclusion criteria to be eligible to participate in the study - to be 60 and over and have engaged in Digital Skills classes with me in a Community Education setting. Eight participants were recruited to gain enough data for analysis via purposeful sampling which is "identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable or experienced" (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2) in what the research is aiming to investigate.

The rationale for participants' age being set at 60 and above is to align with the concept of 'older persons' which is discussed further in the Ethical Considerations section. The rationale for participants needing to have engaged in Digital Skills classes with me in a Community Education setting is that this is the context of the research as outlined in the Aims and Research Questions section. Of the eight participants which were recruited and participated in the study, two were male and six were female and ages ranged from 62 – 88.

Table 3.1

Description of Participants and Assigned Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Demographic Description
Maura	Age 85, female. Member of an Active Retirement Group. Engaged in two six-week series of group Digital Skills classes in a local Library.
Kitty	Age 88, female. Resident of a Housing Association. Engaged in a series of one-to-one Digital Skills classes in the training room of the Housing Association.
George	Age 85, male. Resident of a Housing Association. Engaged in a series of one-to-one Digital Skills classes as well as a four-week group Digital Skills class in the training room of the Housing Association.
Sally	Age 73, female. Resident of a Housing Association. Engaged in a series of one-to-one Digital Skills classes as well as a four-week group Digital Skills class in the training room of the Housing Association.

Claire	Age 62, female. Resident of a Housing Association. Engaged in a series of one-to-one Digital Skills classes in the training room of the Housing Association.
Bill	Age 71, male. Attended a six-week series of group Digital Skills classes in the local Library following seeing the Library's advertisement.
Ethel	Age 62, female. Attended two series of group Digital Skills classes in an Enterprise Centre following seeing the Enterprise Centre's advertisement.
Heidi	Age 62, female. Attended a six-week series of group Digital skills classes in the local Library following seeing the Library's advertisement.

3.5 Procedure

The eight participants were recruited via purposeful sampling (Lavrakas, 2008; Palinkas et al., 2015). To achieve this, potential participants who met the inclusion criteria were approached and asked if they would like to participate. Each individual was provided with an Information Sheet (Appendix 3) and Informed Participant Consent Form (Appendix 4) as well as a copy of the Interview Questions (Appendix 1). They were then able to freely decide if they would like to partake. Upon receiving their consent via the completion of the Informed Participant Consent Form (Appendix 4), a date and time convenient to each participant was arranged to conduct the interview. Participants were given the option to have the interview conducted at the setting in which the Digital Skills classes took place, or at their homes. Five interviews were conducted at participants' homes and three at the settings the classes took place in. Before starting each interview, the mobile phone recording device was tested to ensure that it was working correctly. Next, the following pre-interview tasks were carried out:

1. The participant was thanked for their participation in the interview and the study as a whole
2. The Information Sheet (Appendix 3) was gone through with the participant to make sure that they understood everything it entailed
3. Each item in the Informed Participant Consent Form (Appendix 4) was gone through with the participant ensuring they both understood and agreed with each of the items. It was checked that the participant had both signed and dated the document

4. Each of the Interview Questions (Appendix 1) were gone through with the participant, making sure that they were comfortable with all of them, and they were asked if they wished any to be omitted
5. The participant was informed that that I may take brief written notes during the interview of key points or points to revisit later in the interview and that they could view these notes after the interview finishes
6. The participant was asked if they have any questions before the interview began
7. The recording device was activated, and the interview commenced

The audio file was immediately transferred to OneDrive, hosted and secured by Maynooth University which was only accessible by me. It was then immediately deleted from the recording device. Each participant was provided with a copy of the Debrief Sheet (Appendix 6). Transcriptions of the audio were made utilising the MacWhisper application (Bruin, 2024). I listened to the audio to check accuracy and clarity and rectify any mistakes, spelling or grammatical errors and format them appropriately. They were edited and finally the study was written up using Microsoft Word.

3.5.1 Implementing the Active Interviewing Approach

Throughout the eight interviews, I was able to implement the Active Interviewing approach. For example, when interviewing Kitty and asking Question 6 (Appendix 1), I referred to the hobby she had mentioned previously which had been positively impacted upon by her Digital Skills education. I asked if there was anything in addition to this which she would like to mention regarding new skills she now possessed. In this way, I was viewing the interview as a conversation which was being "constructed *in situ*, as a product of the talk between interview participants" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 67). In Claire's interview, I had previous knowledge of some of the challenges she was experiencing at this time – that she had lost access to the Internet due to her phone breaking which she used as a mobile hotspot. I wanted to tap into this during the interview and viewed the interview as an opportunity for this to be "fleshed out … in relation to the give and take of the interview process and the interview's broader research purposes" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 74). This led me to directly ask about the specific challenges Claire was facing at this time as related to the subject matter of the research topic when it came to asking Question 4 (Appendix 1).

3.6 Analysis

Following transcription and editing of the audio files, I conducted a Reflective Thematic Analysis following the steps outlined by Braun & Clarke (2022) which are detailed as follows:

1. The eight transcripts were printed and I became familiar with and fully immersed in the data through reading and rereading the transcripts
2. I began to generate initial codes based upon my immersion in the data. I logically and systematically began to find meaning in the data through grouping together quotations which fell under initial code headings. 10 initial codes were generated which were: Classroom Environment; Confidence; Fear and Anxiety Surrounding Technology; Feelings Surrounding Technology's Development; Relationship with Technology; Skills; Social Aspect; Vocabulary; Motivation; and Sharing Knowledge with Others
3. These initial codes were then further refined into themes. The reflexive nature of the Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) demanded I be cognisant of not just identifying features of the dataset but looking for meaningful based patterns. The emergent themes began to align with the outlined aims of the study. Themes which emerged were Skills; Confidence; and Motivation. Initial codes which fell under the theme of Skills were Skills, and Relationship with Technology. Initial codes which fell under the theme of Confidence were Confidence; Fear and Anxiety Surrounding Technology; Feelings Surrounding Technology's Development; Sharing Knowledge with Others; and Vocabulary. Initial codes which fell under the theme of Motivation were Motivation; Classroom Environment; and Social Aspect
4. These themes were refined, combined or otherwise shaped, ultimately becoming more concrete. I was cognisant of the final theme names being concise to provide the most clarity and alignment with the patterns identified
5. The themes were again further reviewed until they were finalised
6. I then used these themes and subthemes to generate the Findings and Discussion section of the research

3.7 Ethical Considerations and Dilemmas

The research was ethically approved by the Department of Adult and Community Education following their approval process. Following this, however, I faced various ethical dilemmas throughout the research process. The first arose surrounding the inclusion criteria involving age. I faced a challenge regarding the determination of what an ‘older’ person is. I began to realise as I designed the study that I needed to be cognisant of my views on this and the views of my participants and future readers of the research. How would I determine what an ‘older’ person is? How would I rationalise this in my research and in how I interact with and refer to my participants? I reflected upon how I would define ‘older person’ and realised that I do not think that there is a specific year of age in which this happens. Literature aligns with this, providing various perspectives from 54 (McGarrigle et al., 2017) to 60 (O’Connor & Murphy, 2022), to 65 (Central Statistics Office, 2024b; Sheehan & O’ Sullivan, 2020). Therefore, I aligned myself with Knowles & Hanson (2018) who refer to “aging [as] a process” (p. 74) and made the decision to set the inclusion criteria of 60 years and older as this is the middle of the range previously stated and aligns with the demographic of the participants I intended to approach for recruitment. Mustajoki & Mustajoki (2017) fortified this choice as they discuss each person as being individual and not being categorised as being in a certain point of life just because they have reached a certain age.

I also became aware of the ethical dilemma surrounding gatekeepers while preparing to conduct this study. The Digital Skills classes were conducted through Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB) and Sligo LEADER Partnership’s Community Education programme. As the Community Education Facilitator and Community Development Officer of these organisations provided the original access to these potential participants, I realised that they had the right to be informed and to allow or disallow me from conducting research with these people (Singh & Wassenaar, 2016). Therefore, I contacted these identified gatekeepers via email and sent them the Information Sheet (Appendix X) and Informed Participant Consent Form (Appendix X), receiving their approval for the study to take place.

Another issue I faced was my insider status and previous relationships with the participants due to them being my former students. Saidin & Yaacob (2016) explain that this could lead a researcher to “overlook the confidentiality and sensitivity of the information ... not be as alert and sensitive to the information or issue compared to those who are outside the organisation” (p. 850). Therefore, I made sure to be cognisant of trying to view the research from an outside perspective when it comes to ethical dilemmas and decisions and to bear in mind the possibility of power relationships. I have held the power status of ‘teacher’ and the participant of ‘student’. Participants also have the potential to view me as ‘researcher’, ‘educated’, or ‘Master’s student’, elevating the perceived status of power I may have in their eyes. This dilemma was managed through me having prior relationships with the participants in a Community Education setting which is more informal than traditional, didactic schooling and does not include conventions such as assessment and grading. The content of the classes was formulated with students as co-creators in mind as topics were derived from what would benefit the individual or whole group. I also chose to conduct the interviews in the setting in which the classes took place or in participants’ homes to not involve a power expression of bringing the participants to me, the researcher.

Some of the potential participants I intended to recruit were engaging in Digital Skills classes with me while the study was in its formulative stages. I knew that ethically I could not ‘cold call’ these potential participants and so had to obtain their consent to be contacted regarding the study at a later date. Therefore, I designed a Pre-Study Information Sheet (Appendix 7) which I used to obtain their name, phone number and email address as well as to provide them with details about the study which was under formulation. Mustajoki and Mustajoki (2017) state that because researchers are often passionate about and knowledgeable regarding their field of research, this can lead them to have a personal vested interest in it. This may lead to ethical issues such as adjusting results to suit one’s agenda or not acknowledging the work of others. Therefore, I aimed to be honest, transparent and true to the data collected, the processing of it and to treat participants involved in an ethical way. I also had the guidance of my supervisor who was a resource, guide and point of contact for any issues which arose throughout the course of the research.

I recognised that the demographic involved in the research is categorised as marginalised and often discriminated against (The Equality Authority, 2005). Therefore, the rule of reciprocity was employed. Respect and the previously mentioned sense of the participants being co-constructors of the research was adhered to in line with my social constructionist epistemology (Andrews, 2012; Beaumie, 2001; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004). I achieved this through checking in with participants during the interviews for feedback and using questions such as “What I’m hearing you say is … is that correct?”.

I understand that nothing can ever achieve ethical perfection, but I have been determined throughout the research process to be responsible, empathetic and transparent

(Mustajoki and Mustajoki, 2017). I have done my utmost to respect the participants and to always consider their welfare above all else.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has served to demonstrate my philosophical stance and the subsequent research design and methodological choices which were informed by this as well as the ethical considerations and dilemmas encountered. Through utilising a social constructionist lens, I have, to the best of my ability, endeavoured to place the participants' voices and experiences first and foremost. My choice of methods being semi-structured interviews and the Active Interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) approach compliment this allowing a cohesive narrative to result.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the results of the analysis. Three main themes were identified which are illustrated in Figure 4.1, below.

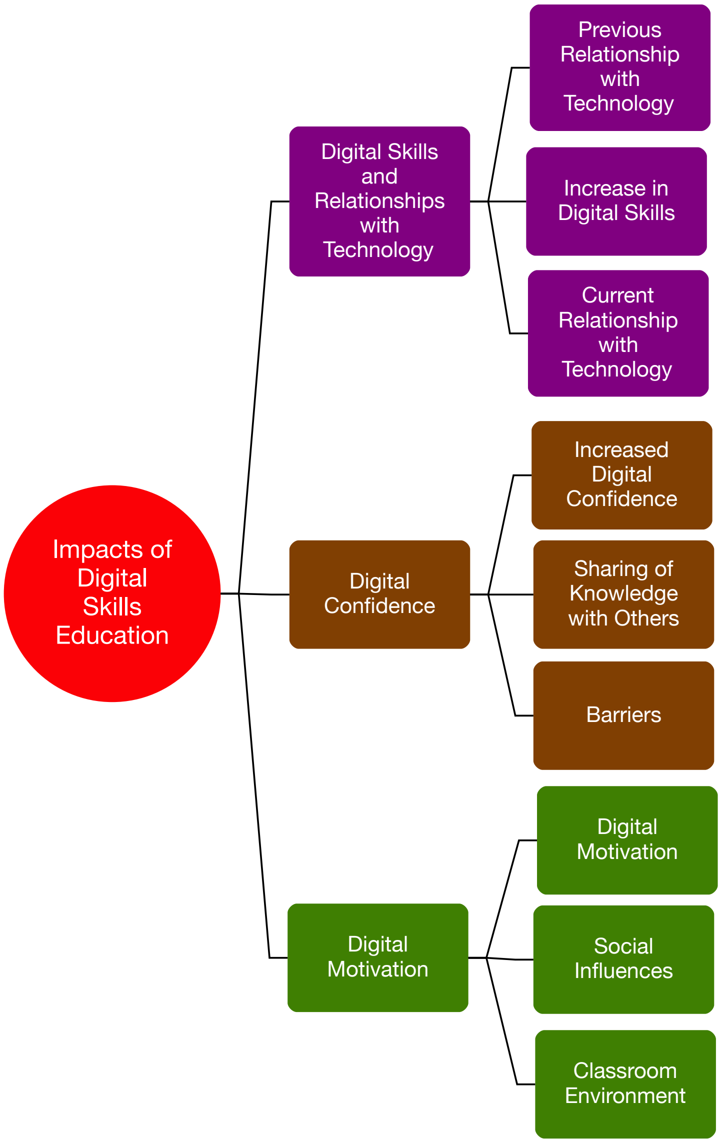

Figure 4.1 *Mind Map Illustration of Final Themes and Subthemes*

4.2 Theme 1: Digital Skills and Relationships with Technology

Participants offered insights into their subjective experience of the impacts upon their ability to use digital technologies in their day-to-day lives following Digital Skills classes. This was split into subthemes to effectively narrate the progression which has been documented. It begins with participants' previous relationship with technology followed by specific skills acquired through attending the classes and then finally their current relationship with technology. This will provide context and clarity regarding what they could previously do due to their relationships with technology throughout their lives and what they can do now after attending the classes.

4.2.1 Subtheme 1: Previous Relationship with Technology

Participants described their previous relationships with technology as being non-existent or developing in adulthood throughout their working lives. Therefore, participants felt that it has not been as integrated into them as it has been with younger generations.

Overwhelmingly, participants expressed that they had not conceived how much technology would develop within their lifetimes. Maura, aged 85, shared that *"it was many, many years after that when I heard about computers, and I thought I will never be in my lifetime … yes, unimaginable how it has developed."*. Similarly, Sally, aged 73 shared a story from her working life that:

> *one day talking to one of my bosses and he- he held up a pen and he says, you know, the time is coming when we will be talking into this pen, and this is the way things are going to happen. And I thought: "Oh, can that ever happen? Will it ever happen?" … And it has come to pass. Things have moved on so fast … And I never thought that I would see that day coming, but it has.*

Conversely, George, aged 85, stated that "*we did foresee that there would be massive advantages and development, you know, in- in- in the digital world."*

Regarding participants' lives growing up Maura, aged 85, recalls that *"I have had no relationship in the past with technology or the Internet … so the technology and the Internet would never have entered my vocabulary.* Similarly, George states *"When I was going to school, primary, post-primary, it wasn't… heard of. And then when I went to middle college, it wasn't mentioned, it wasn't available"* and that for him *"I regret that eh, technology in the* *digital world has come late to me during life."* This shows that technology was not available and present in these individuals' lives for them to learn to utilise it in their formative years.

Speaking of her working life, Sally, aged 73, commented that *"…there were no, em, no laptops, nothing … very raw to technology in my place of work. Eh, there was no such thing, everything was done by hand. For example, handwriting, there was no such thing as a laptop"*. Sally feels that *"…really technology passed me out. Em, I tried to keep up with it all, eh, but a lot of it went over my head."* This resonates with Bill's, aged 71, recollection of his working life as a Civil Servant. He stated that *"When I started working and everything like that everything was manually done and over the years technology has progressed"* even though eventually in his work environment *"we had lots of technology*" that "*everything was preset"*. Therefore, even when technology was developing and being utilised in the working world, these individuals operated it in a basic or rudimentary fashion.

This subtheme illustrates that for most participants, technology came to them later in life, as it developed throughout their lifetimes. Their expressions capture the generational divide which was experienced by them in comparison to groups who have grown up with technology and learned to use it in their formative years. This sets the stage for understanding the significance of the progress they have made through attending digital skills classes in the following subthemes.

4.2.2 Subtheme 2: Increase in Digital Skills

Against the backdrop of participants' previous relationship with technology, increases in skills from attending Digital Skills classes were prevalent among participants. Participants expressed that they were able to navigate the digital world better following attendance of the classes. These ranged from being able to better operate in day-to-day life and stay in touch with others to accessing Government Services and healthcare.

Demonstrating that things which many people may take for granted, such as being able to power on or off a device, are skills which participants did not possess, Maura, aged 85, stated that:

> *…before I did the classes I couldn't turn off my phone, I couldn't put it on silent … now I can turn off my phone, now I can turn off my phone. I can lock my phone. And I can go into Settings.*

Maura elaborated upon this, sharing that:

> *One example would be going to a hotel last year and normally when we'd go to the hotel, just for the Active Retirement Group, I would have to ask them at the desk, would they put on the Wi-Fi for me.*

This shows that after attending the classes, Maura has the capacity to operate more autonomously when it comes to using her digital devices. She was able to perform tasks which she previously would have had to ask for assistance to do. This is an empowering progression for her.

Maura and Bill can now engage with health, Government and other services online thus operating as more independent and active members of society. Regarding everyday life tasks, Maura also expressed other things she is now able to do compared to before, such as: *"For a lot of us we couldn't and the Doctor's appointment now, everything is online and we weren't familiar with being able to … make a Doctor's appointment"* as well as *"…and we were not familiar with being able to do online booking, online banking, any of those Government Services".* Similarly, Bill, aged 71 was able to use his new skills:

> *For your daily- for your daily chores to go in on the computer to pay this or pay that or look up this or look up that … to book an airline ticket, going through the various government departments and things like that, it has made life a lot easier*

Kitty, aged 85, expressed that following the classes, she was able to reengage with a hobby – playing Bridge – which had moved online since the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *… I could have participated with the hobby online, but I wasn't capable of doing it … and felt it wasn't for me. Even though my friends were doing it and kept saying: "It's OK, we'll show you", but that wasn't good enough for me, so I didn't do it, but I have mastered it now and I am enjoying it … I'm in playing competitively online now.*

Kitty was also able to engage better with her sewing hobby as she was now able to access resources online to assist her with it. Kitty shared that "*…another hobby I had was sewing, and it was lovely to go to YouTube and they showed you how to do different … things that would be difficult".* This shows that now Kitty can partake in a hobby (playing Bridge online) which was not possible before due to aspects of the digital divide. She was also able to further develop her skills in another hobby (sewing), which enriches her life and keeps her socially and mentally active.

Sally, aged 73, commented that if she had not attended the classes, she "*would have lost out on so much … the experience I have gained uh, from attending those classes and the things that I can now do ... compared to beforehand"*. She elaborated on this stating that:

> *I have learned how to turn on my laptop how to, eh, search through Google, eh, so many so many sites there are so many sites there for example Gmails, Facebook, obituaries, Online Banking and watching, you know, being able to watch Funeral Masses where you couldn't attend them, you know, being able to do all of that and it's so… you know, you get so much pleasure out of being able to do those things –*

This demonstrates that for Sally, she can do many things online now which she was not able to do before attending the classes. These activities allow her to stay connected, know what is going on in her community and operate independently through accessing services like banking. This brings her a sense of joy and enrichment.

Claire, aged 62, who did not have access to the Internet before being taught how to create a mobile hotspot on her phone, expressed that: *"When you showed me the tethering ... and how, because I don't have Internet here, and I could do a lot of things ... - through the Internet"*. She describes being able to use the Internet as: *"it opened a new world to me absolutely that I never knew existed ... - you know, I thought it was just a phone but it's more than a phone and an iPad is full of information, you know?"* and that now she can *"FaceTime my sister"*. Recently, however, Claire's phone broke and she:

> *found out ... I found out that there's no Wi-Fi in the phone and Matthew can't find it. And so, no access to anything. And I'm going to buy a device called… what do you say it was? Spangle, is it? ... Dongle. And it provides me to the Internet and what I had already ... be restored again.*

Claire's skills acquired through the classes allow her to problem solve her technological issues and get herself reconnected to the digital world which she would not have been able to do previously. This illustrates the profound effect in which developing digital skills has had upon Claire's life. Comparing it to not having these skills, she concludes that she would "*be living in oblivious"*.

Heidi, aged 62, highlighted that she now understood *"Malware and ... securing a safer password"*. She was also able to, like Claire, problem solve an issue she had with her Boarding Pass in the airport when *"the Boarding Pass got caught in the machine or flew away ... so I had no choice, I had to take a photograph and go and scan it"*. This allowed Heidi to be able to board her plane without the assistance of others as she now had acquired the skills to navigate through the problem herself, even under pressure. She states that "*I wouldn't have been able to like, if I saw something online or I wouldn't have been able to screenshot that before the class"* as she was able to do with the Boarding Pass.

This subtheme demonstrates the progress participants have made in relation to their digital skills resulting from attending classes. Skills were both practical such as making Doctor's appointments and accessing Online Banking or other Government services and deeply personal like keeping up communication with family and friends or finding out what has been going on in the local community. Therefore, it can be seen through these narratives that there has been a direct positive impact upon participants' lives through attaining digital skills because of the classes.

4.2.3 Subtheme 3: Current Relationship with Technology

Participants' current relationships with technology were positive and they could see the progress they have made in comparison with their previous relationships with technology.

Kitty, aged 88, stated that technology and Internet usage "*…is a very positive part of my life now … It is, it makes a hell of a difference"*. In line with this, George, aged 85, said that had he not made the progress he has by attending the classes, he would "*feel I'd be lost today… I really, I- I was delighted to grasp the opportunity, which was being offered, and I was glad I did."*

Ethel, aged 62, commented that *"I am very interested in learning. Learning more about the technology of communication. I know I have to move on. I can't stay in the dark ages. I'd be left behind."*. Similarly, Claire, aged 62 expressed that through the classes *"You opened up a life to me and you didn't realise it … it opened the world and created the world. And I got a new iPad because of it"*. Sally, aged 73, resonated with this by her statement that *"...I'm so delighted as well and with myself I'm… trying to get myself there, even halfway there."*

Heidi, aged 62, stated that now she has *"...some basic knowledge in computers"* but acknowledges that she doesn't *"have a passion for them anyways."*

This subtheme provides a vignette of participants' expressions of their relationship with technology after attending Digital Skills classes. When looked at in relation to their previous relationship with technology and the skills they developed through attendance of the classes, the progression they have made both in ability and in attitudes towards technology can be seen in a holistic light.

4.3 Theme 2: Digital Confidence

Participants offered insights into their subjective experience of the impacts upon their confidence to use digital technologies following Digital Skills classes. This was split into subthemes to firstly illustrate reported increases in digital confidence. Next, how this led into participants' experiences of this confidence which then led to them being able to engage in sharing their knowledge with others. Finally, the last subtheme presents specific barriers to digital confidence which were shared.

4.3.1 Subtheme 1: Increased Digital Confidence

Many participants expressed that they felt more confident utilising digital technologies and the Internet following attending the classes, displaying a direct impact. Feelings of accomplishment, pride, courage and ease in relation to operating technology were shared. However, some participants acknowledged that they still needed to build more confidence in their abilities and that they felt more confident in the classroom environment with the Tutor there than they did operating technology and the Internet alone.

Both Maura, aged 85, and Kitty, aged 88, provided insight not only into the skills they gained, but the emotional and attitudinal shift acquiring these skills evoked within them. Their increased confidence is rooted in the achievements they accomplished through their participation in the Digital Skills classes.

Maura commented that now she is *"not so afraid"*. Previously, she would have been *"...absolutely terrified of opening my phone … laptop or my iPad to do anything on it"*. For her, *"...the most important thing I've learned is just have it- not to be afraid of our phones … not to be afraid of our iPad"*. Further to this, Maura described increased feelings of confidence and pride surrounding her usage of digital technologies and the Internet. She shared that prior to the classes, she "*wasn't even confident about texting"* and that now she is "*…able to do online booking, online banking, any of those Government Services. So by doing the Digital Skills course it gave us that confidence to be able to do it"* and "*now I have the confidence to book a train ticket, book a bus ticket, or even to book a Ryanair- Ryanair* *flight"* as well as *"I felt very proud of myself being able to put on the Wi-Fi myself ... learning how to use the Wi-Fi, that was a big advantage for me and helped me to build my confidence."*

Resonating with Maura's experiences, Kitty stated, *"I feel very, very positive", "I feel very au fait with it ... very, very comfortable"* and *"It has changed my life for the better. And I mean that very sincerely".* Kitty has also gained confidence, courage and a sense of ease surrounding issues she may face online. She expressed that:

> *I'm not as scared of it. When I um, started online particularly playing the cards online, if I was blocked out, I panicked ... Nowadays I don't, I just deal with it and don't worry. But I was very… very em, nervous about it at first, but now it doesn't bother me in the least. You know, everybody can be locked out at some time or other … And I just know hang on and it'll come back.*

For Kitty, her panicked feelings when something goes wrong have diminished and a sense of confidence that the issue will be resolved with patience has been instilled in her. This illustrates the direct effect attending the classes has had upon her abilities to self-regulate and maintain composure due to her increased confidence and knowledge surrounding technology and the Internet. Likewise, Bill, aged 71, felt that "*if I have to do it, I'm confident that I have the ability to do it."* He shared that:

> *Prior to the course I'd be hesitant. I might get somebody else to do it on my behalf. Whereas now, I'll have a go at it. And if I succeed, I succeed. And if I don't, I don't get overly concerned. But I might seek help.*

He expressed that "*you still get uptight about it, but you're conscious now that if you do make a boob, that you can rectify it. You may not do it immediately, but before you finish, you will have it sorted."*

Bill therefore has gained confidence in his ability to problem solve or at least try to resolve issues with technology himself. He knows that he can seek assistance if he needs to, but that he has capability within himself which he would not have attempted to tap into before attending the classes.

For Claire, aged 62, she felt that *"…most definitely it opened me eyes in many respects and gave you the confidence really"* and that upon reflection after the classes had concluded *"you wouldn't know it, but it's very beneficial. When it's all over and you go away, that's when you know the difference between right and wrong.".* For Claire, she therefore felt that it was only after seeing how she was operating technology and the Internet after the classes that she realised how far she had come. She recognised her increased confidence to make choices surrounding her usage of these tools.

Ethel, aged 62, directly expressed the effect the classes had had upon her by stating that *"Even the Internet, I'm not as frightened now but that's only because of your classes"*. She shared that she now felt empowered to join Zoom meetings which she previously would have shied away from after attending the classes. As part of her work, she has:

> *…got big Zoom meetings, particularly, when it's things like the County Council. You have a lot of people involved in that particular theme. They're from all over the place. So, it's a wonderful opportunity for my own publicity, for the Woodland ... To have that courage. I wouldn't have had that courage if I wasn't attending your classes.*

Ethel elaborates on this by sharing *"so now I accept the Zoom invitations, and I attend the Zoom calls ... And at this stage now, I even put my makeup on now."* Her sense of courage and empowerment was not just contained within the realm of attending the Zoom meetings, but personally in the way she expresses herself by now wearing makeup to these events. This indicates that feelings of self-worth, self-assurance and visibility may be associated with this.

Ethel shared another instance in which her increased confidence was evident. When shopping with her husband for a router:

> *We knew what to ask … I was able to ask him because of the conversations that you were having with the students. I was able to tune into that, even showing us the equipment that was in the room. It gave me more confidence when you talked it through with me, I could see what it was and what was needed … I'd never have known that if it wasn't for the classes … So, I knew as soon as I saw it, I said: "That's what we need"*

Ethel was able to independently solve an issue she was having relating to digital technologies and accessing the Internet with a sense of confidence, direction and surety directly relating to her experiences having attended the Digital Skills classes.

Conversely, however, not all participants felt a universal sense of increased confidence. George, aged 85, expressed that while he now felt:

> "*more at ease in using the mobile phone and in using the computer … I still feel I- I- I need more confidence in using technology… For instance, if something goes wrong, if I press the wrong button, or if I find that I don't... I'm looking for something and I don't find it, I can't... I have to spend time, you know, searching for it."*

Likewise, Sally, aged 73, also felt that she could still build upon her confidence to operate technology and the Internet without a Tutor's assistance:

> "*As I said earlier, I feel more confident when Matthew is by my side, em, or available to answer my queries and indeed he has given me his phone number but if I need to ask any question all I have to do is ring him, eh, which I have done a few times and no problem whatsoever. Em, now during the classes as well I did take notes, I took notes throughout the classes and I can always refer to them and- and- and it gives me you know I have written there and it gives me the confidence to go on to continue."*

This subtheme demonstrated that many participants experienced a direct positive impact upon their confidence surrounding technology and the Internet following attending the classes. This confidence translated not only into functional abilities but into intrinsic belief in self and for one participant, even confidence surrounding self-presentation. This provided a snapshot into concepts such as identity, feeling seen and agency. The subtheme also highlighted that participants' experiences and journeys are not uniform. Other participants felt that they still needed to build their digital confidence further to operate independently. Overall, this illustrates the complexities and individualism surrounding attaining digital confidence amongst the participants.

4.3.2 Subtheme 2: Sharing of Knowledge with Others

Building upon participants' expressions of confidence following attending Digital Skills classes, participants also gave experiences of them then sharing their acquired knowledge with others.

Maura, aged 85, shared that:

> *I did help somebody now … I was able to show her how to send an email. Now she wasn't- she wasn't at your class, but she called into my house one day and we must have been talking about it, so I did, I showed her how to send an email.*

Likewise, Heidi, aged 62, related an experience of assisting a man she works for as a Personal Assistant:

> *he has business in Dublin, but he has bad arthritis, so I just send emails for him and but like he had his PIN number on his phone and everything. (laughs) Passwords to different things … So, I advised him on it and so was that even for opening links on text messages … For a highly intelligent man, wouldn't be IT-savvy sadly enough … And you know, it's nice to be able to share, too.*

Claire, aged 62, also shared her knowledge with a family member. She stated that *"I try to do- use my information on my sister"*. She shared an interaction between them whereby she explained what she had learned about creating and using a mobile hotspot in the classes. She relayed the conversation as *"And I said, you know Wi-Fi, and I said: "Listen to me, Matthew said that go into tethering ... Into settings", and I said: "It comes up – tethering"*. Her sister then enquired of her: *"When did you become so knowledgeable about this kind of thing?"*, and Claire replied, *"Matthew taught me"*. Following this, she offered her sister *"if you want to write that down again I'd get a pen", I said and write that down: "Tethering", I said: ... "It gives you the Internet free of charge"* to which her sister's response was *"That's great, that's very beneficial I must tell someone else that, you know?"*.

This snapshot of an interaction between participant and a family member illustrates the snowball effect which sharing of knowledge with others can have. From participant to her sister and then potentially from her sister to others, knowledge has been passed on.

For Sally, aged 73, she shared her knowledge in a different way by stating, *"I suppose I feel that you know the- the Sligo Lawn Bowls page was part of sharing what I had learned ... During my class by putting it up ... on the page"*. For Sally, feelings of pride and accomplishment were associated with this achievement. She expressed "*I felt that- that led to all the members sharing, you know, that was I suppose my sharing with them ... as to what was out there ... what I had achieved"*.

On the other hand, some participants expressed that they had not shared what they had learned with others due to lack of confidence in their abilities to transmit the information. For George, he expressed this as:

> *"A lot of the younger people that I would meet, they would be far more experienced and would have a longer association in using that technology than- then I had ... So, I wouldn't feel confident transmitting... anything to them because they already would have that that information."*

Likewise, Ethel stated that:

> *The technology I wouldn't be able because I don't have enough confidence beyond, I'm just learning as I said I think I said it earlier on - I'm very slow - I learn it and I get confident with what I've learned. I would be afraid to show that to somebody else until I'm 100 per cent sure of what I'm doing*

Bill and Kitty had other reasons for not sharing knowledge with others. For Bill, it was that "*my family are away, and they would be very computerized in their world so they don't need me to tell them what to do ... and my wife would be more advanced than myself."*

This subtheme demonstrated that for some participants, they did not just acquire knowledge which gave them confidence, but that they also began disseminating this knowledge to others. This potentially suggests a higher order rather than superficial understanding and confidence in their abilities reflective of both empowerment and transformation. For other participants, however, feelings of lack of digital confidence or not having individuals surrounding them who needed help held them back from sharing knowledge with others.

4.3.3 Subtheme 3: Barriers

Participants expressed various barriers to them feeling more confident regarding their digital skills. These ranged from fear and anxiety surrounding using technology and the possibility of being scammed to not being able to keep up with the pace of technology's development in areas such as banking.

Regarding fear and anxiety surrounding technology, Kitty, aged 88, stated in relation to technology's development that *"It's unbelievable … I kind of wonder where is life going to end?*". For her, the fast-paced nature of technology and the changes it goes through in quick succession has been a challenge. She expressed that "*it's moving so fast it is very hard to try and keep up with it"*. Kitty also expressed fear surrounding this. She described it as *"frightening … Because they could almost tell you where to go for your breakfast."* This sentiment was echoed in Ethel's, aged 62, statement that technology's development is "*exciting but it's frightening"*. For Ethel, she felt that fear was "*my biggest Achilles heel that is it and with my mobile phone I'm still afraid of it".* Sally, aged 73, felt similarly, that *"…I'm still afraid of technology. I'm afraid of my laptop and my phone"*. She felt that *"at this stage of my life I-I-I don't think it will disappear. That fear is always there".* Heidi, aged 62, shared this feeling, that *"I have some basic knowledge in computers. I would have a fear of them. I'm so sure"*.

For Sally, Ethel and Heidi when with the tutor, they felt more confident. However, when alone, Sally expressed that *"I came home and I would try and do it myself and the fear would return … that fear would return"* and Ethel stated, "*The fear factor for me is when I'm on my own … and I can't solve the problem I won't try out things for fear I'll break it".* Heidi felt similarly. She shared that when she was working, she:

> *would have had support at work with my colleagues so that the younger ones at work to as well to always give them a call for help … whereas I don't have that at the minute and it's like when you don't have that like security blanket there it gives you more fear*

Delving into specific fears expressed by several participants, it was shared that the ways in which the Internet and digital technologies can be abused was a barrier to confidence. Claire, aged 62, acknowledged that *"there is a lot of abuse too … it's a dangerous kind of an instrument if you don't know what you're dealing with"*. Similarly, Bill, aged 71, recognised regarding the Internet that *"…in general it's helpful but I'm sure people can abuse it too or be abused"* as did Ethel, who stated *"…there's a lot of the very dark side on the Internet and you can gain access to it very easily".*

Some participants also shared that the fear of being scammed and having personal information or money stolen was another barrier to confidence. Claire said this was "*because you know there's hackers out there and they take advantage".* Likewise, Bill spoke of "*challenges, yes, because you're always worrying about being ripped off or something like that in the sense of somebody getting access to your data"* and Heidi relayed the prevalence of *"false news and stuff … Yeah, all of that and it can have awful negative impact and a lot of uh scaremongering and nothing is private now.* Heidi also made that point that for her, it was specifically "*the security of your- of your card … That I think for me is a bigger issue … That how do you know which site is- is secure and which site isn't?"* and that she receives scam messages that say things like *"you haven't paid the bill on the phone even though it's on a standing order and if you go back online you can see the money came out like it's so easy to click on that negatively".* She shared that her fears are reinforced by hearing *"the most IT savvy people are getting caught"* which made her feel even more vulnerable.

This subtheme demonstrates that fear and anxiety surrounding technology and the Internet as well as the ways they can be abused and utilised to scam people, undermining individuals' digital confidence. It also highlighted participants' feelings of lack of confidence when operating digital technologies and the Internet without tutor supervision, which was said to offset these feelings.

4.4 Theme 3: Digital Motivation

Participants offered insights into their subjective experience of the impacts upon their motivation to be willing to use digital technologies outside of the classroom environment. This was split into subthemes to show increase in motivation for some participants, no increase in motivation for other participants and the impact in which the classroom environment and social influences had upon this motivation.

4.4.1 Subtheme 1: Digital Motivation

Participants expressed both increases and no change to their motivation to utilise digital technologies outside of the classroom environment following Digital Skills classes.

Maura, aged 85, shared that she has since engaged in *"setting up [WhatsApp] groups, sending photos, doing the emails, doing the QR code"* as well as using her mobile phone's GPS. She stated that *"I mightn't be going somewhere … but just to try it out, I have done that".* Similarly, Sally, aged 73, explained that …*believe it or not I set up a Facebook page … I play Lawn Bowls, and their Facebook page was needed or requested, and they said to me would I try it, so I did"*. Commenting on her feelings and the specifics surrounding this, she elaborated that *"I really enjoyed it. I was out taking photos and writing articles on the page, putting up the photos able to put up the photos and giving reports to the local newspaper".*

Claire, aged 62, shared that following the classes she *"sit[s] with her every night - with my iPad and the phone"* and even though she had no access to the Internet at the time "*I just play around with it … and get to grips with what's going on and what you actually can do".* She also recounted how in attempting to solve her issue with Internet access through trying to create a mobile hotspot, she *"found Bluetooth and I tried that way, and I couldn't".* She attributed this attempt to *"because of you, that I even ventured it, you know what I mean?"*

Heidi, aged 62, shared that she has looked up things online since attending the classes to educate herself on topics. She relayed that:

> *I had a friend that- relations - that had quadruple bypass. And yeah, thankfully all is going well, but he has an infection at the minute. But I Googled that to see the procedure and everything else. Which I may not have done that*

Heidi also utilised technology like *"Airport Finder and all of those kind of things and you know for route planners all those yeah, like I was looking through some of those tools"* as well as *"…downloa[ing] apps uh on the- like the- the- the Seek app and the Picture This* *and, you know, even going through what you call it, SuperValu and Eurospar and all of those apps".*

Conversely, other participants shared that they had not been motivated to engage further with digital technologies and the Internet since attending the classes. Kitty, aged 88, said that this was due to her personal preference and needs. She expressed *"I'm happy with what I have at the moment and I've no desire to learn anything more".* George, aged 85 shared that it was perhaps due to time constraints when he stated *"I haven't experienced any changes or made any changes"* but acknowledged that he is *"...still very interested in perfecting my knowledge, you know?".* Ethel, aged 62 and Bill, aged 71 both put this down to the time of the year having an impact on how much they were motivated to engage with technology and the Internet. Ethel commented that *"our lifestyle at the minute is pretty mundane in the sense that the woodland is quiet ... So, I haven't really had an opportunity to try out things because our lifestyle isn't just in that zone at the minute."* Similarly, Bill relayed:

> *During the summer, I like to be out all the time. So, the number of times I would go into my device would be minimal whereas on a winter's evening and nothing on television and there's something on your mind where you might go and research it*

This subtheme demonstrates that for some participants, their motivation to engage with digital technologies and the Internet following attending the Digital Skills classes were directly impacted in a positive way and a sense of enjoyment was gained from doing so. Other participants noted that their motivation had remained unchanged either due to personal preference, time limitations or simply the time of year. This indicates that while digital skills classes may spur individuals to engage further with technology and the Internet outside of the classroom environment, there are other factors which come into play which may impact upon this.

4.4.2 Subtheme 2: Social Influences

Participants provided descriptions of how social aspects impact motivation to engage with digital technologies and the Internet. Connection to peers was overwhelmingly prevalent as was peers allaying their fears and feeling like they were a cohort who were all in this together.

Kitty, aged 88, reflected on the fact that now she can engage in her hobby, playing Bridge online after attending the classes, that "*it occupies my time, my mind … "It's a partner relationship, how my hobby is. And that's very nice."*

Maura, aged 85, shared that attending the classes was a motivator for her because:

> *…you meet other people … you can discuss things with others that you normally you might discuss downloading something or reading something on the Internet here to for you wouldn't have, eh, now we can read any news on the Internet which is great. And you can discuss it then with your friends*

Likewise, Bill, aged 71, commented on the social aspect of the classes stating that it's *"very important too to go and meet other people of your same age perhaps or even younger"* as did Ethel, aged 62, who stated that being with other learners, she could see that they were in the same position as she was. She stated, *"they want to learn but they're afraid and they're older, so I was able to relax into that group and listen to what challenges they had".* Ethel benefited from the group learning aspect of the classes; she recalled that she felt *"we're all of a similar mind … a similar stage in our lives that camaraderie is lovely … That you never you know there are lovely people there who I've made friends with that I never would have met before".* Other learners' questions gave her a sense of belonging, inclusion and allowed her *"…to be able to go into a room of like-minded people and they have conversations with us that they bring in problems or queries or that that I wouldn't have thought of, but I realise I have the same query."*

This subtheme demonstrates the role of the support of other peer learners, friendships and being able to work together to solve problems in having a positive impact upon individuals' digital motivation. It illustrates how digital motivation is not solely technically-based but that there is a relational aspect to it.

4.4.3 Subtheme 3: Classroom Environment

Overwhelmingly, participants commented on the positive role the classroom environment had. The design and delivery of the classes impacted upon learners' engagement and acted as a catalyst for their digital motivation outside of the classroom. It served to assist in allaying their fears which, in turn, led to increased digital motivation.

Maura, aged 85, shared that:

> *There was times when some of us, and particularly myself, I might have a silly, stupid question to ask. I was never afraid to ask you the question, Matthew … And even you always had an agenda or a programme ready for us each day, but if we asked you something that wasn't in that programme, you were always very willing to put the programme on hold or the class on hold and go through our question or our query*

Similarly, Ethel, aged 62, stated:

> *…when I'm there in the class with you, I can face the fear and say: "Matthew, what can I do? Or what have I done wrong here?", and you very calmly, thank you, you always very calmly, you have such a calming effect on me … And you go through it with me - solved. All my big high panic level gone so- so that's- that's the importance*

Ethel elaborated on this, that before attending the classes she felt that *"at my age, I don't want to look like an idiot, but at the same time I know I have to learn"*. She felt that throughout her experience attending the classes, it was her *"…in a corner and being encouraged out of that corner. And now all of a sudden, I'm in a room"* she feels that she was brought *"out of that rut and put me into a room where I could see all these possibilities"*

Heidi, aged 62, felt that the *"nice open forum"* classroom environment helped her to *"not feel like the odd one out",* not *"feel awkward asking questions"* and that sharing the class with learners who *"had held down high positions and they still didn't feel IT-savvy … definitely enhanced that um, the feeling of 'I'm not the only one'"*. Similarly, Bill, aged 71, commented *"…if you asked a silly question … there was no… laughing or joking or anything about it … from either the instructor or the other participants in the course"*. Likewise, Sally aged 73, commented regarding the instructor that "*he never looked at me and said: Oh my God!" … he was so patient. And no matter what question you asked, it wasn't stupid to him"*. For Bill and Sally, these things enabled them to feel comfortable in the class.

This subtheme demonstrates that it is not just the skills that learners acquire which lead them to being digitally motivated outside of the classroom. It also includes the way the classes make them feel, enable them to be seen and allow them to see others as being in the same situation as they are in. It provides insight into how emotion, connection with others and the learning environment impacts upon digital motivation.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the themes and subthemes which emerged from the data analysis in a logical order to include digital skills, digital confidence and digital motivation.

Findings have illustrated that there have been impacts on all these which have had powerful effects upon participants' lives in a plethora of areas from the social, emotional and societal. This provides the basis for the following Discussion chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

My research aims to explore the experiences of adults over 60 who have engaged in Digital Skills education in a Community Education setting in Ireland. My intention is to explore how this impacted upon their abilities, confidence and motivation in relation to utilising digital technologies and the Internet, barriers implicit to this and factors which are conducive to a positive learning experience despite these. I also wish to explore if this experience has been transformative and in what ways. In the preceding chapter, Findings were presented under three overarching themes - Digital Skills and Relationships with Technology, Digital Confidence and Digital Motivation. In this chapter I will interpret and evaluate the Findings of my research. I will do this by discussing, comparing and contrasting the findings with the with the scholarly literature and theoretical framework presented in the Literature Review chapter. This will be achieved in a logical manner by firstly stating the major findings and then directly addressing the research questions. Next, I will outline the implications of the Findings and this research's unique contribution to knowledge. In the concluding section of this chapter, I will highlight identified strengths and limitations of the study as well as identified suggestions for future research. Then I will provide a commentary on my personal reflections of my research process before making my concluding comments.

5.2 Research Question 1

How do older adults in a Community Education setting experience Digital Skills education - what impact does this have upon their skills and confidence in relation to digital technologies and the Internet and the motivation to use these outside of the classroom environment?

Participants described their experiences of Digital Skills education in a Community Education setting in line with three identified themes: skills, confidence and motivation to use digital technologies and the Internet outside of the classroom environment.

5.2.1 Digital Skills

Participants' relationship with technology prior to attending the classes demonstrated their removal from technological skills and digital society due to lack of exposure in early life. This can lead to exclusion from society as indicated by writers such as Jarvis (2004) and Baraka (2024). Participants consciously identified this struggle, even regretted this being the case, which provided the impetus to seek out Digital Skills classes. This resonates with the concept of a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 2006, p. 94), sparking the desire to do something about it through what Mezirow (2006) outlines as "planning a course of action" (p. 94) in Stage 6 of his theory.

Increases in digital skills through attending the classes are consistent with contemporary international research which highlights benefits of ICT programmes as developing problem-solving skills, fostering active online citizenship and knowledge of Cybersecurity (Garcia et al., 2022; Pihlainen et al., 2021). Participants described developments in their skills which are not only functional but indicate reflection such as being able to identify scams or informing others about the necessity of having strong passwords. This depth and breadth in their digital knowledge and skills align with literature surrounding digital literacy; that digitally literate individuals can use digital technologies, are able to apply critical thinking skills in its usage and can be reflective about staying safe online (Biezā, 2020).

In contrast to participants' prior relationships with technology, marked quality of life improvements were experienced linked to post-class relationships with technology. Digital technologies and the Internet were adopted and integrated into everyday life. This indicates not just participants' access and utilisation of these tools but also increased agency through being able to accomplish tasks independently like making Doctor's appointments and engaging with online government services. Participants made progress towards closing the gap between them and technological society, helping to mitigate exclusion and increase agency, as is consistent with Costa et al. (2019). This resonates with Stage 10 of TLT (Mezirow, 2006), that individuals having undergone a transformative learning experience have "a reintegration into one's life" (p. 96), namely that participants' previous conceptions of digital technologies, their usage and abilities have been positively altered.

5.2.2 Digital Confidence

Findings indicated participants felt more confident engaging with digital technologies and the Internet after attending the classes. Movement from feelings such as fear, anxiety or hesitation towards autonomy, confidence and independent usage were illustrated. This aligns with international literature such as Costa et al. (2019), and González et al. (2015) who found increases in confidence and self-esteem following ICT classes. Participants also described feelings of accomplishment, pride, courage and a sense of ease surrounding doing things they didn't know how to do before or didn't believe they could have. For some participants, this change was stark. They expressed that feelings of fear and anxiety were removed which aligns with Mezirow's (2006) concept of "building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships" (p. 96) in Stage 9.

Many participants indicated that this confidence enabled them to share their knowledge with others, something they would not have previously believed themselves capable of. While literature in the field such as Geerts et al. (2023) have examined family and friends assisting ICT learners with improving their skills, there is a notable gap suggesting the reverse (Flynn, 2025; Pizzul et al., 2024) indicating this research contributes to filling that gap. Technology and Internet related knowledge which was imparted ranged from teaching others how to send emails, to educating peers on Cybersecurity and the importance of using strong passwords, to utilising personal hotspots for Internet access from a mobile device. This suggests a further reaching impact of Digital Skills than just the learners themselves. This can be linked to Stage 10 of Mezirow's (2006) TLT - that a "reintegration" (p. 96) of learning has occurred, suggesting not only personal transformation in participants' lives but that this was extended out into their surrounding communities. Not all participants felt they had the confidence to share what they had learned, however. Some felt that others would know more than them and so their input wouldn't be useful. Others indicated fear and lack of confidence still held them back, consistent with writers such as Knowles & Hanson (2018), Wilson et al. (2023) and Yazdani-Darki et al. (2020).

5.2.3 Digital Motivation

Following the classes, participants described both increases and no increases in their motivation to be willing to utilise digital technologies and the Internet outside of the classroom environment. Literature in the field surrounding motivators to technology and

Internet use for older individuals is lacking (Wilson et al., 2023). This research contributes to addressing that gap. For some participants, their newfound skills and confidence spurred them on to engage in activities such as setting up WhatsApp groups, creating social media pages, engaging in research, downloading apps or simply using their devices recreationally. These increases in motivation suggest that participants may have come to the classes for extrinsically motivated reasons such as realising their deficit in skills or recognising the benefit this may bring to their lives which is consistent with the literature (Pihlainen et al., 2021) but that this learning experience has had a transformative effect, shifting this to become intrinsically motivated - engaging in something for leisure or enjoyment in line with Deci and Ryan (2000). This links to Mezirow's (2006) notion of perspective transformation; that a learning experience can enable individuals to change their preconceptions regarding the value of what they have learned.

For participants who did not experience increases in motivation, this was described as not needing to engage with technology any more than they already were, time constraints and the time of year. This suggests that a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is not universal for Digital Skills learners and may be influenced by external life factors outside of the learning setting.

5.3 Research Question 2

What challenges are implicit to this and what factors are necessary to facilitate a positive learning experience?

Despite some participants overcoming their previous challenges in relation to digital technologies and the Internet, other participants described lingering psychological barriers persisting even after attending Digital Skills classes. Participants also described factors such as the social aspect of the classes and the classroom environment itself as being facilitative of a positive learning experience.

5.3.1 Barriers

Participants expressed that even though new skills had been learned and integrated, feelings of fear and anxiety persisted. This resonates with Gruben et al. (2025) who found that in an Irish context, fear was the most significant barrier for students using technology and the Internet. Some felt afraid of their devices, while for others they were afraid of damaging them or not being safe online which is consistent with research by Gallo et al. (2024) , Geerts et al. (2023), Wilson et al. (2023) and Reid et al. (2024). Participants also discussed barriers of being unable to keep up with technology's rapid development as was discussed by Pirhonen et al. (2020). Notably, existing literature lacks discussion regarding participants' expressions that they feel fear when using technology outside of the tutors' supervision, indicating that this research tentatively reveals an additional barrier to utilising digital technologies and the Internet for this demographic.

5.3.2 Factors in Facilitating a Positive Learning Experience Despite Barriers

Participants shared two notable factors which facilitated a positive learning experience despite the outlined barriers, those of social influences and the classroom environment. The fostering of social connections is important for this marginalised demographic (The Equality Authority, 2005). Benefits of this are highlighted by Pizzul et al. (2024) who discuss social inclusion as well as the value of peer-to-peer support for older digital skills learners. Some participants described how feeling part of a cohort attempting to learn digital skills allayed feelings of fear as they realised others felt the same way. Similarly, for other participants, making new social connections provided the opportunity to converse about technology and the Internet which fostered learning and sparked interest.

Considering the classroom environment, research by An et al. (2024) and Reid et al. (2024) discusses negative-self perceptions towards ageing contributing towards fear and anxiety surrounding learning digital skills. However, participants felt non-judgementally heard by their peers and tutor in the classroom environment, expressing that they weren't afraid to ask a silly question or scared they would look foolish in front of others. This dialogic interaction enabled participants to hear others' experiences, viewpoints, struggles and potential solutions to them. This suggests that these positive classroom environment conditions can mitigate negative self-perceptions towards ageing which are discussed by writers such as Barrie et al. (2021) and Köttl et al. (2021) as impacting upon fear and anxiety.

These two factors link to TLT (Mezirow, 2006), whereby through a transformative learning experience, previous assumptions can be challenged and altered. For the participants, it may be suggested that negative self-concepts relating to learning at their age can be positively altered due to social interactions with peers and the classroom environment. The interaction in the classroom environment links to one of the key components of Mezirow's (1991) theory, rational discourse, whereby through conversation meaning perspectives are altered leading to transformative learning.

5.4 Research Question 3

Has this experience been transformative to learners and if so, in what ways?

Elements of TLT (Mezirow, 1997), the theoretical framework for my research, have been identified in participants' narratives and demonstrated throughout this chapter in addressing the first two research questions. I have identified further links between the theory and the research I am conducting. My research is interested in if the learning experience in the Digital Skills classroom was transformative. Therefore, I will be limiting the discussion to Stage 8 - 10 (Mezirow, 2006, p. 94) and application made in relation to the context of my research:

8. "Provisional trying of new roles":
   Learners attended Digital Skills classes, which led to them acquiring new skills. During class time and by using digital technologies outside of the classroom between classes, learners experimented with the new knowledge and skills they gained
9. "Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships":

   Learners gained confidence in their learned skills and their abilities regarding digital technologies. Through using these in new ways, they created and fostered new roles and relationships in the digital landscape

10. "A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective":

    Previous conceptions of digital technologies, their usage and learners' abilities surrounding them were altered. This was adopted as a new conceptualisation of the original dilemma encountered in Stage 1. Learners now have increased motivation to utilise digital technologies and the Internet outside of the classroom environment, indicating their meaning perspectives surrounding this were altered

In addressing whether this experience has been transformative, I suggest three things. Firstly, that participants appeared to conceptualise and form new perspectives regarding the possibilities associated with utilising digital technologies and the Internet in their day-to-day lives. Through gaining these skills, participants were introduced to new ways of interacting with the digitally focused world they inhabit. Previous ideas of ‘not being of that generation’, ‘not being good enough’, or ‘never being able to do this’ were altered. This aligns with Mezirow's (2006) encapsulation of TLT as being “essentially a metacognitive process of *reassessing reasons* supporting our problematic meaning perspectives” (p. 96). Secondly, I suggest that learners’ self-efficacy in relation to digital technologies and the Internet was increased and that they appeared to be able to gain a feeling of accomplishment regarding their own abilities, thus increasing their confidence in the context of an increasingly digitally driven landscape. This aligns with research highlighting the ability transformative learning has in increasing individuals’ confidence (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Nerstrom, 2017). Finally, I suggest that the skills and confidence gained regarding the use of digital technologies and the Internet appeared to lead to increased motivation to continue to learn about it and use it outside of the classroom environment, even sharing learned knowledge with others in some cases.

Taken together, it indicates that this learning experience was not just functional for participants, but had more far-reaching effects, altering the ways they perceived and engaged with digital technologies and the Internet, enabling them to reevaluate their place as digital citizens in society. This alteration resonates with Mezirow's (1978) idea of perspective transformation leading to transformational learning. For some participants, however, the transformation was not as stark due to personal circumstances, negative self-concepts or barriers such as fear and anxiety suggesting that transformation is not always linear, nor does it always progress at the same pace for different individuals.

5.4.2 Evaluation of TLT (Mezirow, 1975) as a Theoretical Framework

TLT (Mezirow, 1975) has provided a fitting framework for exploring participants’ experiences in my research. However, it is not without its critiques. Writers such as Jean Mary (2019) and Newman (2014) argue that it is too focused on the cognitive elements of individuals’ learning and neglecting the whole person view of the adult learner which would include emotions and inspiration to aid learning experiences. However, the emotional elements of participants’ experiences were central to the aims of my research and subsequent findings. Fear, anxiety, self-concept of ageing, pride, sense of accomplishment and connection to others all emerged as emotion-based dimensions of participants' learning. I also incorporated an epistemology which viewed participants as co-creators of knowledge and implemented the Active Interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) approach to offset this critique.

Concerning the stages of TLT (Mezirow, 2006), Newman (2014) argues it is problematic to break down transformation through the impetus of critical reflection into a defined stage-by-stage process (Newman, 2014). In the context of the current research, I believe that TLT (Mezirow, 1975) has merit as the stages provided (Mezirow, 1997) offer a guideline for analysis of the impacts Digital Skills education has had on learners. Newman (2014) also specifically critiques Stage 10 of the theory as he argues that while the individual learner may have had a transformational change, how can they reintegrate this successfully within a culture which has not changed? In addressing this, I believe that in the context of Digital Skills education in a Community Education setting, learners can reintegrate their learning into their life as this learning is enabling them to participate more fully in society as digital citizens as is in alignment with Costa et al. (2019). Adding to this, Jarvis (2004) states that learning can assist individuals to navigate changeable circumstances in their sociocultural environment - in this case the rapid development of technology in society. He argues that as the world or society lived in changes these become transmitted to the person. They can then integrate this, leveraging previous experiences to do so. The knowledge or skills become transformed through this process. The person then sounds down this knowledge or skills into themselves and might act based upon them.

Newman (2014) critiques the usage of the term 'transformation' as this implies a complete change from one thing to another with no gradient. However, I believe that this is a fundamental of what my research is trying to achieve through its exploratory (Mashuri et al., 2022) nature. It also compliments my epistemological stance of social-constructionism (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022) and my chosen methodology of conducting one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

Finally, Newman (2014) also critiques the learning environment transformative learning takes place in. He argues that the educator in this context becomes more of a facilitator due to the emphasis the theory places on reflection. In addressing this, I believe that the theory fits well with the small-group element of the Community Education classes and the philosophy behind the Community Education Programme (AONTAS, 2000, 2004; Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2024; SOLAS, 2024).

In summary, the outlined critiques have merit, yet I argue that TLT (Mezirow, 1975) provides an appropriate lens for interrogating my research's aims and contributes to the discussion surrounding the necessity for TLT (Mezirow, 1975) to be applied in conscientious and flexible ways whilst acknowledging its limitations.

5.5 Implications and Contribution to Knowledge

Implications of my research include it filling multiple gaps in scholarly literature. Firstly, research in the context of Digital Skills in the Community Education sector in Ireland is scarce (Flynn, 2025) and a need for an increase in qualitative research in the field has been called for. This is because historically quantitative research and measures of hard outcomes as opposed to the lived experiences of learners have been dominant (Eustace et al., 2023; Kett, 2015). Therefore, I argue that the premise of my study is inherently of value to academic knowledge. Secondly, around digital confidence, my research fills a gap identified by writers such as Flynn (2025) and Pizzul et al. (2024) regarding this confidence spurring individuals on to share what they have learned with others. Thirdly, surrounding the motivation to use technology and Internet use for older individuals following ICT education, my research also fills an identified gap (Wilson et al., 2023). Fourthly, findings in tandem with literature surrounding the topic, strongly support the notion that Digital Skills in a Community Education setting can be a transformative learning experience for older individuals. This is a unique contribution to knowledge in the Irish field and practice of Adult and Community Education which can be built upon in future research.

5.6 Suggestions for Further Research

Further research could involve expanding the scope to include a quantitative element. As the researcher, not only would this enable me to incorporate my pragmatist philosophical leanings through a mixed methods, post-positivist research approach but it would facilitate a more robust "strategy of inquiry" (Denzin et al., 2024, p. 23). This could be achieved by using quantitative measures such as DigiCompSat (Clifford et al., 2020) for measuring digital competence or the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) for measuring the incorporation of technologies into users' lives.

Expanding the inclusion criteria to include not just individuals who I have taught but who have engaged in Digital Skills classes with other Community Education facilitators would enable an inquiry into the universality of the experience. It would allow a further interrogation into the teaching practices and classroom environments which facilitate this. This would enable a commentary on programme design, curriculum and an advocation for further resources and funding to be put into the sector.

5.7 Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of my research include its focus upon specific elements of individuals' experiences situated within a clearly defined area - Digital Skills education. By utilising contemporary research throughout, I have based my scholarly arguments upon a backbone of sound, up-to-date sources. The usage of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1975) and its stages (Mezirow, 2006) provided a grounding and coherent theoretical lens to position my research within. I have identified gaps in the literature which this research has contributed to filling and I have been consistent in my philosophical underpinning to research design choices. Throughout, I have justified the rationale for the decisions I have made. All of this I believe contributes to my research's internal rigor as is outlined by Johnson et al. (2020).

Limitations involve the scope and timeframe in which my research needed to be completed within. Wordcount remained a pressing issue throughout, yet this served to allow me to pair back content in the final editing stages which tightened and honed my narrative. The number of participants was limited to eight and were all individuals which I have taught. I acknowledge this could have influenced their responses to me as the researcher, possibly limiting negative commentary. A broadening of scope would add additional credence and generalisability to the findings.

5.8 Reflections

Stepping back and looking at my research journey and this completed thesis, I can say that this process has also been a transformative learning experience for me. Academically, using the pronoun 'I' in my writing has been a novel and at times difficult experience which I have constantly had to manage, as was honing and condensing my writing to be succinct and precise. I have been challenged to become reflective throughout this process as opposed to viewing research in a positivist, objective manner. A key example of this was employing the Active Interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) approach to my interviewing. The revelation that I could ask spontaneous questions as opposed to just sticking to my designed interview questions was freeing and empowering. It enabled my interviews to be authentic and human, not scripted and regimented. Learning about research paradigms and philosophical assumptions allowed me to reflect upon my worldviews, reality and knowledge construction and production. I was able to label concepts which were previously subconscious, foregrounding them throughout my research process.

Professionally, I entered my research with the assumption that learners who I had taught were deeply affected by learning digital skills; that they were more confident, more motivated and had spoken about sharing their knowledge with others. What I did not anticipate was the level of impact this learning experience had had upon them. Interviewing participants and hearing how they were more connected socially, had increased confidence while attending work meetings and able to operate as active citizens with reduced fear and anxiety touched me deeply. It has bolstered my resolve to become an impactful and conscientious Adult and Community Education professional. I intend my practice to become even more learner-centred, supportive, non-judgmental and inclusive. Over the next year I plan to gain qualifications in Universal Design in Learning (UDL) and utilising Artificial Intelligence (AI) in programme design and the classroom environment.

Personally, I have been reaffirmed in my person-centred nature and my desire to enable others to improve themselves and reach untapped potentials. Hearing individuals speak of fears and anxieties being replaced by confidence and pride has been both humbling and inspiring.

5.9 Conclusion

My research set out to explore the impacts of Digital Skills education in a Community Education setting in Ireland of learners aged 60 and over who I have personally taught. It aimed to examine the development of their digital skills, digital confidence and digital motivation to use technology and Internet outside of the classroom environment. It also aimed to investigate the barriers involved in this and factors which could mitigate these as well as if this learning experience was transformational.

Findings revealed that learners' digital skills, digital confidence and digital motivation were all positively affected by attending the classes and that these impacts had profound effects in the areas of agency, belonging as well as in feelings of accomplishment and pride. Through being able to more aptly engage with the digital world, participants were able to operate more fully as active citizens, stay connected to their communities and share their knowledge with others. However, barriers such as fear, anxiety and negative self-concepts in relation to learning at their age remained persistent for some participants. This highlighted the need for supportive learning environments and peer interaction as these were seen to help mitigate these barriers.

My study contributes to underdeveloped areas of research - qualitative community education research in Ireland (Eustace et al., 2023; Kett, 2015), Digital Skills education in this context (Flynn, 2025), digital confidence and sharing of knowledge with others (Flynn, 2025; Pizzul et al., 2024), digital motivation for older learners following Digital Skills education (Wilson et al., 2023) and an inquiry into the transformative nature of these learning experiences.

Learning digital skills for older adults is not just functional but empowering. It can be impactful across a variety of life domains. I hope this research gives voice to these learners and their experiences in an increasingly digital society. Fundamentally, it demonstrates the transformative effect which Community Education has to enable older learners not only to access the technological world they inhabit, but to participate as active citizens within it.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Guide and Questions

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Test the recording device
2. Thank the participant for their participation in the interview and the study as a whole;
3. Go through the Information Sheet with the participant to make sure they understand everything it entails
4. Go through each item in the Informed Participant Consent form making sure they both understand and agree with each of the items. Check that the participant has both signed and dated the document
5. Go through each of the interview questions with the participant, making sure that they are comfortable with all of them
6. Inform the participant that I may take brief written notes during the interview of key points or points to revisit later in the interview and that they can view these notes after the interview finishes
7. Ask the participant if they had any questions before the interview begins
8. Start the recording and begin the interview
9. After the interview, immediately transfer the audio file to Maynooth University's OneDrive storage and delete the recording from the recording device
10. Provide the participant with a copy of the Debrief Sheet which contains a list of supports, my contact information and my supervisor's contact information

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your relationship to technology and the Internet?

2. How has technology developed and changed within your lifetime? Did you ever imagine it would get to the stage it has done?
    a. How do you feel about that?
    b. What advantages do you see, if any?
    c. Thinking of our society being so technological now, how does that impact you, positively and / or negatively?

3. How did you make the choice to sign up for Digital Skills classes; what brought you there?

4. Do you experience challenges with your devices or technology in general? If so, what are these challenges?

5. Has attending Digital Skills classes helped with these challenges? If it has, how? Or if not, why not?

6. Can you tell me about any new skills you've learned since attending Digital Skills classes? What can you do now that you couldn't do before?

7. Do you feel more confident using technology after attending Digital Skills classes? If so, how would you describe this? If not, why not?

8. Have you found there has been any changes in your motivation to use your devices and try new things in your own time since attending the classes? If so, can you talk about that? If so, why? And if not, why not?

9. Have you ever had the opportunity to share with others what you're learned or help someone else with their technology or device in some way since attending the Digital Skills classes? If so, can you tell me about it?

10. If you could imagine a scenario where you hadn't attended Digital Skills classes, do you think things would be different for you presently? If so, can you tell me about it?

11. Would you recommend Digital Skills classes to others in your age range? Why, or why not?

12. Before we finish, would you like to add anything to what you've spoken about already or talk about anything we haven't covered?

Appendix 2: Pilot Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your relationship to technology and the Internet?

2. How has technology developed and changed within your lifetime? Did you ever imagine it would get to the stage it has done?

a. How do you feel about that?

b. What advantages do you see, if any?

c. Thinking of our society being so technological now, how does that impact you, positively and / or negatively?

3. How did you make the choice to sign up for Digital Skills classes; what brought you there?

4. Do you experience challenges with your devices or technology in general? If so what are these challenges?

5. Has attending Digital Skills classes helped with these challenges? If it has, how? Or if not, why not?

6. Can you tell me about any new skills you've learned since attending Digital Skills classes? What can you do now that you couldn't do before?

7. Do you feel more confident using technology after attending Digital Skills classes? If so, how would you describe this? If not, why not?

8. Have you found there have been any changes in your motivation to use your devices and try new things in your own time since attending the classes? If so, can you talk about that? And if not, why not?

9. Have you ever had the opportunity to share with others what you've learned or help someone else with their technology or device in some way since attending the Digital

Skills classes? If so, can you tell me about it?

10. Would you recommend Digital Skills classes to others in your age range? Why, or why not?

11. Before we finish, would you like to add anything to what you've spoken about already or talk about anything we haven't covered?

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Empowering Irish Adults Over 60: Impacts of Digital Skills Training upon Ability, Self-Confidence and Motivation Regarding Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Definition of Information and Communications Technology (ICT):

This covers all technical means used to handle information and aid communication such as computer and network hardware and software (Eurostat, 2024).

What is the study about?

This study is looking into the impacts of Digital Skills training upon the ability, self-confidence and motivation of Irish adults over 60 regarding Information and Communications Technology (ICT). This will be done by conducting interviews with participants who wish to take part. This is part of the requirements for the Masters of Education in Adult and Community Education programme which I am studying at Maynooth University.

Who is taking part?

The participants are all individuals who are currently over 60 years old and have completed Digital Skills classes with me.

What will you have to do?

You may freely choose not to take part in the study. If you do take part, will be contacted by me and asked to complete a consent form in order to make sure you understand the purpose of the study, and how the data collected from you will be used. A verbal interview will be conducted with you at a time and place we agree upon. The interview will take no longer than 1 hour to conduct. I will audio record the interview and then transcribe it word-for-word. The transcripts will help me write the research report.

What are the risks?

There are no personal risks to yourself. Your identity will be concealed by a pseudonym (fake name). Your real name and signature on the consent form will always be kept separate from your interview transcription. At the end of the interview, you will be provided with a Debrief Sheet of different supports if you should need to use them. My contact details and my Supervisor’s details will be given to you if you ever need to contact us.

Protection of Information

The research has been granted ethical approval by the Department of Adult and Communityn Education in Maynooth University and complies with Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy. You may request a copy of this ethical approval if you wish. It also complies with the Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Data Protection Act and Freedom of Information Act.

What are the benefits?

There will be no direct benefits to you from participating but the information will contribute to a wider knowledge in this area.

What if I do not wish to continue at any stage?

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time up to a cutoff date of 31st January 2025. You can refuse to answer any question and may refuse to do anything requested of you.

What happens to the information?

All information is completely confidential. All information will be made anonymous through assigning you a pseudonym (fake name). Your real name on the Consent Form will be destroyed at the end of the study along with the audio recording of the interview. It will not be possible to identify you in any reports that result from the study. Your interview will be recorded and then transcribed word-for-word. A report will be written, and this will be submitted to the lecturer and external examiner at the end of June 2025.

What else can I expect from the researcher?

You can ask any questions you like about the research and also request a copy of the overall results. This can be provided in the form of a 2-page document. The cut-off date for requesting this will be given to you when you consent to take part, as the study will be submitted for assessment for the Master of Education in Adult and Community Education programme requirements.

Who can I contact if I need to?

Researcher:

Matthew Hutnik

matthew.hutnik.2025@mumail.ie / 086 211 3831

Supervisor:

Dr. Angela McGinn

angela.mcginn@mu.ie

Appendix 4: Informed Participant Consent Form

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

<u>CONSENT FORM</u>

Researcher:
Matthew Hutnik
matthew.hutnik.2025@mumail.ie / 086 211 3831

Please tick inside the box after each of the following statements to indicate your consent. Feel free to ask me any questions you may have.

I consent that the purpose and nature of the research has been explained to me and I have been able to ask any questions I have needed to	☐
I consent that I am voluntarily participating in the study	☐
I consent that I understand all information collected involving me will be confidential and that I won't be identifiable from it	☐
I consent to the data of my age (in years) and gender (male or female) being collected for demographic purposes in the study	☐
I consent to a pseudonym (fake name) being created and used to conceal my identity	☐
I consent to an audio recording device and software being used to record my interview with Matthew	☐
I consent to the audio of the interview being stored until 1st November 2025 at which point it will be deleted	☐
I consent to the audio of the interview being transcribed word-for-word	☐

I consent to direct quotations from the audio transcript being used for the purposes of the study ☐

I consent to the write up of the research including findings of the study using the transcription of my interview ☐

I consent to the report being submitted for assessment as part of the Master of Education in Adult and Community Education programme in Maynooth University ☐

I consent that my anonymous data may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications ☐

I consent to being aware of the right to withdraw my data from the study without any repercussions up to the cutoff date of 31^{st} January 2025 ☐

I consent to having viewed the list of questions I will be asked in the interview and having discussed them with Matthew ☐

I consent to being given the option to remove any questions I do not wish to answer and having agreed to the remaining questions being asked in the interview ☐

Participant Name:
Contact Number:
Age (in years):

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 5: Debrief Sheet

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

DEBRIEF SHEET

Thank you for your participation in this interview – I really appreciate the time you have given.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at matthew.hutnik.2025@mumail.ie or my Supervisor Dr. Angela McGinn at angela.mcginn@mu.ie.

Below I have provided you with a list of resources and supports for your reference if any part of the process becomes a concern to you now or at a future time.

Please feel free to contact your GP or local counselling service if you need to speak with someone about any issues.

Resources:

Samaritans of Sligo
3, The Mall, Sligo
071 91 42011
jo@samaritans.org
https://www.samaritans.org/ireland/

Domestic Violence Advocacy Service (DVAS)
1A Kempten Parade, Sligo
071 91 41515
support@dvas.ie
https://domesticviolence.ie

Pieta House Outreach Service Sligo
Northside Resource Centre, Forthill, Sligo
074 91 26594
mary@pieta.ie
https://www.pieta.ie

St. Michael's Family Life Centre
Church Hill, Sligo
071 91 70329
stmichaelsfamilylifecentre@eircom.net
http://www.stmichaelsfamilylife.com

Appendix 6: Pre-Study Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Empowering Older Irish Adults: Impacts of Digital Skills Training upon Ability, Self-Confidence and Motivation Regarding Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Among Over 50s

Definition of Information and Communications Technology (ICT):

This covers all technical means used to handle information and aid communication such as computer and network hardware and software (Eurostat, 2024).

What is the study about?

This study is investigating the impacts of Digital Skills training upon the ability, self-confidence and motivation of Irish adults over 50 regarding Information and Communications Technology (ICT). This will be achieved through conducting interviews with participants who wish to take part. This is part of the requirements for the Master of Education in Adult and Community Education programme which the researcher will be studying at Maynooth University.

Who is taking part?

The participants are all individuals who are currently over 50 years old and have engaged in Digital Skills training with the researcher.

What will you have to do?

Towards the end of this year, you will be contacted by the researcher and asked to complete a consent form to make sure you understand the purpose of the study, and how the data collected from you will be used. A verbal interview will be conducted with you at a time and place we agree upon. The interview will take no longer than 1 hour to conduct. The interview will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher and the data gathered will be used in the generation of the research dissertation.

What are the risks?

There are no personal risks to yourself. Your identity will be concealed by a pseudonym (fake name) and your real name and signature on the consent form shall be kept separate from your interview transcription. At the end of the interview, you will be provided with a debrief sheet of different supports you can contact if you need to. The contact details of the researchers and module leader will also be provided.

Protection of Information

The researcher will comply with General Data Protection Regulation and will be following the Data Protection Act and Freedom of Information Act. The research will also have been granted ethical approval by the Social Research

Ethics Committee (SRESC) of Maynooth University. In addition, the study will

comply with Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy.

What are the benefits?

There will be no direct benefits to you from participating but the information will contribute to a wider knowledge in this area.

What if I do not wish to continue at any stage?

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time up to a cut-off date. You can refuse to answer any question and may refuse to do anything requested of you.

What happens to the information?

All information is completely confidential to the researcher. All information will be anonymised using a pseudonym (fake name). Real names of participants will be destroyed at the end of the study. It will not be possible to identify you in any reports that result from the study. Therefore, the information collected during this study will be treated in a confidential way and submitted for assessment. The interview will be recorded and then transcribed word for word. A report will be written, and this will be submitted to the lecturer and external examiner of the dissertation.

What else can I expect from the researcher?

You can ask any questions about the study that occur to you during your participation and request a copy of the overall results. This can be provided in the form of a 2-page document outlining the overall results of the study. The cut-off date for requesting this will be given to you when you consent to take part, as the study will be submitted for assessment for the researcher's Master of Education in Adult and Community Education programme requirements.

Principal Investigator:

Matthew Hutnik: info@atlaseducation.ie / 086 211 3831

If you would like to be contacted in the future to take part in the study, please provide your contact details below. Please note that providing your contact details at this time ***does not mean*** *you are committed to participating in the study - you may freely choose not to in the future.*

Contact Details:

Name: ______________________________

Phone Number: ______________________________

E-mail Address: ______________________________