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# The Experiences of Older Adult Learners in Higher Education Transitioning to Online Learning During the Pandemic

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Naeemah Giovanni Hardison

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2024

Abstract

The Experiences of Older Adult Learners in Higher Education Transitioning to Online

Learning During the Pandemic

by

Naeemah Giovanni Hardison

MA, Wayne State University, 2017

BS, Wayne State University, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology

Walden University

May 2024

## Abstract

Research indicates that older adult learners are faced with a multitude of obstacles and challenges during their experiences as students in higher education. A primary obstacle faced by non-traditional students is adjusting to the use of technology, compared to younger individuals, which is a trend that was exacerbated during the pandemic. Although adult learners are the fastest-growing student population in higher education, there is a lack of information on the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. This study explored many facets surrounding this phenomenon. Guided by Malcolm Knowles's andragogical theory, the research question was: What are the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic? The primary data collection method used for this basic qualitative research study included interviews with nine older adult learners ranging between 31 and 68 years of age, pursuing a college degree during the pandemic. Nonetheless, seven participants were required for recruitment; However, nine participants were selected for the study to ensure optimal saturation for research purposes. Three themes that emerged from the thematic analysis were psychological, technological, and academic. This research may lead to positive social change by enabling institutions of higher education to facilitate appropriate adjustments to effectively serve this population of students. Such understanding could further enable them to provide better accommodations and services for nontraditional learners, increase their rate of academic success; and produce a surge in the graduation rate of older adult learners.

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## Dedication

I dedicate my Ph.D. to my mother Delores, my children in heaven, and all my good ancestors, known and unknown. I extend my dedication to my spiritual court and all the powerful spiritual forces that walk with me. This is from me to you! *Ashe*.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has estimated that the population of adult students between the ages of 25 and 34 will increase by 11% between 2015 and 2026. The same report even projected growth among learners who are 35 years of age and older, albeit at a slower pace (Skopec, 2020).

Older adult learners often feel inadequate due to ageism and negative attitudes from others, as well as feeling disregarded socially. This is supported by Fowle (2018), who found that adult learners generally exhibit low levels of confidence in their own academic ability, which contributes to a feeling of not fitting in academically. It is imperative to note that due to previous learning experiences and motivational forces, the cognitive functioning of older adults is distinct from that of younger generations (Schiller et al., 2020). Older adult learners face many obstacles and challenges when trying to pursue a college education (Courtney, 2020). Also, adult learners face more financial challenges as opposed to younger college students (Fowle, 2018).

Educators are not aware of the many challenges postsecondary students face in higher education, as well as outside of the classroom, that affect their academics (Lloh, 2019). For example, older adults have a more difficult time adjusting to the use of technology than younger individuals (LoBuono et al., 2020), a trend that was exacerbated during the pandemic. Barriers such as sociocultural factors and age-related changes, along with vision and hearing problems, isolation, and lack of computer skills, increased the level of difficulty older adults experienced with technology usage (Weil et al., 2021). For these reasons, academic institutions and their faculty should make accommodations

that will be beneficial to this learning population, especially since most institutions are geared toward traditional, younger students (Alshebou, 2019). Academic institutions must understand that barriers such as time constraints, family responsibilities, delayed comprehension, and slower memory processing can hinder the progress of all adult learners (Rabourn et al., 2018).

The potential social implications for this study rest upon the premise that the global pandemic of COVID-19 resulted in colleges and universities being forced to close their campuses (James & Thériault, 2020). Students had to continue their postsecondary education via distance learning when academic institutions and universities were forced to transition to online learning (Singh, 2021). Older adult learners are a special class of students, and it is imperative to recognize that all adults have different levels of comprehension (Cai et al., 2018). With this being said, special educational approaches are highly suggested for older adults (Kern, 2018). To accommodate the needs of older adult learners, especially as they transition to online learning, educators must first understand the definitive needs of this population (Pawlak & Pisarek, 2018), which was the intent of this study.

In this chapter, I will discuss the background of the study along with the gap in knowledge that my study will address. I will also address the problem statement and purpose of the study within this section, along with the research question that aligns within this study. The theoretical/conceptual framework, along with the nature of the study, are discussed briefly in the chapter. The definitions, assumptions, scope, and

delimitations are covered toward the end, as are the limitations and significance of the study. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Background of the Study**

Adult learners make up 38.2% of the student population in postsecondary education within the United States (Singh et al., 2021). As we know, the global pandemic of COVID-19 posed challenges specifically in higher education, which resulted in students continuing their education online (Singh et al., 2021). As a result of the pandemic, adult learners from disadvantaged families either had no access to internet connectivity, or limited access to the necessary equipment to continue their education online (James & Thériault, 2020).

Technology is the primary component in attending distance education. A study conducted by LoBuono et al. (2020) found that even though technology is leading our society, older adults are adjusting to the use of technology at a slow rate as compared to younger individuals. This is primarily due to technological proficiency, along with cognitive and physical decline due to age related issues (LoBuono et al., 2020). In addition to the effects of the pandemic, the mandatory quarantine could have created additional issues for older adults. Talmage et al. (2020) believed that older adults who are isolated, are more susceptible to a decline in mental and physical activity. Schiller et al. (2020) stated that due to previous learning experiences, knowledge in older adults is attained differently than in younger individuals. This could explain the variation in learning processes between younger and older adults. Furthermore, factors such as

changes in cognitive processing in older adults can have a noticeable impact on their attention, perception, and memory (Schiller et al., 2020).

To support learning, it was suggested that it is optimal to adapt a learner-centered approach when teaching older adult learners (James & Thériault, 2020). It was emphasized by Lloh (2019) that institutional leaders, instructors, and policymakers could make changes to better accommodate the population of adult learners. Thus, exploring the experiences and challenges of adult learners is imperative.

The gap that has been identified is the lack of information about the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online during the pandemic. Past research has explored adult learners in higher education (Cai & Kosaka, 2019; Pham et al., 2021), as well as older adult learners, and gaining a sense of technological proficiency (Lai, 2020; LoBuono et al., 2020; Morrison & McCutcheon, 2019; Pham et al., 2021). However, researchers have not yet explored the various challenges and barriers older adults have experienced while continuing their college education by way of digital technology and internet usage during the pandemic. This study explored and described how the pandemic has affected this population's academic ability as students in higher education through the fast transition to technology usage. The results of this study can initiate positive social change by providing information to institutions and stakeholders on the perceptions of older adult learners, along with the obstacles they face in obtaining a college education via distance learning, to inform interventions and associated support systems.



## **Problem Statement**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted society globally. This international epidemic as per the “Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, along with the state departments of public health and environment” (Garris & Fleck, 2020, p. 1), caused the nation to go into quarantine. Additionally, this required all educational systems to transition from conventional learning to online learning. This changed the face of higher education because adult learners had to transition from face-to-face learning to distance learning (Fang et al., 2021; James & Thériault, 2020; Weil et al., 2021). Today, adult learners who are generally characterized as nontraditional students, are leading in the student population within the higher education sector. For this study, the focal point is older adult learners in higher education, and their experiences as students who transitioned from conventional learning to online learning during the pandemic. Due to the novelty of this phenomenon, there is a lack of information on the experiences of older adult learners in higher education, transitioning to online learning during the pandemic, which this study explored in complete detail. For example, Lloh (2019), discussed perceptions, challenges, and experiences of adult learners in higher education. However, this research study focused on older adult learners in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, what has not been examined regarding this problem, are the various challenges and barriers that older adults have experienced while continuing their college education by way of digital technology during the pandemic. Another important factor to consider is how the pandemic has affected their academic process as students in higher education through the fast transition to technology usage,

which also has not been examined. Thus, research has been conducted on the experiences of older adult learners and the challenges they face. Nevertheless, there does not appear to be any current research on the experiences of older adult learners enrolled in higher educational institutions transitioning to distance learning during COVID-19, which was the focus of this study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study is derived from the basis that there is a lack of information on the experiences of older adult learners in postsecondary education, transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. Research has implied that older adult learners are faced with many obstacles and challenges when trying to pursue a college education (Courtney, 2020). This study filled the gap by exploring the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. Furthermore, educators are not aware of the many challenges those postsecondary students face in higher education, as well as outside of the classroom, that affect their academics (Lloh, 2019). The purpose of this general qualitative study is to explore the experiences of older adult learners as students in higher educational institutions during the time of COVID-19. The intent of this research is to explore the experiences of older adult learners in postsecondary educational institutions transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. This is a basic qualitative research study that examined the meaning behind the experiences and perceptions of older adult learners.

### **Research Question**

The research question for this study is as follows: What are the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is Malcolm Knowles's andragogy theory. According to Knowles et al. (2015), the intention behind articulating the core principles of adult learning is to assist educators who design learning strategies, teach adults, and present core principles of adult learning that will promote efficient learning processes for adult learners. Another description of andragogy is from Greene and Larsen (2018), who stated that even though self-directedness and autonomy are the primary characteristics of adult learners, the instructor plays the role of a facilitator to deliver knowledge in the most precise and effective manner. Andragogy is known as a science for helping adults learn (Agyeman et al., 2018). The facets within this theory are all geared to how adults learn. Griffin (2020) stated that Knowles refers to andragogy as "adult-focused teaching." The theory of andragogy has guided qualitative research by Singh et al. (2021) and Amponsah (2020). Andragogy has been used by Culkin (2019) within the area of teaching military faculty development. Andragogy has helped guide and answer the research question in this study by providing a framework for understanding the way that adults learn.

## Conceptual Framework

In describing how the pandemic has challenged adult learners, students have had to obtain their education through distance learning, that is, continuing their college education online (Singh et al., 2021). This has caused numerous challenges for learners and educators throughout the industry of higher education. COVID-19 has affected access to higher education along with individuals involved in gaining an education through lifelong learning (James & Thériault, 2021). One of the ways the pandemic has challenged adult learners stems from the fact that adult learners were forced to either continue their learning or obtain their education via distance learning due to the pandemic. Weil (2021) stated that the pandemic caused increased isolation social isolation among older adults, which required older adult learners to transition to online learning from face-to-face learning, which in turn required the permanent use of technology.

Krogulec (2019) found that older learners are more likely to experience obstacles and difficulties in academics. This research then went on to suggest that these changes are due to various life experiences and changes in life circumstances associated with being an older adult. Singh et al. (2021) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused numerous challenges for nontraditional students. Knowles's andragogical theory describes the characteristics of the adult learner, which provides guidance about how to better accommodate them academically. Within the study of the experiences of older adult learners in higher education during COVID-19, this theory supports the

development of an understanding on how these self-directed individuals perceived their experiences during the pandemic in higher education.

### **Nature of the Study**

To address the research question of this study, I used a qualitative research design. The type of study conducted for this research was a basic qualitative research study. For my planned research design, I recruited older adult learners in higher education who had transitioned from conventional learning to online learning because of restrictions that were mandated to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Nine participants were selected for recruitment, of whom five were male and four were female. They were between 31 and 68 years of age and had pursued a college degree during the pandemic. A thematic analysis was performed consisting of interviews with students describing their experiences. This is complementary to the work of Busher and James (2019), who examined the experiences of adult learners in access to higher education courses, along with their previous educational and employment experiences. The focal point of my study consisted of the experiences and viewpoints of older adult learners as they continued their postsecondary education, while transitioning to online learning, during COVID (Lloh, 2018). The analysis was performed on primary data, in the form of participant responses I collected through interviews. Interviews focused on the central phenomenon, which is the experiences of older adult students in higher education during the pandemic. This approach aligns with the research problem by enabling an exploration of the experiences of the learner in higher education, while transitioning to online learning, through their own personal lens.

### **Definitions of Key Concepts Used in the Study**

*Nontraditional adult learners:* Singh et al. (2021) described nontraditional adult learners as individuals who are over the age of 25, have full-time employment, are financially independent, have dependents with or without a spouse, and live as a married or single individual. The determining criteria for older adults are those who have specific needs with a definitive purpose for continued learning (Krogulec, 2019). Adult learners can be defined as those who continue their education by balancing their family and work and are generally older than 22 (Kara et al., 2019). For the purposes of this study, the age range indicated by Singh et al. was used.

*Stakeholder:* The term stakeholder is defined as all employees, service users, suppliers, partners, local community members, and all other agents who hold an interest in an organization (Falqueto et al., 2020). These terms are used in the study to describe all those involved within the higher educational setting.

*Transitioning students:* Serhan (2020) described transitioning students as learners in higher educational institutions who transitioned from face-to-face traditional learning to online learning. For this study, adult learners who transitioned to online learning have been recruited.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions related to topic and methodology are necessary for this study. I am assuming that the participants in the study were truthful with the information they disclosed in the interviews.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The inclusion criteria of the study were that consistent of participants being (a) older learners between the ages of 31 and 68 years of age; (b) college students actively attending courses during the pandemic, and (c) students who have transitioned from face-to-face learning to online learning. These criteria were chosen because they satisfied the gap in research. In essence, older adult learners in higher education during the pandemic were the primary focus of the study. Thus, the scope of this study was bound by the characteristics and timeframe relevant to the study. This falls within the guidelines of the theoretical framework being used for the study. The andragogical theory emphasizes adult learning and principles that are derived from assumptions regarding the learning principles for adults (McNalley et al., 2020). It was thus assumed that this theoretical framework was the most appropriate to guide this study. A potential aspect related to the study that was not investigated was older adult learners who discontinued their education due to challenges and barriers of online learning. Gardener et al. (2021) found that retention rates for students are often contingent upon their ability to juggle their busy lives, finances to continue their education, and personal affairs while obtaining a college education. Even though this varies by student, many adult learners entering higher education programs via distance learning are steady. Research has further suggested that a decline in completion rates for distance learning programs by adult learners is due in part to the challenges learners face (Gardener et al., 2021).

### **Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations to my study was that it could take a significant amount of time to complete. Another limitation was that it may be difficult to find patterns in the data. Whether or not all my participants would go through the steps to provide the data for my study was a concern. I accounted for any biases, current, or any that potentially could have appeared in the future.

Measures to address the first limitation consisted of sticking to the pre-arranged questions for the interview as much as possible and ensuring that all sub questions that may arise during the interview were derived strictly from the responses of the interviewee. This provided structure and time efficiency. To identify patterns in the data, I followed the steps for a qualitative analysis using software to optimize the process. To overcome the issue of recruitment, I considered using recruiting services to obtain participants for the study. A strategy used to tackle the challenge that could have arisen due to non-engagement of participants would be addressing the research question in a timely manner, allowing the participants to remain receptive, while not getting off topic.

### **Significance of the Study**

Currently, most of the student population in most educational institutions is made up of nontraditional students (Alshebou, 2019). The intent of this study was to show that for educators to accommodate the needs of older adult learners, they must first understand the definitive needs of this population (Pawlak & Pisarek, 2018).

This is derived from the analysis of the NCES, which estimates the population of adult students between the ages of 25 and 34 will increase by 11% between 2015 and



2026. The study is significant in that it filled a gap by exploring the experiences of older adult learners as students in higher educational institutions during COVID-19. There is little to no research on this because the pandemic experiences are so recent. Because older adult learners have a lack of technological proficiency, gaining a sense of digital literacy will assist them in daily activities, along with completing college courses online (Weil et al., 2021).

Understanding the experiences of older adult learners who are postsecondary students during the pandemic can lead to positive social change by enabling institutions of higher education to adjust so that older adult learners can have better accommodations and services. This will enable these learners to become more successful in their courses, while increasing the graduation rate of older adult learners. This research will support professional practice by changing the instructional approach of educational institutions and faculty along with the politics of educational institutions regarding making changes that will be more accommodating to older adult learners.

### **Summary**

This was a general qualitative study in which I explored the experiences of older adult learners in higher educational institutions, transitioning to online learning, in higher education during COVID-19. This international epidemic has affected the global higher education industry, resulting in higher educational institutions being forced to transition from face-to-face learning to distance learning. Exploration of this topic has not yet taken place prior to this research. Currently, older adults are leading the student population of colleges and universities. Therefore, the primary focus of this study consisted of

nontraditional students between the ages of 31 and 68 during the pandemic. This conferred authenticity, with the intent of integrity from the basis of semi structured interviews of participants. The intent of this research is to provide understanding, insight, and information to higher educational institutions, as well as to their stakeholders, to better accommodate this learning population. The analysis of this study was based upon real life events in a naturalistic setting. Furthermore, the following chapter will provide a literature review supporting research within the area of nontraditional learners in higher education, who transitioned to online learning during the pandemic, along with challenges and barriers they have experienced, when transitioned to online learning during the pandemic.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a lack of information on the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. This student population is faced with obstacles and challenges during their experiences as students in higher education (Courtney, 2020). Nontraditional students are generally self-motivated and self-directed (Cai et al., 2018). However, these students face barriers that hinder their academic success. Mature students often feel inadequate due to ageism and negative attitudes from others, as well as feeling disregarded socially. The cognitive functioning of older adults is particularly distinct from that of the younger generations (Schiller et al., 2020). Factors such as past or present medical conditions, present or prior substance use, life stressors, and slowed mental processing could serve as barriers to learning. Beik and Fazeli (2021) suggested that aging is highly associated with a decline in both cognitive and motor skills, along with motivational factors. Educators may not be aware of the many challenges those postsecondary students face in higher education, as well as outside of the classroom, that affect their academics (Lloh, 2019). Older adults have a more difficult time adjusting to the use of technology than younger individuals (LoBuono et al., 2020), which was exacerbated during the pandemic. Barriers such as sociocultural factors and age-related changes, along with vision and hearing problems, isolation, and lack of computer skills, increased the level of difficulty older adults experienced with technology usage (Weil et al., 2021).

Older adult learners are a special class of students (Cai et al., 2018). Higher education institutions and faculty should make accommodations that will be beneficial to

this learning population. This is imperative because the focal point of most institutions is geared toward traditional, younger students (Alshebou, 2019). Academic institutions must understand that barriers such as not having enough time, family responsibilities, and delayed comprehension could interfere with the academic achievement of learners. Moreover, the NCES estimated that the population of adult students between the ages of 25 and 34 will increase by 11% between 2015 and 2026. The same report even projected growth among learners who are 35 years of age and older, albeit at a slower pace (Skopec, 2020). Thus, this study intends to increase our understanding of the experiences of these older learners above the age of 25.

One of the ways researchers have addressed adult learners is through the lens of andragogy. This is a theory that focuses on how adults learn (McNally et al., 2020; Mews, 2020). This is followed by the fact that andragogy is all about adult learners (Note et al., 2020). A specific strength within the research area of this study is that research has previously been performed on adult learners in higher education. This is supported by Singha et al. (2021), who discovered that research has been done on adult learners in higher education, along with challenges they have faced. Additionally, Singh et al. explored the challenges faced by nontraditional adult learners in higher education during the pandemic. In previous research, there was no information found on the direct experiences of older adult learners in higher education or the challenges they faced in higher education as a result of the pandemic.

Thus, the purpose of this general qualitative study is to explore the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the

pandemic. In this chapter, I will cover the literature search strategy, the theoretical foundation, and the literature review. Furthermore, I will explore online versus face-to-face-education, strategies for learning in older adult students, and the selected population's experiences of the use of technology. Lastly, I will discuss online learning versus face-to-face education, learning strategies for older adult students, the experiences of technology use, along with challenges and barriers to adult learning in higher education—both online and face-to-face, closing with a conclusion.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Several databases and search engines were used to locate relevant literature. The initial databases used were Academic Search Complete, APA PsycNet, EBSCO Thoreau, and Educational Source. The next set of databases used were ERIC, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO. The last set of databases used were Science Direct and Taylor & Francis Group. In my literature search strategy, words such as *adult learners*, *adult students*, *aging*, and *andragogy* were used. The next set of words that were incorporated into the search strategy were *barriers*, *challenges*, and *college students*. *Community colleges*, *COVID-19*, and *distance education* were also used in obtaining information. Moving forward into my search, the words *gerontology*, *higher education*, and *lifelong learners* were often used. Following the words used previously, *mature students*, *natural disaster*, and *nontraditionally aged students* were also used. Going further into my searches, words such as *older students*, *pandemic*, and *problems in learning* were often used. Lastly, words such as *postsecondary students*, *problems with adult learners*, and *post-traditional students* were used as search strategies.

The terms that were used for Academic Search Complete were *andragogy* and *older adult learners*. For APA PsycNet, the terms used were *older adult learners*, *higher education*, and *population*. For EBSCO Thoreau, the initial terms used in my search were *older adult learners*, *higher*, and *adult learners*. Moving forward into my search, *adult students*, *non-traditional students*, and *education* were words that were commonly used. Following the previous search terms, *college or university*, *experience or perception or attitude or view of feeling or opinions*, and *andragogy* were often used. In going further into my search, words such as *COVID-19 or coronavirus*, *pandemic*, and *lifelong learning or life-long learning or adult education*, were also used. Lastly, the words *higher education* and *gerontology or elderly or aging* were used under academic search complete. The terms that were used for Educational Source were *educational technology*, *college*, and *adult learners or adult students or non-traditional*. *Gerontology or elderly or aging*, *history or background or origin*, along with *higher education or college*, and *COVID or coronavirus or pandemic*, were additional terms that were used. The terms used for ERIC were *adult learners*, *adult students*, and *COVID-19*. Additional terms used were *higher education*, *non-traditional students*, and *pandemic*. Lastly, the terms that were used for Google scholar were *mature students in higher education*, *non-traditional college students*, and *older adult learners during COVID-19*.

The terms used for PsycINFO were *adult learning or adult learners or adult students or non-traditional or nontraditional*, *andragogy*, and *higher education or college or university*. With Science Direct, words such as *adult learners*, *non-traditional*

*students*, and *mature learners* were used. The search term used for the Taylor & Francis Group was the *background of older adult learners in college*.

Due to the novelty and subsequent continuation of the pandemic, there is not enough information on the direct experiences of older adult learners getting a college education currently. The intended approach to address this was to obtain this information through analysis of data gathered during interviews.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical framework used was Knowles's andragogy theory. The term *andragogy* originated with Alexander Kapp in the 1830s but became popular in the 1960s through the work of Malcolm Knowles (Mews, 2020). The intention behind articulating the core principles of adult learning is to assist educators who design learning strategies and teach adults by presenting core principles of adult learning that will promote efficient learning processes for adult learners (Knowles et al., 2015). Andragogy is the art and science of teaching mature learners (Nally et al., 2020). Another description of this comes from Greene and Larsen (2018), who stated that even though self-directedness and autonomy are the primary qualities of adult learners, the instructor plays the role of a facilitator to deliver knowledge in the most precise and effective manner. Loeng and Omwami (2018), supported this by suggesting that in Europe, the theory of andragogy was used in conjunction with pedagogy to express the evolution of adult learning. This theory is based on adult-focused teaching (Griffin, 2019). The rationale for using this theoretical foundation was that there are a multitude of challenges and barriers that older adult learners face in higher education institutions whether it is face-to-face learning or

distance learning. On the other hand, the andragogical assumptions could produce challenges in online learning; because remote learning is different from traditional learning (Ng & Baharom, 2018).

Knowles's theory of andragogy relates to older adult learners by making assumptions about how adult learners acquire information. The assumption of andragogy is to serve as a guide to how adults learn (Hagg & Kurczewska, 2020). Knowles (1980) described six core principles of adult learning theory, which included (a) "learner's need to know, (b) self-concept, (c) prior experience, (d) readiness to learn, (e) learning orientation, and (f) motivation to learn" (Ornelles et al., 2019, p. 548). This theory is relevant to the design of this research because it provides suggestions for understanding how older adults learn. The foundation and assumptions within this theory are based on how to better facilitate the transition of adult learners into self-directed learners. This will support research by providing insight into how nontraditional students learn. The andragogical approach is a wide framework of reference regarding how adult students learn. This theory has been applied in constructing syllabi for students to maintain a learner-centered approach to teaching (McNally et al., 2019). The andragogical theory is recognized as a need for guidance from the educator, as well as learning for the student, which should come through a pedagogical and andragogical approach (Hagg & Kurczewska, 2020).

The connections between the framework presented and the nature of the study rest upon the premise that Knowles's theory describes the characteristics of the adult learner, with the goal of better accommodating them academically, and this study is focused on



adult learners. The principles of andragogy are used to enhance the learning experience of adult students (Mews, 2020). In this study of the experiences of older adult learners during COVID-19, this theory both predicted, and explained how these self-directed individuals perceived their experiences.

An andragogical approach encourages students to be autonomous and take responsibility for their learning (McNally, 2020). This is relevant since older adult learners were forced to take a more self-directed approach to their education due to isolation because of the pandemic. The fundamental element of andragogy includes adults recognizing that learning is important, the freedom to be self-directed, learners working according to their convenience, and having a learning process that is positive, motivating, and experiential (Note et al., 2020). Andragogy suggests that everyone can learn. Furthermore, all students learn more effectively when the learning experience is relatable to their personal life (McNally et al., 2019). The research question builds upon the existing theory by diving into adult learners' perceptions of their experiences learning during the pandemic. Research suggests that barriers such as sociocultural factors and age-related changes, along with vision and hearing problems, isolation, and lack of computer skills, increase the difficulty older adults experience with technology usage (Weil et al., 2021). Research suggests that older adult learners are faced with many obstacles and challenges when trying to pursue a college education (Courtney, 2020). Failure of adult learners to establish autonomy could result in a lack of academic independence. Although research has been conducted about the educational experiences

of adult learners, this study focuses on the experiences of this growing group of learners during a worldwide epidemic, using the theoretical lens of andragogy.

### **Literature Review**

It has been determined that most of the student population in most educational institutions consists of nontraditional students (Alshebou, 2019). Due to advancements in medicine, older adults are healthier and high functioning; and society is recognizing the significance of lifelong learning in this population (Kuklewicz & King, 2018). This could be the primary factor in promoting education for adult learners. The NCES estimated that the population of adult students between the ages of 25 and 34 will increase by 11% between 2015 and 2026 and that there would also be growth among learners 35 years of age and older, albeit at a slower pace (Skopec, 2020).

Because older adult learners may have a lack of technological proficiency, gaining a sense of digital literacy will assist them in daily activities, along with completing college courses online (Weil et al., 2021). This will also help those individuals who desire to pursue a college education through online learning. Distance learning has grown rapidly due to the convenience and flexibility that it provides for students (Ng & Baharom, 2018). Distance learning supports increases in educational attainment because it promotes accessibility to higher education globally. Lloh (2019), suggests that education is more attainable due to the availability of online learning.

Understanding the experiences of older adults during the pandemic can lead to positive social change by enabling institutions of higher education to adjust so that older adult learners will have better accommodations and services in place. Incorporating

education into the lives of older adults can produce remarkable effects in the areas of cognition and overall well-being (Sorbral & Sorbral, 2021). Buchanan and Warwick (2020) found that obtaining a college education can help restructure the lives of adults suffering from mental health issues.

One of the ways researchers have addressed adult learners is through the lens of andragogy. This is a theory that focuses on how adults learn (McNally et al., 2020; Mews, 2020). One of its strengths within the research literature reviewed is that there has been research performed on adult learners in higher education. This is supported by the stance that the andragogical theory serves as a foundation for adult learners (Note et al., 2020). Previous research has been conducted on adult learners in higher education, along with the challenges they experienced. Singh et al. (2021) explored the challenges faced by nontraditional adult learners in higher education during the pandemic. As a weakness throughout the literature reviewed, no information was found on the direct experiences of older adult learners in higher education. Also, there was no information on the challenges that older adult learners have faced as a result of the pandemic in higher education. A qualitative research approach was used to answer the research questions in the study.

The focal point of this study consisted of the transition from in-person to online education for older adult learners during the COVID 19 pandemic. Studies related to the learning experiences of older adult college students address the challenges faced, but not during the pandemic. As we know, the COVID-19 pandemic caused social isolation among older adults. This required older adult learners to transition from face-to-face learning to online, which required the permanent use of technology (Weil et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unique and numerous challenges for nontraditional students (Singh et al., 2021).

The following literature review focuses on the differences between online and face-to-face education, the learning strategies in older adult learners, the experiences of older learners related to the use of technology in higher education, along with the challenges and barriers experienced by these learners in higher education during online and face-to-face instruction.

### **Online Versus Face-to-Face Education**

For older adult learners, attending college can be a very exciting and life-changing journey. Attending college can be associated with a feeling of liberation, empowerment, and happiness. Oftentimes, feelings of nervousness, uncertainty, and apprehension due to the unknown in retrospect of what is expected during this journey; can be inevitable for older adult learners attending a higher educational institution. Overall enrollment of adult learners from the ages of 35 and above has increased to 13% of the total population of college students and is expected to expand within postsecondary institutions (Mews, 2020). This growth will require that higher educational institutions change to meet the needs of this population. Adult learners now have more opportunities to attend higher education institutions (Brunton & Buckley, 2021). These learners often search for learning environments that allow them to transition smoothly into the student role while still meeting their personal obligations (Ng & Baharom, 2018). In a traditional educational setting, community colleges are more accepting of older adult learners as students and are more adult learner friendly (Lloh, 2019). This could be due to factors

such as smaller campus and smaller class size. Although the educational setting may be adult learner friendly, Kalavar et al., (2021), found that adult learners are more susceptible to experiencing low academic achievement, and higher drop-out rates.

Even though older adult students are likely to have a specific interest in a particular area they would like to study, many higher educational institutions lack good curricula, and this creates obstacles for older adult learners (Cai & Kosaka, 2019). Managing work, personal affairs, family life, and school poses a challenge for adult learners in both online and traditional learning settings (Kara et al., 2019). Online education is more popular because it allows individuals with busy lifestyles to obtain a college education while providing flexibility (Ng & Baharom, 2018). Since the year 2016, 31% of students in higher education institutions were enrolled in one online course (Lloh, 2019).

For this reason, distance learning is seen as being more convenient for the average individual with a busy lifestyle. However, technological proficiency plays a major role in online learning. This is best described as possessing the skills necessary to operate digital devices which includes cell phones and computers (Pihlainen et al., 2021). Those students who were technologically proficient before transitioning to learning online may not perceive this as a challenge. However, those individuals who are low in digital literacy may have seen the transition to distance learning as a barrier. Even though online courses increase opportunities to pursue a college degree; they pose concerns such as poor learning for students, and low completion rates compared to a traditional learning setting (Lloh, 2019). Constant evolution in information technology has increased the need

for older adults to acquire digital literacy (Pihlainen et al., 2021). There is a contrast between learning in a traditional setting and learning virtually. For this reason, the course information must be presented differently in each case, so that the student can fully conceptualize and understand the information being taught. In essence, changes in how educational information is conveyed to students from face-to-face versus online learning should initiate changes in pedagogy. This should corroborate a continuation in learning that is optimal for educational performance in each learning setting. As we know, COVID-19 called for educators to switch from face-to-face learning to distance learning, which enabled them to utilize different ways of teaching. These alternative ways of educating students were performed using zoom and simulation-based teaching videos (Fang et al., 2021). Changes in how educational information is conveyed to students from face-to-face, versus online learning should initiate changes in pedagogy, which should corroborate a continuation in learning.

When students are obtaining a college education via distance learning, the use of a computer is mandatory. Digital technology is often needed and used to complete assignments. In traditional learning, discussions, and debates, along with fraternizing among classmates and staff are common occurrences. This is supported by the fact that collaborative projects along with conducting in-class assignments and activities are traditional in face-to-face learning (Fang et al., 2021). Within a traditional learning setting, it is easier for educators to connect with students, motivate students, monitor their learning, and oversee their interactions among their classmates. Furthermore, in face-to-face learning, educators can monitor the behavior of the students in class, which could

signal whether the students are interested or disinterested in the material; as well as if they are understanding what is taught (Fand et al., 2021).

More adults are enrolling in college at an increased rate, and the numbers will continue to escalate over time. Because of this increase, higher education institutions must be able to effectively meet the needs of nontraditional learners. For many, distance learning may be their choice over a traditional in-class learning environment. There are pros and cons to both preferences of learning. However, the instructional designs of all the courses should cater to the needs and various learning styles of this population (Cai & Kosaka, 2019).

### **Learning Strategies for Older Adult Students**

It is important to understand that all individuals learn differently, and learners of various age groups have different educational needs (Pawlak & Pisarek, 2018). The academic needs of a twenty-one-year-old will be different from those of mature learners thirty-five years of age or above (Fowle, 2018). Older adult learners often pull information from their past, and they build on prior knowledge. A good support system can help older learners prepare mentally for their academic journey through college (Griffin, 2020). Nevertheless, if internal motivational triggers promote a desire for learning, students will continue their education. Educators can cater to the needs of older learners more effectively if they understand how they think and process information (Pawlak & Pisarek, 2018). Further, learning experiences for older learners should be highly involved, discussion oriented, and in a stress-free environment (Pawlak & Pisarek, 2018). The learning process in older adults is different from that of younger adults, which

is due to factors such as motivational intensity, previous learning experiences, and changes in cognitive abilities (Schiller et al., 2020). All students learn differently, and educators must meet the students where they are in their educational journey.

Gaining additional knowledge and communicating with others on an academic level can serve as good motivators for learning (Schiller et al., 2020). Research indicates that older adults who were confined to their homes during the pandemic experienced social isolation from their families, friends, and social networks (Weil et al., 2021). This increased the need for computer use, which encouraged internet use. Older adults have expressed that their self-confidence has increased, and their self-image has improved through learning digital skills. This has allowed them to gain a sense of independence, along with life mastery skills (Pihlainen et al., 2021). Nontraditional learners must develop strong academic skills, and self-confidence, along with a good support system to be successful in higher education (Fowle, 2021). Learners benefit greatly by keeping an open line of communication with educators, as well as addressing any academic difficulties early on. Another key factor in academic achievement is maintaining a balance between family, personal affairs, work, and school (Griffin, 2019).

### **Older Adult Learners' Experiences of Technology Use in Higher Education**

Even though technology is taking the world by storm, older adults are becoming acclimated to this usage at a declining rate (LoBuono et al., 2017). The importance of technological proficiency became critical during the time of COVID-19. Since practically everything can be done online, internet accessibility is a great advantage. In today's world, the average individual owns a cellular device that is internet ready. Because of this



trend, internet usage by older adult learners of 65 years of age and older is slowly increasing (Weil et al., 2021).

Many individuals struggle with the use of current technologies. Those individuals who do not have internet access, along with those who lack technological proficiency, are referred to as being part of the “digital divide” or being part of society’s “grey digital”. Furthermore, these individuals are separated from those who are advanced in the use of technology (Weil et al., 2021). Older adults are usually independent and live by themselves. Due to the aging of society, and people living longer, the majority of older adults live alone (Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021). This could present an additional challenge if these older adults need immediate assistance with technological issues or academic challenges. Limited understanding of technological usage, along with a decline in cognitive abilities and physical deficits, often leaves older adults feeling discouraged and hopeless about using technology (LoBuono et al, 2017). More times than not, the usage of a smartphone is usually this population’s initial introduction to technology. This is generally followed by assistance with usage, along with getting acclimated to operating the device. Older adult learners experience barriers in using technology for academic purposes. These barriers can be due to age-related changes, changes in visual capability, hearing loss, and reduced ability to perform tasks (Weil et al., 2021). These age-related changes can interfere with technological proficiency, but having the appropriate assistance when needed, along with a good support group, can address the issue. Due to the need for older adults to become digitally competent, programs have developed globally that offer technology training (LoBuono et al., 2017). If older adults can become

more enthusiastic and motivated to the use of technology, the digital divide may close (Sobral & Sorbral, 2021).

Technology usage is increasing globally, with most of life's affairs including education able to be handled online. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of technology has escalated, and internet usage has become a must. This affects all of society, including those who have little knowledge of smart phones, internet, and computer usage. This is particularly seen in the older adult population, which is why most older adults struggle with the use of technology. Because older adult learners who attended traditional higher education institutions were forced to continue their education at distance due to COVID-19, technology became an additional barrier to their academics.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Adult Learning in Higher Education**

#### ***Online***

Technology can pose a substantial challenge to older adults. Sutton and Hope (2017) suggested that adults may not have the necessary tools or resources accessible to pursue an education online. As we know, adult learners face many challenges. Due to the many challenges adult learners face, there are not enough resources to provide support for these older adults who do not adapt as quickly to the use of technology as younger individuals (LoBuono et al., 2020). Moreover, there are three barriers that students face, which are situational, institutional, and dispositional (Courtney, 2020). Situational barriers are challenges such as lack of time, childcare, financial issues, job responsibilities, along with issues regarding transportation. Institutional barriers are

unintentional challenges imposed by the academic institution itself or the educators, such as faculty ending their workday at the same time the adult students start their courses. Dispositional barriers are self-perceptions that the student has about his or herself, such as low or diminished self-confidence (Courtney, 2020). Regarding distance learning, staying focused is a challenge because online learning is self-directed, which requires discipline and accountability. On the other hand, distance learning allows students to have additional time for study and completing assignments on a schedule that best fits their lifestyle (Lloh, 2019). Because online learning is self-paced and unsupervised, if the learner is unable to fully understand what is going on in the course, they are more likely to be dissatisfied with the course (Ng & Baharom, 2018).

Psychological distress and physical discomfort are two things' students may experience due to the distance learning environment (Campbell et al., 2020). Some educators in online, higher educational institutions issue students a pass or fail instead of a letter grade; and the courses are poorly planned due to a rush to transition to remote learning due to the pandemic (Singh et al., 2021). Distance learning requires self-motivation, as well as possessing the capability to follow directions without the direct supervision of the educator. Online learning requires fully understanding and comprehending the information being taught to conceptualize the course material. For example, simulation videos are often used in e-learning, and the student must be able to understand, and correctly follow the simulation procedure for the assignment (Fang et al., 2021). If the instructional delivery in distance learning is not student friendly, or formatted for online learning, the student could experience confusion, distress, and

anxiety which could result in not understanding what is required for the course. Ng and Baharom (2018), suggests that instructors and facilitators of distance learning courses have not established a means of delivering course instruction to the students in an effective manner.

The lack of technical resources in online learning has caused additional barriers for adult learners (James & Thériault, 2020). Not all students can learn directly from a book or by computer instruction, so the presence of an educator makes a difference in learning. The lack of social presence from the educator and classmates in distance learning may cause a disconnection because many students need to feel a sense of community among their instructor and classmates (Ng & Baharom, 2018). The use of technology can be a barrier to online learning for students who are not technologically proficient. A technological device such as a computer is needed to attend class. Learners who are not familiar with basic computer use will have a difficult time maneuvering through the class portal. Because online learning is geared more towards students who are self-directed, autonomy is a big factor in becoming successful in distance learning. Even though online learning is convenient, it requires self-motivation and discipline. Nevertheless, factors such as reading, and comprehension are exceptionally critical for academic success in distance.

### ***Face to Face***

In addition to being highly motivated, older adult learners must exhibit strong self-confidence, along with heightened self-actualization which will provide inspiration to help them move forward (Pawlak & Pisarek, 2018). Older adult learners can

sometimes feel inadequate due to their age and the extended time that they have spent outside of the classroom. Adult learners differ from traditional students in academic ability, psychological ability, and life attributes (Brunton & Buckley, 2021). There are three barriers that students face within higher learning; and these are situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers (Courtney, 2020). The pandemic has caused many social barriers due to social distancing, which has continued into educational settings. For example, due to the restrictions of COVID-19, medical students who were attending medical school in a face-to-face learning environment and had to move to an online situation experienced challenges in learning due to social distancing (Fang et al., 2021). Due to the circumstances previously discussed, one could argue that those students did not receive the full learning experience.

Even though older adult learners face the struggle of keeping up with the various changes in life, universities that are adult friendly often contribute to them gaining a sense of autonomy (Gierszewski & Kluowicz, 2021). On the other hand, Lloh (2019), suggested that the demands of life often interfere with student involvement on campus, resource-seeking, and time needed to devote to studies. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that adult learners have an advantage because they can contribute wisdom and life experiences to the classroom environment. In some instances, depending on the context and the course, this can either serve as an advantage or a hindrance to the student.

Since the aging process takes a toll on individuals physiologically, Fowle (2018), suggested that stereotypes are often associated with age. This can create challenges for older adult learners trying to obtain a college education. Changes in brain functioning in

older adults, better known as altered cognitive processes, often cause issues with paying attention, memorization, and understanding (Schiller et al., 2020). This could serve as a handicap in the area of academics because it impedes cognitive functioning which can interrupt the learning process. Furthermore, many adult learners have not attended school for a substantial period, so re-entering higher education could be a potential challenge regarding academic skills (Fowle, 2018). Teaching medical students face-to-face during the pandemic was very difficult due to restrictions on social distance, and suggestions were made to continue teaching online (Fang et al., 2021). In traditional learning, setting incivility causes chaos and disruption in the classroom (Campbell et al., 2020). Therefore, standards and rules must be set to ensure an effective, nurturing, and rewarding academic environment. In a traditional educational setting, older adult learners are generally motivated as students due to their anticipated academic achievement. Due to the variation of ages of students in the course, some older adults may feel uncomfortable and inadequate due to their age, and length of time outside of school. Thus, older adult learners may experience unique barriers inside and outside of the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Learning for older adults involves a full life experience, as well as an exceptional understanding of their own life. The educational level of older adults often affects their health and lifestyle, along with having a desire to become a lifelong learner (Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021). It was further noted that gaining knowledge helps older adults establish a new identity (Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021). Having a good understanding of how this population learns could help educators better prepare for this task, as well as

increase the academic success of these students. In academia, older learners should be treated with recognition and respect (Cai et al., 2018). Moreover, a student-centered approach, which focuses on the needs of the student; along with incorporating student autonomy, will aid in teaching older adult learners (Schiller et al., 2020). This is where the theory of andragogy comes into play. The principles of andragogy are used to enhance the learning experience of adult students (Mews, 2020). However, due to the abrupt transition from traditional face-to-face learning to distance learning, students may not have been able to grasp a self-directed approach to learning fast enough. Even though the andragogical perspective is useful and helpful, some adult learners prefer to be guided academically (McNally et al., 2020).

The gap that has been identified is the lack of information about the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning in higher educational settings during the pandemic. What others have not yet explored about this problem are the various challenges and barriers that older adults have experienced while continuing their college education by way of digital technology during the pandemic. How the pandemic has affected their academic ability as students in higher education through the fast transition to technology usage has not been examined. Research has been performed on the experiences of older adult learners and the challenges they face. However, there does not appear to be any current research on the experiences of older adult learners enrolled in higher educational institutions, who transitioned to online learning during COVID-19.

The following chapter will explain the research method used to carry out this study as well as the procedures that will be used, along with the recruitment process for participants in the study.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this general qualitative study is to explore the experiences of older adult learners in higher education, transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. In this chapter, I will explore the following elements within the study: the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and the participant selection logic. Further, I will address the instrumentation, content validity, and procedures for recruitment, along with the participation of the those recruited for this study. Additionally, I will discuss data collection, saturation, and debriefing. Lastly, I will present the validation strategies, data analysis plan, ethical concerns, and protection of participants.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

There is a lack of information on the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. For this reason, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of older adult learners as students in higher educational institutions during COVID-19. Qualitative research is the research tradition that was utilized for this study. This research approach was chosen because the intent is to explore the perceptions of my participants in a specific setting, during a definitive time. The research question addressed in this study is as follows: What are the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic?

Basic qualitative research is driven by scholarly interest in an event or phenomenon to gain an extended formulation of observation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 5). For the sake of this research study, the objective is to acquire further knowledge

about the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during COVID-19.

The type of study that was conducted is a basic qualitative research study. The use of a qualitative research design involves investigating an event or phenomenon through the lens of those involved in the experience. A qualitative research design entails describing, clarifying, interpreting, and otherwise comprehending the essence of a specific phenomenon that occurs naturally (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 7). This research involved answering questions and understanding the meanings that people make in response to an existing or pre-existing occurrence. For the planned research design, older adult learners in higher education who transitioned to online learning during the pandemic were recruited for interviews. The intent was for participants to describe their experiences, which made the basic qualitative approach appropriate for this study. I performed an analysis on primary data collected from interviews. Busher and James (2019) collected their qualitative data through group interviews. The age of older adult learners ranged between 31 and 68 years of age, as this age group is typical of those adult learners pursuing a college degree during the pandemic (Schiller et al., 2020). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on older adult students in higher education who transitioned to online learning was examined. The research identified and described the various ways students' academic experiences were affected due to the transition from traditional learning. In accordance with the university standards and institutional review board (IRB) approval (IRB Approval # 05-18-23-1003781) for research purposes, conclusions were reached based on the analysis of data obtained. Thus, this basic qualitative research

strategy best served this study in answering the research question and filling the gap with much-needed knowledge.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My primary role as the researcher in this study consisted of being an observer. This allowed me to establish empathy and consideration for my participants. This is in conjunction with developing a better understanding of their reality and perceptions their experiences. Ciesielska et al. (2018) suggested that the observer, which is an important role, combines with the environment of the study to better understand the group; however, this can also be performed without any involvement with the participants. This is accomplished by learning the norms, behaviors, and values of the group being studied (Ciesielska et al. 2018). In this study, the primary role of a researcher was to gain the information needed for the study, by gathering data obtained from participants. This is in conjunction with their experiences in a specific setting, during a definitive time. Each phenomenon, event, or situation experienced by others is unique, while part of a specific context, along with all the interactions within the phenomenon being experienced (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 17). Understanding the significance of the participants' experiences, along with their perceptions of how their education was impacted by the transition to online learning during the global world epidemic, was the goal of this research. This provided insight into the phenomenon and generated recommendations on how higher education institutions can better assist mature students.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The participant population was older adult learners between the ages of 31 and 68 years of age (see Schiller et al., 2020). They were active students in a higher educational institution during the time of COVID-19, who transitioned to online learning. The sampling strategy was nonprobability sampling. This was determined to be the best option for qualitative research. The sampling strategy facilitated sufficient representation of the population of interest. Purposeful sampling was used to identify and recruit participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 7). Interviews were the basis of obtaining data because my inquiry was guided by a need for information. I ensured that I had no dual relationships with participants. Supervisor and instructor relationships with the participants were not applicable in this study. Ethical issues were not anticipated within this study. The research was not performed in a work environment, and there was no conflict or power differentials. However, the researcher offered a monetary gift of \$10 to the participants. Gangnon et al. (2018) found that incentives work when trying to recruit individuals because they serve as motivation and encouragement for them to participate. The selection of the unit of analysis was based on semi structured interviews of seven older adults (Kuklewicz & King, 2018). Two sampling approaches were used for this study. The first one is called a convenience sample, which was based on the availability of respondents and time (Obhi et al., 2019). The other sampling method is called snowball sampling, which was finding participants who fit the criteria for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98).

The inclusion criteria of the study were that participants had to be (a) older learners between the ages of 31 and 68 years of age, (b) college students actively attending courses during the pandemic, and (c) students who have transitioned from face-to-face learning to online learning. The inclusion criteria for participant selection (a) ranged between the ages of 31 and 68 years of age, and (b) obtaining a college degree at a higher education institution at the time of the pandemic. The primary aim during sampling was to reach saturation (Kuklewicz & King, 2018). The proper way of knowing that one has reached saturation is when the responses become repetitive. This is supported by Creswell and Creswell (2018), who suggested that discontinuation of data collection is acceptable when categories or responses become saturated. The relationship between saturation and sample size was as follows: The goal was to get enough participants in the sample who would represent the population being studied. Furthermore, saturation must exist for the researcher to know that they have enough participants that are representative of the sample. For research purposes, the lowest number of participants that would be recruited in the study was seven. This is approximately the number of participants that have been suggested for semi structured interviews (Kuklewicz & King, 2018). The interviews ranged anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes in length and were conducted over the phone. This provided me with the data needed for analysis. Moser and Korstjens (2018) suggested that sample size can vary for each study. The sample size for this research was small but was also representative of the population. Furthermore, research suggests that it is best to carefully choose the

participants for the sample size, and to ensure the key participants hold the most knowledge regarding the phenomenon that will be studied (Moser and Korstjens, 2018).

Recruitment of participants began with distribution of an initial invitation to those who met a specific criterion. The participants were identified through their inquiries about the research study being conducted. Colosimo and Badia (2021) obtained approval for their study through the research ethics board prior to recruiting participants for the study. Dalessandro (2018) suggested that the internet is an effective way of recruiting participants for a research study. In this study, participants were recruited via a convenient sample from online recruitment. Recruitment took place at researchandme.com, which is an online recruitment global database site. Participant recruitment also took place at Wayne State University. Researchers must obtain consent for their study through the IRB before recruiting participants for the study.

### **Instrumentation**

As the researcher, I served as the primary instrument for data collection in this research study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that qualitative researchers collect their own data by interviewing participants, observing the behavior of others, and analyzing documents. Data was collected by way of interviews with the participants. Schiller et al. (2020) conducted a research study in which the research protocols used were semi structured interviews. As for the researcher, possessing the ability to adapt to different situations serves as an advantage in research. The data collection instrument used for this study was researcher produced. Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 16), stated that in qualitative research, the primary instrument used in data collection and analysis is

the researcher. Interviewing was the data collection method that was utilized for this research. Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 187) found that in qualitative interviews, the interviews are generally conducted face-to-face with participants, over the telephone, or through focus groups by the researcher.

For this study, I utilized semi structured, open-ended interview questions (see Appendix). Ng and Baharom (2018) found that open-ended questions provide participants with an opportunity to express themselves and elaborate on their experiences. This study explored the perceptions of a particular group of individuals in a specific place, during a specific time globally. The initial context of the study was being an older adult student in a higher educational institution, who transitioned from traditional learning to distance learning during COVID. Interviews were an effective way to obtain the data for analysis; From individuals who were present during an event or phenomenon.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

I did adhere to the requirements of the IRB regarding recruitment procedures. The recruitment of participants was performed through advertisements on fliers. Within this study, I used a research recruitment platform (i.e., <https://www.researchandme.com/>) for my study. This is complementary to Dalessandro, (2018), who conducted a study on recruiting participants through digital means. The interviews served as the primary data collection method because it is an essential way to obtain data in qualitative research about the experiences of learners, along with their knowledge, and feelings (Pham et al., 2021). For the present research study, the interview questions in addition to screening questions that were used are as follows:

- What is your gender? (demographic question)
- How old are you? (demographic question, screen)
- Are you pursuing an undergraduate degree or graduate degree? (demographic question, screen)
- How long have you been in your program? (demographic question, screen)
- How long were you in the program before you transitioned to distance learning?
- Describe the resources you had—such as a computer or access to a computer, for online learning prior to the transition to online learning?
- Describe your technological proficiency (Good with using a computer) prior to switching to online learning.
- Do you prefer traditional face-to-face learning or online learning? Explain.
- Describe your experiences when switching from traditional learning to distance learning?
- What are some of the challenges that you faced in each of the teaching modalities (face to face, online)?
- How have your academics been affected as a result of the transition?
- What was your overall experience as a result of transitioning from traditional learning to distance learning?

The interviews, which ranged 30–45 minutes in length, served as the primary data collection method. This form of data collection is an essential way to obtain qualitative information about the experiences of the learner, their knowledge, and feelings (Pham et



al., 2021). This was a semi structured interview, in which the participant and I had a conversation that included questions related to the research study (see Pham et al., 2021). While interviewing the participants, I took notes pertaining to information disclosed by the participants during the recording of the interview. Furthermore, consent of the participant had been acquired prior to data collection. Buchanan and Warwick (2020) collected their data through semi structured interviews for each participant, which were audio recorded by the researcher.

Data collection included the online recruitment site Researchandme.com. In a study conducted by Goings (2018), participants were effectively recruited from social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. For this study, I also posted fliers to recruit participants at Wayne State University. The data was collected from a sample of participants who acquired the information necessary to effectively answer the research questions.

### **Saturation**

The data was recorded from transcripts of interviews, after the coding process had taken place. Kuklewic and King (2018) highlighted the interview responses during their initial coding process, then incorporated their personal notes and recorded all the information as data analysis. The data was recorded by hand, without the use of software. In the data collection phase, the initial process contained the transcription of data from the interview, along with the re-reading of transcripts for accuracy and gaining a sense of closeness with the data (Singh et al., 2020).

## **Debriefing**

The debriefing procedures for this study consisted of informing each participant about the basis of the research study, along with the role each participant played in the study. They were also informed of how their interview played a critical role in the study, along with how they enhanced the research project. Sankary et al. (2020) conducted a study where the exit procedure consisted of the researcher providing the participants with a 12-month follow-up. Furthermore, after completion of the interviews, the data was processed from the transcripts. Following the data analysis, I contacted the participants during a follow-up, to see if they recalled any additional information they wanted to add. Similarly, contacting participants post-interview is known as member checking. Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 246), found that this strategy of maintaining internal validity was in fact accomplished through this procedure. The intent of this is to clarify or gain information in addition to what was conveyed in the primary interview. Candela (2019) found that member checking is a way for researchers to maintain accuracy with the experiences and perceptions of the participants during the interview. Thus, the participants were contacted to share research findings and interpretation of the data to ensure credibility.

## **Validation Strategies**

### **Member Checking**

For this study, member checking is the strategy that was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 246), found that member checking is a way for the researcher to check-in with the participants at a later date for

clarification, or to see if there is additional information that any of the participants may want to add. Member checking was performed by following up with the participants after the study was complete. Upon closing out the study, a 1- or 2-page summary was written that contained the results of the study, and this was provided for the participants. The study was concluded by giving thanks to the participants for being a part of this research study. Furthermore, my contact information was provided to each participant via consent form, and this served as my final contact with them.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is having the ability to observe an event in its natural situation. Reflexivity is said to be a power move, in the sense that it increases clarity, enhances accountability, and improves credibility in qualitative research (Humphreys et al., 2021). The researcher accomplished this by fully acknowledging the role played by the researcher during the research process. This was accomplished by the researcher keeping notes, during and after the interview, regarding the participants, as well as noting my own personal thoughts as the researcher. Amin et al. (2020), found that reflexivity assists researchers in dealing with their personal influences that could be brought into the study.

### **Transferability**

Because trustworthiness is the main factor to adhere to, it shows the credibility of the research that has been conducted. This study contained both male and female participants for the study. Transferability is described as applying the research findings from a study to other circumstances, situations, or people in the realm of research (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 253). Since the study is based on naturalistic elements, details of

the context were provided through reflexivity to enable replication in a different context. Quintao et al. (2020) suggested that external validity refers to the ability to replicate the phenomenon in other situations. As a strategy for transferability, the research procedure was illustrated in full detail. This increased the probability of effective replication in a different context.

### **Thick Descriptions**

This study described the behaviors and experiences of participants, as well as the context. This provides an accurate account of the events that will provide a sense of transparency for the outsiders (Korstjens & Albine, 2018). Thick description was carried out by including quotations from the participants, to enhance data trustworthiness through credibility. Amin et al. (2020) suggested that the primary goal of thick description is to dive deeper into the setting, participants, and other stakeholders involved in the phenomenon. Nevertheless, providing a thick description brings transparency to the interpretation of the data and data analysis.

### **Dependability and Audit Trail**

Because dependability is a factor in data trustworthiness, the findings should remain stable over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure this, the researcher was meticulous in developing the concepts of the study. Moser (2018) found that in dependability, the analysis process must intertwine with the design of the study. The results from the analysis should show that the researcher is consistent, precise, and detailed throughout the entire process. One way to ensure this is through audit trails,

which help to assess the dependability of research. Amin et al. (2020), suggest that an audit trail is composed of keeping records or notes throughout the entire research process.

In this study, an audit trail provided a clear, precise, and accurate interpretation of describing the experiences of the participants in full explanations regarding the “What” and “How’s” throughout the research process. In addition, the data collection process was thoroughly implemented, along with the data analysis procedures in the clearest manner possible. As the researcher, a comprehensive, detailed account in written format was kept of all technicalities regarding the research in a conceptual and methodical manner. This has assisted with the organizing and constructing of trustworthiness for the study. In research, a specific type of trustworthiness is called triangulation. This is described as using multiple methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of an incident or event being analyzed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016., p. 245). This strategy has also been referred to as checking the credibility of the findings by analyzing a question about research, from several viewpoints (Amin et al. 2020). However, this study did not use the research strategy of “Triangulation”.

### **Confirmability**

The fundamental aim of confirmability rests upon verification of the data analysis being representative of the interpretation of the participants, and not the biases of the researcher. Korstjens and Moser (2018), support this notion by expressing that the conclusions of the data via the researcher, could be verified by other researchers. They then went on to state that the analysis and perceptions must be representative of the participants’ experiences, and not of the researchers’ imagery. Confirmability

corresponds with reflexivity from the position of the researcher during the investigation. To maintain confirmability as the researcher, a detailed report should be maintained explaining the decisions made during the research process, the reasons for the decisions, along with how the actions were carried out must be done. This supports the angle of the researcher understanding their innate role in the investigation as the researcher.

For this study, the researcher was cognizant of the importance of composing knowledge during the entire research process. Each step of the research process was executed in the most comprehensive, precise, and practical manner to facilitate confirmability and generalization for the entire research process. This was performed by the researcher maintaining notes, a journal, personal recordings, or a diary consisting of detailed steps in the research process.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The participants were interviewed using a series of open-ended questions, regarding the specific phenomenon at hand. Ng and Baharom (2018) requested that the participants in their study answer open-ended questions about the studied phenomenon. The interviews were recorded with prior participant consent to enhance the trustworthiness of the collected data. Buchanan and Warwick (2020) collected the data from the participants' semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded. In the present study, the data from the interviews with the participants were recorded and analyzed. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that in analyzing data, searching for themes and patterns, along with the use of thematic analysis, is the most suggested form for qualitative analysis. Cai and Kosaka (2019) used the method of inductive analysis in

analyzing data that was obtained from interviews, which this study will follow. The steps of analysis for the research study were as follows:

1. I transcribed the interviews of each participant in the study. Lloh (2019), transcribed the semi structured interviews of the participants in his study. At this time, the data were either numbered or color coded.
2. At this time, categories were arranged in sections of similar codes, named, arranged into groups, and the themes were then synthesized from the codes. Cai and Kosaka (2019) divided sections of each interview into categories that shared similarities. They then sorted specific classes into groups and formulated the main themes from the classes.
3. I also searched for patterns within the codes by reviewing the data repeatedly to identify persistent patterns. Marrero and Milacci (2018) utilized a pattern coding technique that required repetitive reviewing of the data to establish patterns within the text of the interview.
4. I also looked for themes within the data for coding purposes. Fowle (2018) searched for themes within the interviews of the participants.

During this time, I identified elements within the themes that were complementary to each other. Fowle (2018) used a statistical software called NVIVO, to search for common elements within the themes of the interviews of the participants. At this point, I interpreted the data, analyzed it, then recorded the findings. Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p.215), found that the last stage of the study involves interpretation, development of models, and creating a theory.

Interviews were transcribed by hand and computer, and thoroughly coded by hand. I listened to the recordings from the interviews, and repetitively reviewed the transcripts and notes that were taken during each interview, which I then started the coding process. Buchanan and Warwick (2020) fully transcribed the interviews of the participants in their study, while utilizing an interactive approach to analyze their data. In this study, the codes were organized into themes and sections. Specifically, the coding for the recorded conversations would be performed line-by-line (Cai & Kosaka, 2019). Even though the use of NVIVO was anticipated, there was no software used for these procedures. In a study that explored heterogeneity in higher education, the analysis of interviews was analyzed and transcribed using thematic analysis with NVIVO (Fowle, 2018)

### **Ethical Concerns and Protection of Participants**

As for ethical concerns and a plan to address them, there were no ethical concerns in relation to recruitment. Ethical approval must be obtained from the research panel of the educational institution (Fowle, 2018). In cases where students are presently taking a course, they can receive emails as a way of recruitment (Pham et al., 2021). However, the invitation briefly stated why I was recruiting students for a research study (Fowle, 2018). Potential subjects must receive information describing the study, along with the procedures involving the study; those interested can participate in the study voluntarily (Palmeirim et al., 2020). It was required that those willing to participate in the study sign an informed consent. This affidavit was to be in written form, from individuals participating in the study (Miyaders et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the traditional fashion is



for participants to sign an affidavit providing their consent to participate in the study; along with the stipulation of being 18 years of age or older for consent to be valid (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 188). As for ethical concerns related to data collection, and a way to address them, a way to protect participants within a research study is to maintain confidentiality (Surmiak, 2018). I assumed full responsibility for keeping the participants' identity private. The Personal Data Protection Act states that all individuals have the right to personal data protection (Surmiak, 2018).

Regarding whether data is anonymous or confidential, along with any concerns related to this, all data is confidential because it contains private information from the participants in the study. Similarly, I acted as the research tool for conducting the interviews. In protecting confidential data, Creswell and Creswell (2018., p.96), stated that the researcher will have access to the data from the research. Also, the data can also be shared with the participants in the study, as well as the stakeholders. The researcher has initial access to the data and is willing to share any reports with individuals recruited for the study. Ethical procedures for protection of human subjects in research were followed.

### **Summary**

Basic qualitative inquiry was the method used for this study. The use of a qualitative research design involves exploration and description of a phenomenon through the lens of others. This includes answering questions and understanding the meanings that people have produced in retrospect to an existing or pre-existing occurrence. This study involves describing and interpreting the experiences of older adult

learners during the pandemic. Data collection included semi-structured interviews by the researcher who obtained the information through phone interviews with the participants. Upon completion of this process, the data was then analyzed for the research purposes of this study.

The following chapter will consist of results and data from interviews with recruited participants. Results will include inductive data analysis aimed at answering the research questions.

## Chapter 4: Results

This general qualitative study explored the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. This was accomplished by interviewing nine participants who were recruited for the study. Each interview consisted of 12 semi structured questions, to which each participant provided responses about their perception and experience of transitioning to distance learning in postsecondary education during the pandemic. The research question that served as the foundation for the data collection protocol and subsequent data analysis was “What are the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic?”

The chapter starts with a synopsis of participant demographics, along with their academic information. This is followed with an in-depth exploration of the thematic analysis utilized in facilitating the synthesis, and analysis of the data that materialized throughout this research. During this process, quotations, codes, and themes will be illustrated to support the finalized results of the analysis.

The study involved nine participants who met the criteria for the study. These individuals were between the ages of 31 and 68, while being a student at a higher educational institution, who transitioned from conventional learning (face-to-face learning) to online learning as a result of the pandemic. During the data collection process, seven participants were required for recruitment, but nine participants were selected for the study to ensure optimal saturation for research purposes. For this study, I acted as the instrument that collected the data. The initial process entailed recruitment of

qualified participants from an online research database. However, fliers were also distributed at a local university to recruit additional participants for the study. The recruitment process was completed over the course of 4 weeks, followed by scheduling a phone interview for each participant via the researcher. With the consent of each participant, I used an audio recorder and took personal notes during each interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Because this is a qualitative research design, thematic analysis is the method of analysis utilized for this study. The processes used in the data analysis of this research are as follows:

1. Each interview was transcribed, and the data points were numbered.  
Categories were arranged in sections of similar codes, named, arranged into groups, and the themes were then synthesized from the codes.
2. Patterns originating from the codes were identified by reviewing the data repeatedly.
3. Themes materializing from the data were identified for the purpose of coding, along with elements within the themes that were complementary to each other.

In the data analysis process, specific codes, themes, and categories materialized, along with quotations that supported the analysis conducted. The codes that emerged from the data were as follows: Difficulty and challenges, computer usage and technology, learning and study, positive learning experience, adaptation to online learning, and challenges to online learning. The themes that originated were psychological, technological, and academic. The categories under this section were demographics of

study participants, time spent in program, demographics of participants, grading information for participants, challenges reported due to online transition, and participants' overall experiences, codes, and themes. In support of this research, the following quotations further emphasize and support the findings presented. The quotes that appeared under the heading challenges reported due to online transition were "Hard time adapting, challenging, hard, difficult, got distracted, not concentrating, not serious, not interested, discomfort, improved computer usage, problems with internet connection, struggle, hard time with computer functions, and moving too fast requires more study time. Furthermore, the additional quotes proceeding the data above appeared under the heading: Participants overall experience, these quotes were "The experience was interesting, stayed positive, learned new things, this elevated my skills, it was good, it enhanced my life and computer experience and confidence, and it was a good experience and it helped me focus." More quotes include "Find additional resources and join support groups, you can focus more on school and still have time for your family, it was good, teachers respond to emails faster, being in the comfort of your own home is quieter, I had to get use to online learning because this was the only option at the time due to the pandemic." Additional quotes included were "My confidence increased, there is limited access to professors, zoom and chat are a big part of online learning, using the raise your hand feature and keeping your eye on the panel made things better, and once I found people who had the flexibility to work offline, things got better." As stated previously, these quotes are descriptive of the participants' experiences overall. The following section will consist of information pertaining to the integrity of this study.

### **Trustworthiness in Research**

Trustworthiness in research is imperative to the integrity and validity of formulating data, as well as data analysis. This process began with recruitment of participants for the study, in which credibility was essentially established. Moreover, credibility was demonstrated through the selection process, by which participants were required to meet a specific criterion for participation in the study. The determining criteria for this study were being either male or female, between the ages of 31 and 68, while being an active college student at a higher educational institution who transitioned from conventional learning to online learning during the pandemic. During the study, trustworthiness was executed through member checking of the participants. This process was carried out by sending each participant an email containing a table that included quotes, codes, and themes of the completed analysis of the aggregated data. The email concluded with a request from me for the participants to confirm that the information did in fact appear to be correct. Even though all participants in the study were contacted, only two individuals replied, both of whom reported the information to be accurate.

Because integrity and trustworthiness are interrelated, different forms of trustworthiness are utilized in research. Another form of trustworthiness in research is transferability. For ensuring transferability, generalizability is a key factor in intensifying the integrity of the research. Moreover, a way of increasing the likelihood of transference was performed through thick description. This was accomplished in Chapter 3, in which all procedures for this research were described in full detail. For example, each respondent had to meet specific criteria. Specifically, they had to be male or female,

between the ages of 31 and 68, and a college student at a higher educational institution who transitioned from conventional learning to online learning during the pandemic. Each interview consisted of semi structured questions to be asked in a specific order. As stated previously, the methods used in implementing the study were thoroughly described and planned out in Chapter 3.

With trustworthiness as the forefront of research, dependability is an extension of this aspect of research that was utilized in the present study. In this research, dependability was established during data collection, interpretation of the findings, and the data analysis phase of research. Trustworthiness can also be established by showing consistency through reliability, which was displayed by using an audit trail. Credibility is another form of trustworthiness which was acquired by keeping personal records of how the research was performed. The replies of each participant from the interview questions equated to acting as data in research. This was derived from the original research question: What are the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic? In obtaining participants for the study, recruitment screeners were used, such as [researchandme.com](http://researchandme.com), along with fliers that were distributed specifically targeting a particular demographic for the purpose of this study. All respondents were prescreened by the research database prior to being selected for recruitment. Fliers that were distributed to advertise the study contained specific demographic characteristics everyone was required to possess for recruitment. This consisted of participants being either male or female, between the ages of 31 and 68, and

a college student at a higher educational institution who transitioned from conventional learning to online learning during the pandemic.

For this research, I conducted thematic analysis of interview data. Moreover, replication of this study by another researcher would yield similar results, if in fact the method of thick description was applied in all procedures. While ensuring trustworthiness, I established confirmability during the phases of interpretation and analyzing the data. In essence, the tables displaying codes and themes, along with quotes to support the findings, in effort to ensure that the data is in fact a result of information derived directly from the interviews. Based on the data analysis, the conclusions make sense, results are credible, and no bias evolved from me. For the intent of this study, the validity aspect was also established, in which the results did in fact line up with the research question.

Moving forward, the following information being presented will consist of demographic information from each participant, along with their academic standing prior to transitioning to distance learning. Research questions and responses from participants will be presented in written format, as well as displayed in tables. All results and in-depth explanations are presented in each section, following the tables, while ending with a summary of the data analysis for the study, along with the participants overall experience.

In the beginning of each interview, demographic information was obtained to substantiate validity for this research, emanating from the aspect that each participant met the criteria for the study. This information is illustrated in Tables 1–3, along with in-depth information supporting what has been presented.



Table 1 provides general demographic information of each participant, along with academic information as it pertains to the study. Table 1 shows that, of the nine participants in the study, five identified as male, and four identified as female. Everyone recruited were between the ages of 31 and 68, a student of a higher educational institution pursuing a college degree during the time of the pandemic, which satisfied the recruitment criteria for the study. Out of the nine respondents in the study, one pursued a bachelor's degree, seven were pursuing a master's degree, and one pursued a PhD.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Participants*

Participants	Gender	Age	Degree pursued at the time of the pandemic	Type of degree
Participant 1	Male	32	Graduate	Master's
Participant 2	Male	33	Undergraduate	Bachelor's
Participant 3	Male	34	Graduate	Master's
Participant 4	Female	33	Graduate	Master's
Participant 5	Male	33	Graduate	Master's
Participant 6	Male	50	Graduate	Master's
Participant 7	Female	46	Graduate	Master's
Participant 8	Female	66	Graduate	Master's
Participant 9	Female	54	Graduate	PhD

Table 2 exhibits responses of participants who were asked how long they were in their program, along with the length of time they were in their program before they transitioned to distance learning. This information is imperative because it may be relevant to whether participants had to change their form of learning by transitioning

back to conventional learning when possible. Many of the participants stated that after transitioning to online learning, they were required to learn technological functions quickly to keep up with the course. Though the learning styles changed, the educators insisted on keeping the original schedule from the start of the term, with few accommodations, if any.

**Table 2**

*Time Spent in Program*

Participants	Length of time in the program	Length of time in the program before transitioning to e-learning
Participant 1	4 years	1 year
Participant 2	3 years	Less than a year
Participant 3	4 years	3 years
Participant 4	2 years	1 year
Participant 5	4 years	2 years
Participant 6	1½ years	1 year
Participant 7	4 years	2 years
Participant 8	1 year	6 months
Participant 9	5 years	1½ years

Table 3 displays all participants in the study who had previously acquired their own form of technology prior to converting to distance learning. This table also provides the degree of technological proficiency possessed by each participant in the study. All participants in the study indicated that they had a computer of their own prior to transitioning to online learning. This is important because it could possibly substantiate a claim of some level of comfort with computer usage. Four of the participants had basic

computer skills, meaning they possessed minimum skills when using a computer. Four were proficient, meaning they were good at using a computer, but not perfect, and one participant had excellent computer usage, meaning they possessed enough knowledge and skills to help others.

**Table 3**

*Demographics of Participants/Technological Status*

Participants	Participants who already had a computer prior to transitioning	Prior computer knowledge before transitioning
Participant 1	Had a laptop prior	Proficient
Participant 2	Had a computer	Proficient
Participant 3	Had a computer already	Basic
Participant 4	Had a laptop already	Proficient
Participant 5	Had a computer	Basic
Participant 6	Already had a computer	Basic
Participant 7	Had a computer already	Basic
Participant 8	Had a surface laptop	Proficient
Participant 9	Already had a computer	Excellent

**Synopsis of Data Analysis**

Tables 1, 2, and 3 included demographic information about the nine participants recruited for the study, showing that five identified as male, and four identified as female. Five participants were in their 30s, one was in their 40s, two were in their 50s, and one in their 60s. Eight of the nine participants were pursuing a graduate degree, and one was pursuing an undergraduate degree. Elaborating further, seven of them pursued a master's degree, one pursued a bachelor's degree, and one pursued a PhD. Three of the

participants had been in their program for 4 years, one had been in their program 3 years, and the other participant spent 2 years in their program. Also, there was one participant who had spent 1 year in their program, another a year and a half, and the last individual spent 5 years in their program. When asked how long each participant had been in their program before transitioning to e-learning, one participant had been in the program 3 years, two participants had been in the program two years, three participants had been in their program 1 year, one participant spent less than a year in their program, one participant spent 6 months in their program, and the last individual spent a year and a half in their program. Moving forward, table 3 displayed all participants having access to technology prior to transitioning to distance learning. When participants were asked if they had pre-existing computer knowledge before switching to online learning, it was shown that everyone possessed some degree of technological proficiency prior to the switch.

Transitioning into the educational facet, table 4 displays demographic information pertaining to the participants' academics. Participants responded to the following questions: "How have your academics been affected because of the transition?" and "What was your overall learning preference as a result of their overall experience?" The responses consisted of two participants experiencing a decline in their grades, while three participants stated no change in their grades. In addition, three participants found a fluctuation in their grades, and only one participant experienced an increase in grades. Most participants indicated a preference for online learning despite varied experiences with grade fluctuation.

**Table 4***Grading Information for Participants*

Participants	Grades affected due to the transition to learning online	Overall learning preference as a result of transitioning from traditional learning to distance learning
Participant 1	Grades declined	Online
Participant 2	Fluctuation in grades	Online
Participant 3	Fluctuation in grades	Online
Participant 4	Fluctuation in grades	Traditional
Participant 5	Grades increased	Online
Participant 6	Grades stayed the same	Traditional
Participant 7	Grades declined	Online
Participant 8	Grades stayed the same	Online
Participant 9	Grades stayed the same	Online

Participants also responded regarding their challenges during the transition. Codes and quotations were generated based on the responses of the participants, along with three themes that emerged from the data, all of which are described in Table 5.

**Table 5***Challenges Reported Due to Online Transition*

Themes	Codes	Quotations examples
Psychological	Difficulty and challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard time adapting</li> <li>• Challenging</li> <li>• Hard</li> <li>• Difficult, got distracted, not concentrating, not serious, not interested.</li> </ul>
Technological	Computer usage and technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problems with internet connection.</li> <li>• Struggle, hard time with computer functions.</li> </ul>
Academic	Learning and study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving too fast requires more study time.</li> </ul>

Starting with the initial theme being “Psychological” this was supported by Participants 1, 2, and 3, who all suggested that the transition was problematic and burdensome. Participant 3 also found that “The transition was taxing mentally.” Participant 4 experienced “Crucial challenges that resulted in them losing interest and motivation, along with feeling a loss of concentration.” Participant 5 experienced “Discomforts, but their technological proficiency was enhanced.” The second theme that emerged was “Academics”. Participant 1 found that “Acclimating to transitioning to online learning was difficult.” Participant 2 stated, “The workload was heavy.” Participant 6 suggested “The acceleration in coursework was mentally taxing, and the work itself required more time.” The last theme that emerged was “Technology” which proved to be an issue for some respondents. Participant 7 stated, “There were technology issues in network connections.” Also, Participant 8 expressed, “Struggling was a frequent occurrence, which resulted in difficulty operating computer functions.” In conjunction with data discussed previously, other categories were examined. These categories are

challenges in online learning, challenges in traditional learning, and the overall experience from traditional learning to distance learning. The outcome of these classifications will be discussed in the following section.

Challenges in online learning is another area that was examined within the research. Participants 1–8 all experienced challenges in distance learning. These challenges included academic issues, environmental problems such as disruptions and distractions, and technological and psychological issues. Participants 1, 2, 3, and 6 reported that distractions were a significant challenge in online learning. Participant 1 stated “Distractions, unable to focus, hard to concentrate, loss of direction, and had to call upon friends to help,” which are all responses to challenges in online learning. Participant 1 also stated that “The online learning caused me to be mentally detached from coursework, and I had to reach out to friends for help.” Furthermore, the challenges that students faced included academic issues, environmental problems such as disruptions and distractions, along with technological and psychological issues. Categories and codes that emerged from the data analysis of the interviews are as follows: Challenges in online learning: academic, environmental disruptions, and distractions, technological, and psychological (apathy/time management, motivation, time management). The codes that were developed within the transcripts were distractions, noise, procrastinating, time management, problems with internet connection, and learning new technology.

An additional category explored was challenges in traditional learning. Inevitably, all participants in the study experienced some form of obstacle in traditional learning. Participants one, two, and three suggested that transportation in traveling back and forth

to class was a challenge. For example, participant one stated that “It required more time, intense and exhausting class work, transporting was problematic, and time consuming, collaborating with classmates was difficult, and everything was very difficult”.

Participant two stated “Transportation was problematic”. Participant three stated “Commuting was a problem”. Participant five addressed financial challenges as posing a substantial problem, stating that “Financial issues caused barriers”. It was also stated that in traditional learning the course information is comprehensible, and personal responsibilities were delayed. Participant five also suggested “Feeling lethargic, non-energetic, disinterested, and non-motivated”. Additional categories and codes that originated from the data are as follows: Traditional learning (cons): Time consuming and not cost effective; Traditional learning (pros): better understanding; Traditional learning (cons): Financial; Traditional learning: Educator bias. More codes that materialized under the category of traditional learning were time consuming, convenient, transportation being an issue, money, psychologically taxing, along with physical/context related (large class size, difficulty getting questions answered, and seating). An additional code within this category was academics, with limited time to process the information being taught.

During the progression of the study, respondents were asked the question, what was their overall experience from traditional learning to online learning? Participants one, two, three, five, seven, eight, and nine suggested having positive experiences. For example, participant two stated “It was good, teachers respond to email faster, and being in the comfort of your own home is quieter”. Also, “Going to different places may be noisy and online is better because you can tape them and share them”. However,



participant four stated “I had to get use to online learning because this was the only option at the time due to the pandemic, and no other options were available”. Participant six stated that “Online learning requires a lot more time, (time consuming) and there is limited access to professors” and “You have to only go by their office hours, and knowing computer functions is important”. Categories and codes that emerged were Traditional to online process: Positive learning experiences (skills); Traditional to online process: Positive learning experiences (educator response); Traditional to online process: Positive learning experiences (convenience and comfort); Traditional to online process: Positive learning experiences (psychological and academic). The codes that emerged from the transcripts were as follows: Experience was interesting, and teachers responded to emails faster. As stated previously, the quotes above exhibit the participant’s perceptions relating to their overall experience from traditional learning to online learning. Moving forward, table 6 below, displays responses to the research question regarding participant’s overall perception of their transition from conventional learning to remote education, along with emerging themes, as well as the codes that materialized from the data.

**Table 6***Participant's Overall Experience, Codes, and Themes*

Themes	Codes	Quotation examples
Psychological	Positive learning experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Experience was interesting, stayed positive, learned new things, and this elevated my skills.”</li> <li>• “It was good, teachers responded to emails faster.”</li> <li>• “It was good.”</li> <li>• “It was good. It enhanced my life and computer experience, and my confidence increased.”</li> <li>• “It was a good experience, it helped me focus, find additional resources, and join support groups.”</li> <li>• You can focus more on school and still have time for yourself and for your family.”</li> </ul>
Technological	Adaptation to online learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was good, teachers responded to emails faster. Being in the comfort of your own home is quieter.</li> <li>• It was good.</li> <li>• I had to get use to online learning because this was the only option at the time due to the pandemic.</li> <li>• It was good. It enhanced my life and computer experience, and my confidence increased.</li> </ul>
Academic	Challenges of online learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is limited access to professors.”</li> <li>• “Zoom and chat are a big part of online learning.”</li> <li>• “Using the raise your hand feature and keeping your eye on the panel made things better.”</li> <li>• “Once I found people who had the flexibility to work offline, things got better.”</li> </ul>

Expounding on the information presented in table 6, all responses are in reference to the participant's overall perception of the transition. Additional information is as follows: Participants one, two, and three all had a positive experience in transitioning to

learning online. Participants two, three, five, seven, and nine believed their experience to be good. When asked the closing question of their final learning preference, regarding their overall experience, these participants chose online learning. Participant four suggested that “They had no other choice, but to get used to this particular style of learning, due to no other option being available”. However, when asked about their overall learning preference, this individual chose traditional learning. Participant five believed “The experience was insightful, as well as motivating, which also increased their confidence, and improved their technological skills”. As a result of this positive experience, this participant chose online learning as their overall learning preference, regarding their total experience of transitioning. Participant 6 found that “Online learning required more time, and the professors are not as accessible when students need assistance”. This individual also stated that “Technological communicating systems such as zoom, and chat are used regularly in online learning”. The student’s overall learning preference was traditional learning. Participants seven stated that “Internet learning was good, you can focus more on school and have time for your family, and it should have been introduced earlier”. Participant eight stated that “It was fine, using the raise your hand feature and watching the panel made a difference, and finding people willing to work together offline made a difference”. Participant nine stated “It was a good experience, it helped them focus, they found additional resources, and they joined groups”. As a result of the experiences of these participants, their overall learning preference is online learning. Additionally, table 6 included three codes, which were

positive learning experience, adaptation to online learning, and challenges to online learning. The theme that developed from these codes was academic.

As we know, remote learning requires heavy computer usage which prompted me to inquire if participants experienced technical difficulties during the time of distance learning. The data showed that participants four, five, six, seven, and nine experienced internet connection issues/ technical disruption during online learning. Participant 4 stated “Some links were not actually sent, and some of the links that did come through did not actually work”. Participant 5 expressed “There were network problems in general, during this process”. Participant 6 stated “There were technological problems with different software that was required for learning”. Participant 7 stated “There were problems with their internet and server”. Lastly, Participant 9 expressed “Internet problems occurred due to bad weather”.

These responses exemplify the actual data that has been structured, interpreted, and analyzed to provide the results for this study. The following section will discuss the perceptions of the participant’s comprehensive encounter.

### **Overall Experience of Participants**

Throughout the analysis, significant findings emerged which resulted in these findings: One participant stated that face-to-face learning is sometimes more convenient. Another participant stated that in conventional learning, you obtain all the information being taught. On the other hand, there were three participants who stated that conventional learning was time consuming. In conjunction with the previous statement, another participant stated that with face-to-face learning, there is a lack of time for

personal affairs. However, one individual found that online learning caused a lack of time for personal affairs. On the other hand, there were six participants who stated that online learning is in fact more convenient. Four participants experienced distractions and a loss of concentration in switching to distance learning. For example, one participant stated that it was hard for them to concentrate while learning online. Two other individuals experienced distractions during the switch and had a difficult time concentrating, while a different individual expressed feeling lost in class and unable to concentrate. Overall, four participants in total discussed their distractions in online learning. In addition to information stated previously regarding feeling loss, two more individuals experienced feeling loss during their time in online learning. The first individual stated that there was a lack of understanding and direction when learning online, and the second individual expressed feeling a loss of direction when learning online.

During conventional learning, two participants expressed feeling tired due to coursework, along with commuting to class. Because traditional learning requires commuting to and from a specific location, having transportation is a significant factor. Additionally, three individuals stated that transportation was an issue in face-to-face learning, and one individual stated that while learning online, transportation was not an issue. Ideally finances play a part in learning whether it is costly or cost effective. Three participants had something to say regarding the financial aspect of getting an education. One participant stated that conventional learning is costly, another participant stated that in conventional learning, money was in fact a challenge. The last participant commented that online learning is cost effective. Moving forward, distance learning often involves a

disconnect, and gap in communication between the educator and the student due to the style of learning. For this reason, there were two participants that found it difficult to obtain academic assistance from the professor in online learning. One participant found that students cannot really ask questions to the professor. Ideally, the other participant suggested that there is limited access to professors, in which a person can only converse with them during their available office hours. The data discussed in this section was a recap of additional data gathered throughout the process of thematic analysis. The following chapter will consist of a collaboration between the analysis of this study, and literature documented surrounding this topic.

### **Summary**

This study consisted of nine participants. Their ages ranged from 31 to 68. All participants were enrolled in higher education programs, in which one individual pursued a bachelor's degree, seven individuals pursued a master's degree, and one individual pursued a PhD. The longest time a participant spent in their program was five years, and the least amount of time was one year. The longest time an individual spent in their program before transitioning to an online environment was three years; The shortest time spent in a program before switching to distance learning was six months. Each participant in the study had access to a computer, along with possessing basic to excellent technological proficiency prior to transitioning to e-learning. Regarding academics, three participants did not experience any fluctuation in grades. However, there were three individuals who experienced a variation in grades, two who experienced a decline in grades, and one who experienced an increase in grades. Seven individuals chose online

learning, and two chose traditional learning as their preferred mode . Challenges experienced by participants in online learning were represented by quotations.

Additionally, codes and themes emerged from the data. The codes were as follows:

Difficulty in challenges; computer use and technology; learning and study. Lastly, the themes that emerged within the data were psychological, technological, and academic.

The above information discussed in this section was a brief overview of the data analysis that was presented in each table. The following section will present a concise overview of general findings that originated from the analysis. It is important to note the terms face-to-face learning and conventional learning will be used interchangeably, even though they both have the same meaning.

## Chapter 5: Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusions

### **Brief Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of older adult learners in higher education transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. The study uses a basic qualitative research design. The reason for conducting this study is that there is a lack of information about the experiences of older adult students in higher education during the pandemic. The intent of this study was to explore the various challenges and barriers older adults have experienced while continuing their education by way of digital technology during the pandemic, along with how the pandemic has affected their academic ability as students in higher education through the fast transition to technology usage. This chapter will present the key findings derived from this research, interpretation of the findings, a description of the resulting themes, and a description of the relationship of the research findings to the theoretical/conceptual framework. Limitations of the study will be discussed, along with recommendations for future research, implications for positive social change, methodological criteria, recommendations for practice, and concluding remarks.

### **Key Findings**

There were nine participants, all between the ages of 31 and 67, five male and four female. One participant pursued an undergraduate degree, and the other eight pursued graduate degrees. The longest time a participant spent in their program was 5 years, and the shortest time was 1 year. The longest time spent in a program before transitioning to e-learning was 3 years, and the least time spent was 6 months. Everyone



who participated in the study had access to a computer prior to switching to e-learning. As for academics, three of the students' grades remained consistent, while the other individuals experienced a fluctuation in grades. For overall experience, seven of the participants preferred online learning, and the two remaining chose traditional learning.

Under challenges reported due to online transition, the codes that emerged within the data were difficult and challenges, computer usage and technology, and learning and study. The themes that originated from the data in this section were psychological, technological, and academic. Under the heading of participants' overall experience, the codes that emerged were positive learning experience, adaptation to online learning, and challenges to online learning. The themes that originated from the data in this section were psychological, technological, and academic. The following section will contain an interpretation of the findings that emerged within the study, along with peer-reviewed literature supporting this research.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Barrot et al. (2021) stated that the global health crisis of COVID-19 impacted education, which resulted in the government mandating that conventional education be switched to online education. This in turn began the journey of online learning, being the only option for obtaining an education during that time. Wilde & Hsu (2019), found that distance learning/remote learning suggests that there is a physical distance between the educator and the student, requiring a special kind of delivery. Ng and Baharom (2018) stated that distance learning has grown rapidly due to the convenience and flexibility that it provides for students. Even though remote learning existed prior to the pandemic,

society pushed traditional education to be more recognizable and respected. According to Yeung et al. (2020), out of the 7 million students enrolled in online courses in the United States, 47% attended fully online, and 53% had taken one course remotely.

Dinh and Nguyen (2022) found convenience to be the biggest advantage to online learning. This is supported by Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8 of my research, who all suggested that online learning is more convenient. This is recognized by Salikhova et al. (2021), who found that educational systems are expanding in the realm of increasing the accessibility of gaining an education remotely. Nevertheless, distance learning is a different mode of education, which requires additional tools such as online access and accessibility to a computer, as opposed to conventional learning. Aguilera-Hermida (2020) found that remote education is mediated using technology. Online learning is constructed to be conducive to adults with busy lives, because this enables adults to be multifaceted in tending to their personal affairs. Sutton and Hope (2017) stated that adults may not have the necessary tools or resources accessible to pursue an education online. This is invalid because everything is contingent and subjective to each individual and their present resources. Substantiated proof is shown in a study conducted by Lemay et al. (2021), who found that over 85% of their participants had internet access, as well as their own computer equipment prior to transitioning to remote learning. Furthermore, all participants in this study had a computer prior to transitioning to online learning, as well as exhibiting some form of technological proficiency prior to transitioning. This will increase the probability of students being self-directed in their learning processes.

On the contrary, Ng and Baharom (2018) stated that online learning is self-paced and unsupervised; therefore, the learner is unable to fully understand what is going on in the course. This could be due to instructional delivery, as well as the instructional design of the course being complementary to remote learning. This was supported by Participant 1, who felt a loss of direction in online learning and expressed a lack of understanding and knowing what to do. Participant 5 further supported this by suggesting that in online learning, it is easy to miss or skip activities due to a lack of direction, as well as keeping track of all the course activities. Vezne et al., (2023), found that a correlation exists between student engagement and students' willingness to learn remotely in an emergency such as COVID-19. They continued further to suggest that students establishing a positive attitude toward online emergency learning will result in them developing a strong motivation to learn. In essence, internal mechanisms will trigger physical actions. Nonetheless, a student's willingness to learn by expressing their obligation and commitment to obtaining an education through any form of learning is based on several factors. For this to be deemed possible in online learning, experience in remote learning, along with proficient technological skills should exist.

Moving forward, Ali (2020) argued that the purpose of the online learning environment is to provide a private space for learner interaction, working together remotely, and enabling students to become self-directed in learning. In viewing these factors from a learning perspective, a discord in some students' academics is quite possible. Khan et al. (2021) stated that online learning was not considered to be a legitimate format of learning prior to the pandemic. Further research suggests that

exercising autonomy is a significant component in digital learning, as well as having internal motivation to move forward (Salikhova et al., 2021). As opposed to the participants previously discussed, Participant 1 stated that they learned a lot through their overall experience of online learning, and how it elevated their skills. Participant 5 stated that it enhanced their life, Participant 7 said they learned a lot, as did Participant 8. This provides evidence that students learn differently, and some individuals acquire knowledge faster than others. Vezne et al. (2023) found that it is essential for educators to understand the motivation of learners and their learning behaviors when creating instructional designs of courses. This is particularly imperative because each course has its own course objective, and teaching philosophy could require additional support through educational delivery. With learning at the forefront, Mews (2020) suggested principles of andragogy are used to enhance the learning experience of adult students. In essence, knowing and understanding how adults learn in different formats, can better equip educators with effective tools for instructional delivery in all learning methods.

Fang et al. (2021) found that the videoconferencing platform Zoom and simulation-based teaching videos were used to facilitate instructional delivery to students. This is supported by Participants 4, 7, and 8, who all used Zoom. Some participants also struggled with the use of these features. Dinh and Nguyen (2022) believed that zoom and chat allowed easier communication between educators and students. Therefore, technological features along with educational resources that facilitate communication in remote learning environments should widely be considered. Fowle (2018) found that adult learners generally exhibit low levels of confidence in their own academic ability,

which contributes to a feeling of not fitting in academically. Society's view on college students being under the age of 25, or adult learners returning to school later in life could serve as a contributing factor. Kara et al. (2019) argued that this could originate from the lack of support and resources experienced by adult learners. In this study, Participant 3 stated that learning online enabled them to become more confident because it was not face-to-face. Participant 7 found that in conventional learning, one of her instructors would ignore her when her hand was raised. Also, she felt that some professors showed favoritism. These statements serve as evidence to prove that confidence plays a major factor in obtaining an education. Moreover, challenges are an additional factor that can interfere with completing and finishing one's educational journey.

Fowle (2018) suggested that adult learners face more financial challenges, as opposed to younger college students. In this study, Participant 5 stated that money was a challenge, and not being financially stable caused transportation issues. Barrot et al. (2021) discovered during the lockdown, that students did experience financial challenges in remote learning, because additional finances were needed for internet access, along with educational equipment and materials. In addition, Lloh (2019) found that educators are not aware of the many challenges postsecondary students face in higher education, as well as outside of the classroom that affects their academics. Participants 2 and 3 both faced the challenge of transportation, while Participants 1, 5, and 9 had financial challenges. Participants 5 and 6 found that their education took up so much of their time, they had little to no time for personal affairs. Current research by Bellare et al. (2021) suggested that managing different life roles, scheduling courses while maintaining

employment, having a lack of support, along with making necessary accommodations to pursue an education are common obstacles faced by adult learners. Moreover, prioritizing responsibilities, along with transitioning from employee to student role regularly, are substantial challenges frequently faced. These external factors often inhibit adults from acquiring a higher education and finishing postsecondary education programs they previously started. Bellare et al. (2021) found that because adult learners' initial priority is employment, gaining a higher education often takes a back seat.

Dinh and Nguyen (2022) found convenience to be the biggest advantage to online learning. This is due to responsibilities and priorities that exist in everyday life, which enables busy adults to gain a higher education. Lloh (2019) stated that distance learning allows students to have additional time for study and completing assignments on a schedule that best fits their lifestyle. This coincides with participant three who believed that online learning makes it easier to attend class, they were more confident, and their academic performance became better. Furthermore, Participant 7 stated that in online learning, you can focus more on school, while still having time for yourself and family. Participant 8 found that online learning is good for time management, and Participant 5 stated that the lack of distraction in online learning increased their grades and online is good for time management. Lastly, Participant 9 found that online learning is more flexible and convenient, and they could attend class at their own leisure wherever they wanted. Research supporting this includes that of Gardener et al. (2021), who found that the retention rates for students are often contingent upon their ability to juggle their busy lives, finances to continue their education, and personal affairs while obtaining a college

education. Participant 1 found that face-to-face learning was time consuming, and it takes up a lot of time going from one place to another. Moreover, lunch and bus riding are also costly, which speaks to the financial component of obtaining an education. Participant 5 found that not being financially stable caused transportation issues; and Participants 5 and 6 discussed a lack of time for personal affairs. Financial instability can impede adults from furthering their education. Oftentimes, priority is given to stable employment for reliable income, to sustain living. On the other hand, financial hardship can sometimes act as a motivator in obtaining more education, to enhance employment opportunities that will provide financial stability for better living.

Fang et al. (2021) found that collaborative projects, conducting in-class assignments, and activities are traditional in conventional learning. In this study, Participant 6 collaborated with other students, as did Participants 1 and 8, who stated that connecting with people was a problem for group projects during remote learning. Participant 8 found that in online learning, group projects were tough due to gathering students together to work on projects. This is one of the obstacles faced in distance learning that is commonly due to isolation, and the lack of interaction between classmates. Many students need to feel a sense of community among their instructor and classmates. Ng and Baharom (2018) found that the lack of social presence from the educator and classmates in distance learning may cause a disconnection. Due to the discord in distance learning in this study, Participant 4 stated that students cannot really ask questions during remote learning. Salikhova et al. (2021) found the absence of live contact with the educator during online learning to be problematic for students. This was

seen in the present study with Participants 6 and 9, who discussed limited access to professors, and how you can only talk to them during their office hours.

Ng and Baharom (2018) suggested that instructors and facilitators of distance learning courses have not established a means of delivering course instruction to the students in an effective manner. If this is so, students' academics will be compromised due to a lack of understanding of the course content. As a solution to this dilemma, Barrot et al. (2021) found videoconferencing with online learning to be highly efficient in delivering course content. Traditional teaching methods in conventional learning are non-effective in delivering instructional information and course content to students remotely. This assertion is supported by Participant 1 who expressed a loss of direction in online learning and expressed that understanding and knowing what to do was a problem. Furthermore, Participant 5 found that the directions given in online learning were not clear, it was hard to capture all the information, and it was difficult to keep track of everything. This could be due to the rapid transition to online learning with little preparation from the educator. Singh et al. (2021) and Dinh and Nguyen (2022) stated that courses were poorly planned due to a rush to transition to online learning due to the pandemic. Participant 8 supported these findings in stating that their switch to online learning took place over 1 week, and everyone had to quickly learn how to use zoom. It was also stated that everyone in the course struggled with zoom, backdrops, share screen, meeting rooms, and other software. This is the technological component in which communication platforms are utilized for interaction between the educator and the student. Yeung et al. (2022) found it to be inevitable for educators and students to



experience difficulty when changing from traditional learning to remote learning due to the rapid transition.

In remote learning, the infrastructure of online institutions contains the school's website, which must be accessed first, before logging into the student/faculty portal. This portal contains the students' and faculty's information, their course content, and navigation links to access all departments and resources for that academic institution. The relevancy of the previous information discussed, coincides with the technological aspect of accessing the educational institution and course content. For this reason, participants in this study expressed that navigating through the student portal was a struggle. Sobral and Sorbral (2021) suggested that if older adults can become more enthusiastic and motivated to use technology, then the digital divide may close. This can only begin with adequate information and knowledge in using technology. Therefore, the likelihood of students attaining academic success in distance learning must start with technological proficiency. Participant 1 found the overall experience of online learning to be interesting, while acquiring additional knowledge and skills. Participant 5 found that because of their overall experience with the transition, their confidence increased, as well as their computer experience. The switch from conventional learning to remote learning required students to adjust in many areas.

Campbell et al. (2020) found that psychological distress and physical discomfort are two feelings students may experience due to the distance learning environment. Participant 1 found that it was hard adapting to online learning, difficult to concentrate, and focus, as well as lacking in understanding course direction, along with other

struggles. Participant 2 stated that it was challenging, and Participant 3 believes that the experience itself was hard. Participant 4 found that it was difficult, which caused them to be distracted, resulting in them not being serious and not concentrating on their work. Participant 5 found that the adjustment itself caused discomfort, a loss of direction feeling unmotivated, and they had a hard time keeping track of everything. Participant 6 believed that everything was moving too fast, the work was harder, and a course needed to be dropped as a result of everything. Participant 7 stated they had to change their class due to struggling in the course. Participant 8 suggested that everything was a struggle (technology-wise) and very stressful. Also, learning everything was difficult, and navigating through the student portal was crucial. Participant 9 emphasized internet issues due to fluctuations in the weather. Dinh and Nguyen (2022) supported this by stating that instability in internet connection is a major challenge in online learning. Challenges in network connections could result in disinterest and non-motivation in participating in class. Campbell et al. (2020) argued that psychological distress and physical discomfort are two feelings students may experience due to the distance learning environment. Participant 5 found that effort had to be made in effectively acclimating their time to distance learning and completing the course work. Participant 6 discussed how distance learning requires an extreme amount of work, and different software packages are required for online learning. Also, a lack of time for personal affairs was a big issue. Lastly, Participant 8 stated that their graduation was pushed back due to the transition to e-learning.

In summation, this section contained research literature previously discussed in prior chapters, along with new research findings from literature reviews, in support of aspects of this study. Connections between journal articles and interpretations of the findings were in fact established to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. The following section will consist of themes that emerged from the analysis, along with present studies that substantiate both a connection and relevancy regarding these themes.

### **Research Themes**

The themes that originated from the data of this research were Psychological, Academic, and Technological. Each theme will be discussed briefly in reference to the current literature surrounding the topic.

#### **Theme 1: Psychological**

Under the first theme, Psychological, difficulty and challenges were the codes that emerged within the data. Initially, making the decision to return to school requires extensive thought, and life adjustments that cause feelings of hope, uncertainty, and apprehension. Bellare et al., (2021), found that adult learners experience a work-school conflict, which negatively impacts their personal resources, as well as academic and work performance. Therefore, there are major mental processes from a psychological perspective that are formulated from the start.

Yeung et al. (2022) found that during the transition to online learning, students had trouble concentrating, and self-discipline became a challenge due to non-supervision. For this reason, responsibility, accountability, self-motivation, autonomy, and being self-directed in learning, are internal qualities that are mandatory in being successful in

learning online. Salikhova et al. (2021) found that learners must be motivated to continue their education online. Oftentimes, internalized feelings show through our behaviors. For this reason, self-confidence can serve as self-encouragement and motivation, which will result in feelings of tenacity that help students move forward. (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020) suggested that self-confidence was a major challenge in online learning. However, improving educator-learner interaction and student-student interaction will provide a more positive learning experience. Coman et al. (2020) expressed the importance of online platforms that provide functions for educator-learner interactions. Due to the fast transition because of the pandemic, understanding course content was secondary to the technological challenges that students needed to overcome. Barrot et al. (2021), stated that because of the pandemic, students developed behavioral and emotional issues, which affected their mood and attention due to isolation, health risks, and economic issues. Lack of time for personal affairs, as well as struggling with online learning can contribute to stress for some students. In support of this, Aguilera-Hermida (2020) found that students have experienced stress related to online learning.

### **Theme 2: Academic**

The second theme, Academic, was referenced to the transition's effect on students' knowledge and comprehension of the course content. Salikhova et al., (2021), stated that the online version of courses must not only be conducive to educating students, but students gaining an adequate understanding of the course material This will enable students to gain a better grasp of course content through remote learning. However, in a study conducted by Dos Santos (2022), foreign language students had a

great experience with their transition to online learning, both academically and technologically. This is complementary to Coman et al., (2020), who found online learning to be student-centered while adding flexibility for adult learners. It is important to note that in the Dos Santos study, many of the students had a prior background in remote learning. Nevertheless, this proves that prior knowledge and experience are good predictors of student performance. Barrot et al., (2021), found that video conferencing in online classrooms proved to be highly effective in maintaining students' attention, and academic performance. For this reason, educational institutions must be open to incorporating various dynamics and tools to facilitate the learning experience for students. Educators should be meticulous in creating instructional designs and teaching strategies for remote learning environments. Also, incorporating learning apps and platforms will facilitate learning for the students. Another important factor to consider was made by Vezne et al., (2023), who suggested that students' engagement in courses, motivation, along with readiness for online learning are essential components for student success in remote learning. However, for this to be plausible, proper instructional methods for online learning, as well as possessing strong proficiency in technological skills should be put in place. This will better prepare students for any future situations where remote learning is mandatory. Supporting this, Mishra et al., (2020), discovered that in mediating potential educational issues after COVID-19, distance learning courses should be maintained, including those that are offline courses (hybrid).

**Theme 3: Technology**

In looking at the last theme, Technology, rapidly integrating online learning due to COVID, was a challenge for stakeholders in all educational systems. The educational objective of distance learning is communicating with the students and delivering course content through the internet. However, sufficient computer knowledge displayed by educators is mandatory in carrying out this task. During the recent switch to online learning, many of the educators experienced teaching remotely for the first time Coman et al., (2020); Just as some students experienced learning remotely for the first time. Unfortunately, student's inability to effectively utilize technology for educational purposes can directly affect their academic performance in online learning. Bellare et al., (2023), found that sufficient technological skills act as a barrier for adult learners returning to school. The recent transition to remote learning due to the pandemic proves how relevant proficient computer skills are. It is imperative to acknowledge that technology and network connections and processes work together. Dinh and Nguyen (2022) found the instability of internet connection to be a substantial disadvantage in online learning. This is an additional hindrance that educational systems should account for. Due to remote locations and rural areas, networks can run slower than normal, as well as experiencing disturbances in connection. Coman et al., (2020), found that students experienced challenges such as internet accessibility and internet connection issues. These are potential limitations that should be accounted for by students and acknowledged by educators. Yeung et al., (2020), believes the complications experienced by educators teaching online stem from a deficiency in technical knowledge and minimal

technological skills. In taking all this into account, educators should always provide students with personal contact information during times of network malfunctioning.

In summary, the themes that emerged are elements derived from the research that holds substantial relevance within the perceptions, and experiences of the respondents in this study. Additionally, a connection between recent studies conducted, and the themes displayed are apparent, with a visible complementary aspect between prior literature and the present study. The following section will contain the findings of the research in collaboration with the theoretical framework for this research.

### **Research Findings with Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was Knowles's andragogy theory (2015). With interpreting the findings of this study, in collaboration with the theoretical framework. Because andragogy is based on how adults learn, Malcolm Knowles created six principles describing how adults learn. These were self-concept, learning from experience, readiness to learn, immediate applications, internally motivated, and need to know (Ornelles et al., 2019, p. 548). The foundation of this research study rests upon the premise of adult learners actively being a student in a postsecondary educational institution during the pandemic. These same students were obtaining their education under a conventional method of learning, commonly known as face-to-face learning; and they transitioned over to a remote learning method commonly known as distance learning due to a global emergency to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The groundbreaking point is that during conventional learning there were instructional designs, along with specific methods of instructional delivery conducive and effective to that learning style.

Carrying out the effects of how adults learn, which is derived from the theory of Andragogy, was carried out in a systematic fashion during conventional learning. During this time, educators were able to utilize PowerPoint, illustrations, lectures, writing on the board, along with in-class participation to facilitate knowledge, comprehension, and understanding of students. Therefore, the theory was adequately applied in a face-to-face learning setting. Knowles's six learning principles can effectively be incorporated and carried out in a conventional learning setting. The participants in this study were conditioned to learn under direct supervision, with autonomy carried out in a controlled setting. Furthermore, the participants conveyed external challenges that affected their ability to focus on their classwork. There were no direct complaints about their inability to learn the course material presented. Outside of this, time-consuming, collaborating with classmates, large class size, limited time to process information, and students being overlooked in class by the educator, were primary complaints to learning. Additionally, theory of andragogy, along with the six learning principles, are directly applicable, and effective in a conventional learning setting.

In distance learning, the use of technology, along with network platforms and functions was used to communicate with the students remotely. The component of utilizing the andragogy theory was not directly applied to the changeover because the primary goal was connecting with students remotely. How adults learn in distance learning was not the primary concern. Carrying on the course remotely was the focus. As discussed previously, the andragogical theory emphasizes adult learning and principles that are derived from assumptions regarding the learning principles for adults (McNalley



et al., 2020). For the sake of this research, the principles of andragogy were carried out through online learning. They were displayed through the behavior of the students in response to adjusting quickly to a different model of learning with minimal preparation. For example, autonomy, and independence were shown through the students taking responsibility and accountability for their education and logging into their courses, showing discipline by remaining active in their studies, and learning independently without direct supervision from a live instructor. Being self-directed was shown through the students' self-discipline, by the students logging in on their own, maneuvering through the student portals, and uploading their assignments without direct support and oversight.

Learning from experience was displayed by the students developing their own personal strategies to effectively keep up with their courses, using time management, organization, learning the material, and remaining active through remote learning. Students' readiness to learn was displayed through the transitioning process from conventional learning to e-learning. During this process, students had to learn additional technological skills, as well as navigating through the online student portal to gain access to their courses. Immediate applications were shown by the students when they were briefly informed on how to continue conventional courses remotely. Any information that these students learned had to be applied and performed quickly to continue their academics. Internally motivation was shown through the students choosing to continue their education remotely, as opposed to discontinuing their education until traditional learning was resumed. Need to know was established during the process of preparation

for the transition. These are the ways that adults themselves carried out the principles of Andragogy. In significance, adult learners utilized their own academic skills and strategies to continue learning, in a different learning method that was novel to them. This section displayed a connection between the findings of the study, and the theoretical framework that served as the foundation for this study. Collaboration of the theory's assumptions with the essence of the respondents' perceptions encompasses the highlight of this research. The following information will contain potential inhibitions that occurred throughout the exploration of this analysis.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations that were perceived prior to this study did not occur. Conducting the research to carry out this study took relatively less than a month, therefore it did not take a significant time to complete. The other limitation that was anticipated prior to the research was experiencing difficulty in finding patterns in the data, which also did not occur. Due to the similarities in participants and their experiences, the patterns were apparent within the data. The final anticipated limitation was if the participants would be willing to go through the steps to obtain the data for this study. This limitation did not occur because all participants recruited for the study were willing to answer all pre-arranged questions for the study. Therefore, no inhibitions occurred during this research process, and the study was free of all issues. Furthermore, there were no biases that occurred during any point of this research. In summary, the potential issues that were anticipated prior to conducting this research were non-existent. The participants were receptive, and advantageous in assisting with the study. Furthermore, Due to the

comparability of the perceptions in respondents, commonalities were identifiable in the analysis, which caused no restraints within the study. The following section will contain information pertaining to future areas of inquiry in relation to the present research study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Previous research has been conducted on adult learners in higher education; along with challenges they have faced. Research has also been conducted on the challenges of adult learners transitioning to online learning during the pandemic.

Further recommendations for future research would be: How can academic institutions improve the instructional designs of online courses, along with teaching delivery methods to accommodate the needs of students? How can students overcome their challenges in online learning? These are the immediate foreseeable indications for further study. Moving forward, the following section consists of clear ramifications revolving around affirmative change from a social perspective.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

The results of this study will initiate positive social change by providing information to institutions and stakeholders on the perceptions of older adult learners, along with the obstacles they face in obtaining a college education via distance learning, to inform interventions and associated support systems. Understanding the experiences of older adult learners who are postsecondary students during the pandemic, will lead to positive social change by enabling institutions of higher education to adjust; So that older adult learners will have better accommodations and services. In turn, these learners will become more successful in their courses, while increasing the graduation rate of older

adult learners. This research will support professional practice by changing the instructional approach of educational institutions and faculty along with the politics of educational institutions regarding making changes that will be more accommodating to older adult learners. Reiterating transformation is the only element that can implement alterations; That must emanate from the pinnacle of the higher educational sector that will facilitate effective learning in a remote setting. The following sections contain the methods utilized for this study, along with concise information on best practices mediating the challenges of older adult learners in higher educational institutions transitioning to online learning during and after the pandemic.

### **Methodical Implications**

This basic qualitative research study utilized thematic analysis to examine the data in this study. This method of analysis was incorporated due to the use of interviews as the methodical method of obtaining data for the study. The theoretical approach chosen for this research study is Malcolm Knowles Andragogy Theory.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The temporary implementation of virtual learning due to the pandemic revolved around technological and computer usage. To better prepare students of traditional institutions for remote learning during emergency periods; Technological proficiency, adequate computer knowledge, strong reading, and comprehension skills, along with competency skills in writing, are mandatory skills that should be acquired prior too, for successful learning online. Additionally, course objectives, instructional designs, course assignments, and content delivery methods must be carefully constructed for online

learning, while acknowledging the challenges that older adult learners face. It is critical to know that online learning requires expression through the form of writing, in which all students are not good writers. Therefore, writing skills should remain applicable in reference to educational level, with little emphasis on perfection outside of gradual level.

Stakeholders must recognize that most students are new to online learning, so the technical component is a challenge itself, along with conceptualizing the course content. Students would perform better in distance learning if the educators were more open to communicating with the students outside of email, and their office hours. For this reason, it should be mandatory for educators to administer their phone numbers to students, in case of network disturbances. Effectively implementing these fundamentals in preparation for remote learning, as well as during the process, students will be more satisfied with their education, experience fewer challenges, experience academic success and higher completion rates. With learning at the forefront, a concise and strategic approach of implementing these elements will revolutionize the higher educational industry globally.

### **Conclusion**

The Coronavirus, commonly called COVID-19 is a global health crisis that rocked the nation and shook up the foundation of society. As a result, remote learning became mandatory for students, and was sensationalized worldwide. Due to the complexity of this phenomenon, it was a tumultuous time for educators, students, information technology, and all departments of academic institutions exclusively. Technical proficiency and having a personal computer that contained specific software

for network connections, became necessary during this time, as well as possessing sufficient computer literacy skills. Due to this change, experience and prior knowledge in these areas would change the dynamics of any potential obstacles faced by learners. Students taking an online course for the first time experienced more challenges, just as those students who possessed minimal computer skills during this time.

Educational institutions and their stakeholders must be cognizant of the challenges that older adult learners face in postsecondary education. Therefore, higher educational institutions must incorporate revolutionized, practical applications that are complementary to older adult learners in an online platform for students. This will enhance the desire to pursue postsecondary education, increase college enrollment for institutions, while promoting a positive, non-stressful, educational, and self-satisfying academic experience for nontraditional students. This will in turn change the face of higher education in all modes of learning, while incorporating an electrifying spin off to online education.

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