Beyond Access: From Digital Confidence to Participation Beyond the Classroom Among Older Adults in Community Education

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Keywords

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ABSTRACT

As everyday life becomes increasingly mediated by digital technologies, older adults are at increased risk of digital exclusion. While policy and research frequently emphasise access to devices, connectivity and skills training, less attention has been placed on how confidence develops and how it shapes motivation and participation in digital life. This paper explores how participation in community-based digital skills education supports older adults' movement from fear and low self-efficacy towards digital confidence, motivation and participation. The study adopted a qualitative, practitioner-led approach, recruiting eight individuals aged 60 and over who attended digital skills classes facilitated by the author in an Irish community education setting. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to explore participants' experiences of learning, confidence development and engagement with digital technologies. Findings are organised into three themes*: fear, self-doubt and initial barriers*; *developing digital confidence*; and *moving from confidence to motivation and participation*. Fear, anxiety and low self-efficacy were described as barriers to digital engagement. Confidence emerged, not as a fixed outcome, but gradually through relational support, peer interaction and non-judgemental learning environments. Increased confidence enabled participants to persist despite uncertainty, make mistakes and engage with digital technologies and the internet with increased independence. This participation was not limited to functional necessity but extended to areas of life-enrichment and personal enjoyment. Some participants shared what they had learned with others, pointing towards informal mentoring and participation beyond the classroom.

This paper contributes to existing literature by conceptualising digital confidence as a relational and processual phenomenon, illustrating how community education environments scaffold confidence and expanding understandings of participation to include enrichment and informal mentoring. The findings highlight the importance of ongoing support and community-based approaches in supporting sustained digital engagement among older adults, and align with current policy directions, which emphasise not only access and skills, but also confidence, trust and meaningful participation in a digital society.

1. Introduction

As society becomes ever more digitised, older individuals become more at risk of facing exclusion in digital contexts (Accenture, 2022; Baraka, 2024). They may experience barriers that extend beyond technical skill to include fear (Gruben et al., 2025; Wilson et al., 2023), low self-efficacy (Knowles & Hanson, 2018; Yazdani-Darki et al., 2020), and feelings of not being able to keep up with technology's rapid development (Pirhonen et al., 2020).

Everyday life is increasingly mediated through digital technologies. However, the provision of devices, connectivity and training does not automatically translate into confident or meaningful engagement. Digital skills education is often framed as a way of addressing digital exclusion, with discourse commonly surrounding access (Mullen, 2022; National Economic & Social Council, 2021). Recent Irish policy, reflected in the *National Digital and AI Strategy 2030*, similarly emphasises inclusion, digital literacy and empowering individuals to participate in a digital society, while acknowledging that access alone is insufficient to ensure meaningful engagement (Department of the Taoiseach, 2026). Therefore, while access is an important facet, meaningful participation and sustained outcomes such as increased confidence and motivation to use digital technologies are crucial. As such, this paper asks: how does participation in community-based digital skills education support older adults to move from fear and low self-efficacy towards digital confidence and motivation, enabling fuller participation in an increasingly digital society?

Drawing on literature surrounding digital confidence, community education and digital participation (Geerts et al., 2023; Gruben et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2023; Pirhonen et al., 2020), this paper argues that digital confidence is not merely a byproduct of technical skills acquisition, but rather emerges relationally through supported participation, peer interaction and non-judgemental learning environments. Findings suggest that community-based digital skills education can support older adults not only to develop digital skills, but also to participate more confidently in digital life in ways extending beyond functional necessity into areas such as enrichment, autonomy and informal mentoring. In doing so, the paper highlights the importance of relational, community-based approaches which foreground confidence-building, ongoing support and meaningful participation within digital inclusion initiatives.

Irish research on older adults' experiences of digital skills education in community education settings is lacking (Flynn, 2025), with quantitative methodologies being more prevalent as opposed to qualitative (Eustace et al., 2023; Kett, 2015). This paper contributes to this underexplored area through treating confidence as a relational and processual phenomenon as opposed to an abstract feeling or byproduct of skills acquisition, providing qualitative

insight into the experiences of adults over 60 who attended digital skills classes in community education settings.

2. Literature

2.1 Digital access, skills and digital confidence

Policy and research often place their focus on the necessity of access to digital skills education, devices and connectivity to the internet. In an Irish context, gaps in access to internet connectivity and skills remain prevalent in contemporary strategies and reports (Mullen, 2022; National Economic & Social Council, 2021). These initiatives are important, however, emerging research suggests that access and skills development alone are insufficient to support digital inclusion which is both meaningful and sustainable (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2018; Scheerder et al., 2017).

Discussion surrounding older individuals and learning digital skills often centres around the concept of the digital divide which separates into three levels: those who have and do not have access to the internet; skills required to use it; and outcomes of using the internet and benefits surrounding this (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2018). International research indicates that even when older individuals have access to technology and the internet and participate in training surrounding it, disengagement can persist due to barriers such as fear, anxiety or low self-efficacy surrounding confident use (Pirhonen et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2023). Therefore, this suggests the importance of examining factors such as confidence, motivation and participation in digital skills education contexts.

The concept of confidence as being important in conjunction with technical skills acquisition has been highlighted in recent research, with social aspects being foregrounded as helping learners make meaningful progress and feeling better about their use of the internet and technology (Geerts et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2023; Pihlainen et al., 2021). One community-based digital intervention highlighted the development of confidence through interaction while learning digital skills, both through facilitator and peer engagement (Lu et al., 2023). Confidence development has also been discussed as a process, through supported engagement and repeated interaction over time (Gruben et al., 2025), indicating that educators and peers play a vital role.

2.2 Community education, peer learning and social context

This research is situated within an adult and community education context, considering how community education principles shape experiences of digital skills learning among older adults. Adult and community education embodies the values of experiential learning,

democracy and learner input, making it a social, dialogic and relational process (AONTAS, 2000; Brennan & O'Grady, 2022; Department of Education and Science, 2000). As such, adult learning is not just knowledge and skills acquisition. It involves learner voice, active participation and meaningful outcomes which go beyond the classroom environment, being able to influence civic, community and cultural life (Department of Education and Science, 2000).

Research on community-based digital skills education consistently points towards the importance of non-judgemental and dialogic interaction (McCashin et al., 2022; Reid et al., 2024). Older adults report feeling more comfortable asking questions, making mistakes and trying new things when in a community-based digital education setting, rather than a more formalised one (Barrie et al., 2021; Betts et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2025). Peer learning and supported facilitator guidance help to normalise feelings of uncertainty. This allows learners to recognise that they are not alone in their journey of learning more about digital technologies and the internet. Despite this, research surrounding the topic in a community-based digital education context is scant (Flynn, 2025).

In an Irish context, community education programmes provide a space to address digital exclusion for this cohort (Gruben et al., 2025). However, much of the existing literature places its focus on programme evaluations and hard outcomes, often in the form of quantitative data (Eustace et al., 2023; Kett, 2015), with less emphasis placed upon how learners experience confidence-building, social support and participation over time.

2.3 Mentoring, motivation and participation

Within community education contexts, learning is often understood as relational and participatory (AONTAS, 2000; Brennan & O'Grady, 2022; Department of Education and Science, 2000), creating opportunities not only for individual development, but also for learners to support others and share their knowledge with them. Digital mentoring is an under-theorised aspect of digital skills acquisition (Dezuanni et al., 2019) with emerging research exploring how individuals support others in developing digital skills. Marshall et al. (2025) define digital mentoring as digital skills learning taking place in a "supportive environment … by fostering confidence and competence in technological skills and making meaningful social, cultural and economic connections online" (p. 6). Research on digital mentoring suggests that mentoring roles are often taken up by those who have improved their own digital skills and confidence (McCosker et al., 2019), pointing towards mentoring as an expression of participation extending beyond individual use.

While literature in the field surrounding motivators for engaging with technology and internet use for older individuals is lacking, research suggests that when learners feel confident and supported, they are more likely to engage with digital technologies and the internet of their own volition - due to an increase in motivation to engage (Pihlainen et al., 2023). These less tangible forms of engagement are often overlooked in policy-driven accounts of the digital divide and inclusion, with access and skills being prioritised (Scheerder et al., 2017).

Irish research is similarly limited, particularly qualitative studies (Eustace et al., 2023; Flynn, 2025; Kett, 2015). Addressing this gap, this paper produces qualitative research exploring older adults' experiences of digital skills education in an Irish community education context, focusing on confidence and participation as an ongoing and supported outcome, rather than a fixed endpoint following skills acquisition.

Taken together, the literature (and identified gaps within it) suggests a need to move beyond access and a focus on hard outcomes towards approaches which foreground confidence, relational support and participation. Particularly in Ireland, there remains a lack of qualitative research examining the concept of older adults experiencing confidence development and how this shapes motivation and participation in digital life. This paper therefore contributes to a growing body of work which understands digital confidence as a process facilitated by supported participation through foregrounding participants' lived experiences situated within an adult and community education practice context.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach, whereby I conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 60 and over who attended digital skills classes that I facilitated in an Irish community education context. Following transcription of each interview's audio recording, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to generate themes and subthemes to interpret participants' experiences.

This study was situated within an interpretivist qualitative framework and informed by a social constructionist approach, reflecting its ontological and epistemological positioning. Ontologically, the research understood participants' experiences surrounding digital confidence and participation as socially and relationally constructed. Epistemologically, knowledge was co-constructed through interaction, context and meaning-making, in line with Berger & Luckmann (1991), between participants and myself as the researcher. Participants were therefore understood as co-creators of knowledge with their own lived experiences of what was being explored (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). This positioning aligned with the use of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022),

recognising the active role of the researcher in interpreting and constructing meaning from participants' subjective accounts.

3.1 Participants

Eight participants were recruited via purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria consisted of being aged 60 and over and having engaged in digital skills classes with me in a community education setting. Of the eight participants, two were male and six were female, with ages ranging from 62 – 88 (see Table 1).

3.2 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from participants. This allowed participants to express themselves in their own terms, giving space for topics to organically present themselves during the interviews while ensuring a level of consistency between them (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Interview questions were informed by the aims of the research alongside literature surrounding digital confidence, digital inclusion and community-based learning contexts. Five interviews were conducted at participants' homes and three at the settings the classes took place in. Interviews were audio recorded, with each audio file stored securely and subsequently deleted from the recording device. All participants were assigned unique pseudonyms and interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Maura	85	Female
Kitty	88	Female
George	85	Male
Sally	73	Female
Claire	62	Female
Bill	71	Male
Ethel	62	Female
Heidi	62	Female

3.3 Data analysis

Interview transcriptions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Through reading and re-reading the transcripts, initial codes were developed into emergent themes. As both facilitator and researcher, I remained reflexive and aware of patterns emerging throughout the analysis. Themes were subsequently refined until they were finalised. This approach to analysis enabled the exploration of how participants described their experiences of learning, confidence and engagement. Three themes emerged and were developed through the analytic process: Fear, Self-doubt and Initial Barriers; Developing Digital Confidence; and From Confidence to Motivation and Participation. Together, these themes captured participants' experiences of movement from fear and uncertainty towards increased participation in digital life.

3.4 Ethics and reflexivity

Maynooth University's Department of Adult and Community Education approved the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to conducting interviews and confidentiality of all data was maintained. Participants were given the right to withdraw from the study up to a specified cut-off data. As facilitator of the digital skills classes and researcher conducting the study, I occupied dual roles throughout the research process. Existing relationships with the participants may have contributed to a sense of familiarity and openness during interviews, potentially enabling them to speak about their experiences more freely. At the same time, I remained reflexive regarding how existing facilitator-learner relationships, alongside my role as 'researcher', could have shaped both the interview process and interpretation of the data.

Therefore, reflexivity was an ongoing aspect of the research process. Throughout the analysis, I remained cognisant of how my experiences as an educator may have influenced the themes that developed and the ways in which I interpreted participants' accounts. As Braun & Clarke (2022) acknowledge, reflexive thematic analysis recognises the researcher's active role in knowledge production and interpretation.

4. Findings

Findings are organised into three themes: *Fear, self-doubt and initial barriers; Developing digital confidence; and, Moving from confidence to motivation and participation*. These themes illustrate participants' movement from fear and low self-efficacy towards confidence and increased engagement with digital technologies.

4.1 Fear, self-doubt and initial barriers

This theme captures participants' experiences of fear, anxiety and low self-confidence surrounding digital technologies before attending classes. Participants shared emotional and psychological barriers including feelings of panic, uncertainty and a sense of being left behind in an increasingly digital society. These experiences often contributed to hesitation surrounding independent engagement with technology and the internet. Participants described their relationship with technology prior to attending classes as being non-existent, or having developed in adulthood, in contrast to younger generations who grew up with technology embedded in their everyday lives. This generational contrast appeared to contribute to participants' fear surrounding technology use, concerns about breaking devices and feelings of not being able to keep up with technological change.

Many participants described generational contrast as feelings of being left behind, recognising, as George (85) did, that *"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"*. He felt *"I regret that eh, technology in the digital world has come late to me during life"*, resonating with Sally (73) who felt that *"really, technology passed me out"* and that she *"tried to keep up with it … but a lot of it went over my head"*. Likewise, Maura (85), commented that it is *"unimaginable how it [technology] has developed"* within her lifetime.

This lack of integration of technology and the internet contributed to feelings of fear, even panic surrounding it, with this fear often being described as emotional rather than technical. Kitty (88) expressed that technology is *"frightening … Because they could almost tell you where to go for your breakfast"*, and that if something went wrong she *"panicked*." Ethel (62) commented on her relationship with her device. She felt that fear was *"my biggest Achilles heel … with my mobile phone, I'm still afraid of it."* Fear persisted even among those with some digital familiarity, as Heidi (62), shared that even though she has *"some basic knowledge in computers, I would have a fear of them"*, illustrating that fear coexisted even with a measure of competence.

Self-doubt related to personal capability was expressed. Kitty (88) shared that she was *"nervous"* about her ability to solve technical issues which may arise, resonating with Bill (71), who felt *"hesitant"* at engaging with technology alone. Participants raised concerns surrounding being scammed. Claire (62) acknowledged that *"it's [digital technologies and the internet] a dangerous kind of an instrument if you don't know what you're dealing with"*. Bill shared his concern that *"there's hackers out there and they take advantage … you're always worrying about being ripped off or something like that in the sense of somebody*

getting access to your data" while Heidi (62) raised her concern of *"how do you know which site is- is secure and which site isn't?"*

These outlined factors left participants feeling a lack of digital confidence. Sally (73) shared that when alone and not with a more skilled technology user, "*that fear would return"*. Ethel (62) resonated with this, stating that *"the fear factor for me is when I'm on my own … I won't try out things for fear I'll break it"* while Heidi (62) described having more knowledgeable others to assist her while engaging with technology as being like a *"security blanket",* without which, she feels *"more fear"*.

4.2 Developing digital confidence

This theme explores participants' movement from fear and uncertainty towards increased confidence and capability in using digital technologies. Confidence developed gradually through supported participation, relational learning and non-judgemental classroom environments. Attending digital skills classes led to movement from fear and low confidence towards feelings of personal capability and being able to use technology and the internet more independently without others around. Participants described marked emotional and attitudinal shifts, including increased willingness to experiment, engage more independently with technology and persist despite uncertainty. Some participants also began sharing their knowledge with others, informally mentoring them in what they had learned.

Participants did not describe mastery, but a changed relationship with error and uncertainty. Maura (85) expressed she is now *"not so afraid"* and previous feelings of being *"absolutely terrified of opening [her] phone"* were markedly reduced. She also felt more confident, commenting 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."* She now feels a sense of pride as a result, sharing that *"I felt very proud of myself being able to put on the Wi-Fi myself … that was a big advantage for me and helped me to build my confidence."* Kitty (88) expressed her developing digital confidence as feeling *"very, very positive … very au fait with [technology and the internet] … very, very comfortable"*. Her previous feelings of panic when something went wrong were replaced by a calm reassurance in her ability. Now, *"it doesn't bother me in the least*." She recognises that *"everybody can be locked out at some time or other … And I just know hang on and it'll come back."* Bill (71) echoed these sentiments, stating that *"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 … If I have to do it, I'm confident that I have the ability to do it."* Claire (62) felt that the classes *"opened me eyes in many respects and gave [me] the confidence really"* as now she *"know[s] the difference between right and*

wrong" when it comes to technology and internet use, attributing this to *"you [the facilitator], that I even ventured it, you know what I mean?"*

Increased digital confidence spurred participants to avail of opportunities which arose to share what they had learned with others. Maura (85) related a time when she *"did help somebody now … I was able to show her how to send an email."* Likewise, Heidi (62) helped a man she works for as a Personal Assistant with his Cybersecurity skills. She related *that "he had his PIN number on his phone and everything … Passwords to different things … I advised him on it and so was that even for opening links on text messages."* Likewise, Claire (62) shared her newfound knowledge with a family member who enquired: *"When did you become so knowledgeable about this kind of thing?"*.

The classroom environment appeared to be a catalyst for this. Being able to ask questions and not feel judged, belittled or rushed was conducive to participants feeling comfortable and allowing confidence to develop. Maura (85) expressed that during classes she *"was never afraid to ask [the facilitator] the question"*, as did Heidi (62) who didn't *"feel awkward asking questions"*. For Bill (71), even if he felt he had *"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"*. Ethel (62) shared that she came to the classes not wanting *"to look like an idiot"* and made the profound statement that as the classes progressed, she felt that she was *"in a corner and being encouraged out of that corner. And now all of a sudden, I'm in a room"* for her, the classes brought her *"out of that rut and put me into a room where I could see all these possibilities."* A sense of being 'all in this together' was prevalent for participants, with Heidi (62) describing this as a *"nice open forum"*, helping her to *"not feel like the odd one out"*, and *"I'm not the only one"*.

4.3 Moving from confidence to motivation and participation

This theme captures how increased digital confidence supported participants' motivation to engage more actively with digital technologies and the internet beyond the classroom environment. This allowed participants to make independent and motivated choices to engage with technology and the internet in ways which were not previously possible. These choices included more advanced device operation, active citizenship through engagement with Government Services and Healthcare Providers and living fuller, more enriched lives. Increased confidence also encouraged experimentation, curiosity and ongoing learning, signalling movement from skills acquisition towards meaningful participation in digital life.

Maura (85) described being able to do things now she wouldn't have had the confidence or motivation to before. She relayed that "*now I can turn off my phone. I can lock my phone.*

And I can go into Settings", elaborating on 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 illustrates Maura's increased autonomy and motivation to give things a go. She is now able to "*make a Doctor's appointment"* and *"to do online booking, online banking, any of those Government Services"*. Similarly, Bill can now independently navigate *"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,"* expressing that, as a result, *"it has made life a lot easier."* Sally (73) can now operate services such as *"Gmails, Facebook, Obituaries, Online Banking and watching, you know, being able to watch Funeral Masses",* commenting that she *"get[s] so much pleasure out of being able to do those things."*

Beyond functional necessity, participants indicated that participation extended into meaningful life enrichment. Kitty (88) reflected on her increased motivation to engage in hobbies such as playing Bridge online and sewing. She expressed that previously "*I could have participated with the hobby [Bridge] online, but I wasn't capable of doing it"*, whereas now, *"I have mastered it now and I am enjoying it … I'm in playing competitively online now,"* and *"… 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."* Likewise, Claire (62) was able to navigate using her phone as a personal hotspot following the classes, stating "*I thought it was just a phone but it's more than a phone and an iPad is full of information"*.

Participants expressed their newfound interest and desire to learn more, indicating increased motivation and participation in digital life. Kitty (88) stated that it *"…is a very positive part of my life now"*, echoing Ethel (62) who remarked *"I am very interested in learning. Learning more about the technology of communication. I know I have to move on."* Claire (62) poignantly related that she feels as if "*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."* Maura (85) shared that she tries out the maps and GPS features of her device in her spare time for pleasure, commenting "*I mightn't be going somewhere … but just to try it out, I have done that"*. Likewise, Claire (62) *"sit[s] with her every night - with my iPad and the phone"*, explaining that "*I just play around with it … and get to grips with what's going on and what you actually can do"*.

While increased confidence enabled greater motivation and participation, engagement was not without limits. This indicates that ongoing support, reassurance and relational scaffolding remain important. Sally (73) indicated this as *"I feel more confident when [the facilitator] 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", while Bill (71) acknowledged that if he encounters issues he *"might still seek help"*.

These three themes illustrate a progression from fear and low confidence towards increased motivation and participation, shaped by relational support and learning environments. The findings further highlight both the possibilities and limits of digital confidence, situating participation as an ongoing and supported process.

5. Discussion

This paper sets out to explore how participation in digital skills education in a community education setting supports older adults' movement from fear and low self-efficacy towards confidence, motivation and participation in digital life beyond the classroom. Findings highlight confidence as a relational and processual phenomenon, shaped by the learning environment, social interaction and ongoing support.

5.1 Moving from fear to confidence: Confidence as relational and processual

The findings highlight a movement from fear and self-doubt towards confidence in engaging with digital technologies and the internet. Participants described fear, self-doubt and generational contrasts as being barriers to confidence surrounding engagement and participation, resonating with Pirhonen et al. (2020) and Wilson et al. (2023), with fear often being described as emotional rather than technical. Participants did not describe confidence as a fixed attribute - something which is achieved - but as something which formed over time, in a relational process, consistent with Gruben et al. (2025). Through engagement with their peers and the facilitator, participants expressed emerging confidence in line with Lu et al. (2023) and a sense of not being alone in their struggles with technology. Participants often expressed feeling more confident when in class or with another who could provide support if necessary. Ultimately, confidence manifested itself, not as technical mastery, but as an increased willingness to try, to make mistakes and to persist despite them rather than to give up or panic. This suggests that ongoing support provided scaffolding and reassurance rather than dependency.

While existing research identifies fear, self-doubt and low confidence as barriers to digital engagement, less attention, especially in an Irish context, has been paid to how confidence develops within community education settings. By foregrounding the lived experiences of participants, this study extends existing work by demonstrating how confidence is formed

relationally over time, advancing a processual understanding of digital confidence in this setting.

5.2 The role of community education and the learning environment

Similar to literature in the field, a community-based context and learning environment appeared to be a catalyst for participants being at ease (Barrie et al., 2021; Betts et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2025). Participants outlined that a non-judgemental atmosphere where questions were encouraged as well as an appropriate learning pace was conducive to digital confidence development, linking to research by McCashin et al. (2022) and Reid et al. (2024). The learning environment appeared to operate as a space for participants to hear, be heard and feel like they can try new things without becoming overwhelmed. This points towards an informal and collaborative setting as providing an ideal learning environment for older digital skills learners.

In line with this, adult and community education principles of social, dialogic and experiential learning (AONTAS, 2000; Brennan & O'Grady, 2022; Department of Education and Science, 2000) were highlighted by participants as facilitating a comfortable and safe learning environment. Peer learning, as highlighted by Flynn (2025) and facilitator support offset uncertainty and enabled participants to step outside of their comfort zone throughout the course of the classes. This suggests the environment acted as relational scaffolding; bolstered by the fact that participants expressed elements of fear returning when alone or being more at ease when having someone around in case they encountered difficulty or something went wrong.

While community education settings are frequently cited as effective sites for digital skills learning (Gruben et al., 2025) there is limited qualitative research into how these learning environments actually function to facilitate digital confidence development. In an Irish context, research has tended to focus on outcomes (Eustace et al., 2023; Kett, 2015) rather than relational dynamics of the learning environment, to which this paper contributes.

5.3 From confidence to participation: Motivation and mentoring

Participants described confidence as providing the impetus for them to engage in increased participation with digital technologies and the internet outside of the classroom environment, consistent with Pihlainen et al. (2023). In addition, some participants took steps to share what they had learned with others, as discussed by McCosker et al. (2019). Findings indicate that this motivation and sharing of knowledge was voluntary, self-initiated and sometimes relational.

Engagement with digital technologies and the internet was described by participants as not just being for functional necessity but also extended into enrichment activities and usage for enjoyment. Policy-driven accounts of outcomes arising from digital skills education often equate participation with access to digital services (Scheerder et al., 2017; Mullen, 2022). This paper contributes to extend existing literature by illustrating how digital confidence can enable participation that extends into the realm of enjoyment and life enrichment. This points towards a shift away from functional models of digital inclusion towards a more relational and participatory understanding, where confidence plays a key enabling role.

In addition, motivation to engage with technology beyond the classroom as well as the concept of digital mentoring by sharing acquired knowledge with others remains underdeveloped in the literature (Dezuanni et al., 2019) with concepts of access and skills often foregrounded (Scheerder et al., 2017). As such, this paper contributes towards the body of knowledge surrounding the ways in which digital confidence can manifest itself in voluntary participation and informal mentoring outside the learning environment.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored how participation in community-based digital skills education supported older adults' movement from fear and low self-efficacy towards increased confidence, motivation and participation in digital life. Findings highlighted digital confidence as a relational and processual phenomenon shaped through supportive learning environments, peer interaction and ongoing engagement. The study contributes to understandings of digital inclusion by illustrating how participation extends beyond functional necessity into areas such as autonomy, enrichment and informal mentoring.

Confidence supports motivation and participation, while also remaining context-dependent. As such, digital skills education with cohorts such as these may benefit from foregrounding confidence-building alongside technical skills approaches. This includes creating non-judgemental learning environments and approaches which incorporate appropriate pacing, repetition and peer interaction. Opportunities for post-education informal support such as drop-in sessions may help sustain confidence beyond the classroom through continued relational support. Furthermore, recognising participation which extends beyond functional necessity but into life enrichment and personal enjoyment, curiosity and sharing of knowledge with others may support more holistic understandings of what 'success' means in digital skills education. Taken together, this suggests that digital inclusion initiatives grounded in community education principles are well positioned to support the confidence, motivation and participation of older adults in digital life. By framing confidence as an ongoing and relational

process rather than a fixed outcome, it may help educators and policymakers to design learning experiences and opportunities which better reflect older adults' lived experiences, thus supporting sustained, self-directed participation in digital life over time.

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