

# **OLDER PEOPLE AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH**

## **CREATIVITY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AS VEHICLES FOR ENHANCING WELLBEING**

Research Report  
June 2022



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## INTRODUCTION

*‘Along with many retirees, living alone, I sorted the family photographs (Was that George or Peter when they were babies?) Then the holiday snaps (Is that when we were in Venice or Budapest?) It filled the days, then what?’*

Val, workshop 3, UK

Researchers from several universities who had all been previously involved in research with older people came together with a common purpose, that of gaining insight to share with others into how research ‘with’ older people rather than research ‘on’ older people could be better implemented. Participatory research, in which research participants are involved throughout the design, process and discussion of the findings of the research, was implemented to understand how older people were using digital technologies in their creative activities and the sharing of those activities. This project was keen to incorporate the lived experiences of the older people who became our co-researchers.

This interdisciplinary and collaborative project brings together researchers from the Humanities and Social Sciences, the School of Arts and the Business disciplines from the UK, Ireland and Italy and included Oxford Brookes University, Maynooth University and The University of Turin to focus on **Older people and participatory research: The role of digital technologies in creative curation as vehicles for enhancing wellbeing.**

### The research aimed to:

- establish a network of community stakeholders, older people and researchers who are interested in creative participatory research with older people
- identify the role of digital technologies in the creative curation by older people through participative research
- create good practice of creative participatory research with older people for community stakeholders and scholars.

This report presents the findings of a series of workshops which involved older participants from local communities, local community group leaders, academic researchers specialising in gerontology and organisational stakeholders from institutions focusing on the wellbeing of older people, from across the three countries involved. The key insights are provided as well as good practice for creative participatory research with older people which is available for all to use. We make suggestions for creative curation through digital technologies and outline the implications of this research for those involved with older people.

Note: By ‘creative curation’ we mean active engagement and involvement with creative activities ranging from the performing arts, to visual arts and craft making and including the creation of archives of such activities to share with others.

Note: By ‘digital technologies’ we mean technologies enabled by the internet such as email, social media, Zoom meetings, YouTube, WhatsApp messaging all accessed from smart phones, tablets or laptops or other computers.



# RESEARCH DESIGN



The project has embraced a participatory research approach and was highly collaborative with the people who are experiencing the issue under investigation. By inviting older people to become co-researchers, and inform the design and implementation of the research as well as review the findings, the approach taken has enabled relevant and meaningful findings.

The recommendations and framework will provide practical and actionable insight to inform future research with older people, in addition to addressing how creativity through digital technologies can be used to enhance older people's wellbeing.

A programme of three interactive workshops held between February and June 2021 was used to investigate the role of digital technologies in engaging older people in the curation of cultural heritage through participative research. All the workshops were held on Zoom in compliance with UK Covid regulations.

The first workshop involved active scholars, including members of the British Gerontology Society and community stakeholders in defining the characteristics of participatory research with older people and the role of digital technology. This resulted in a working definition of participatory research with older people.

The second workshop concentrated on the enactment of creativity by older people as a way to build resilience and enhance wellbeing and involved representatives of older people's community based organisations such as University of the Third Age (Italy), Action Age (Ireland), Age UK Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire over 50s (both UK). Examples of creativity from across the three countries were provided and shared across the workshop.

The third workshop explored the role of older people as co-researchers in a digital era in which the older co-researchers reported their findings to an expert audience of scholars and community stakeholders. These co-researchers had reached out to their community to gather qualitative data through groups and meetings in gardens and parks on what other older people had been creatively engaging in

and through what mechanisms. During the workshop a live Google 'Jamboard' (see example above) of reflection was collated on which participants shared their thoughts in real time.

Participants involved in the workshops and the community participatory aspects of the research comprised independently living older people aged between 60 to over 90 years old. There was a mixture of urban and rural residents and a wide range of digital competence and confidence across those who participated. All participants gave consent for their data and their creative outputs to be used in the project and all participants have been given alternative names when quoted.

A wide variety of data were collected including; video, images of creative outputs, live captured post-it notes via Jamboard software, as well as audio and text based material. Once analysed thematically, the data from these workshops created a set of key findings about the interaction between digital technology and creativity as well as a framework. The findings were shared with a selection of participants to ensure accurate representation of the data.

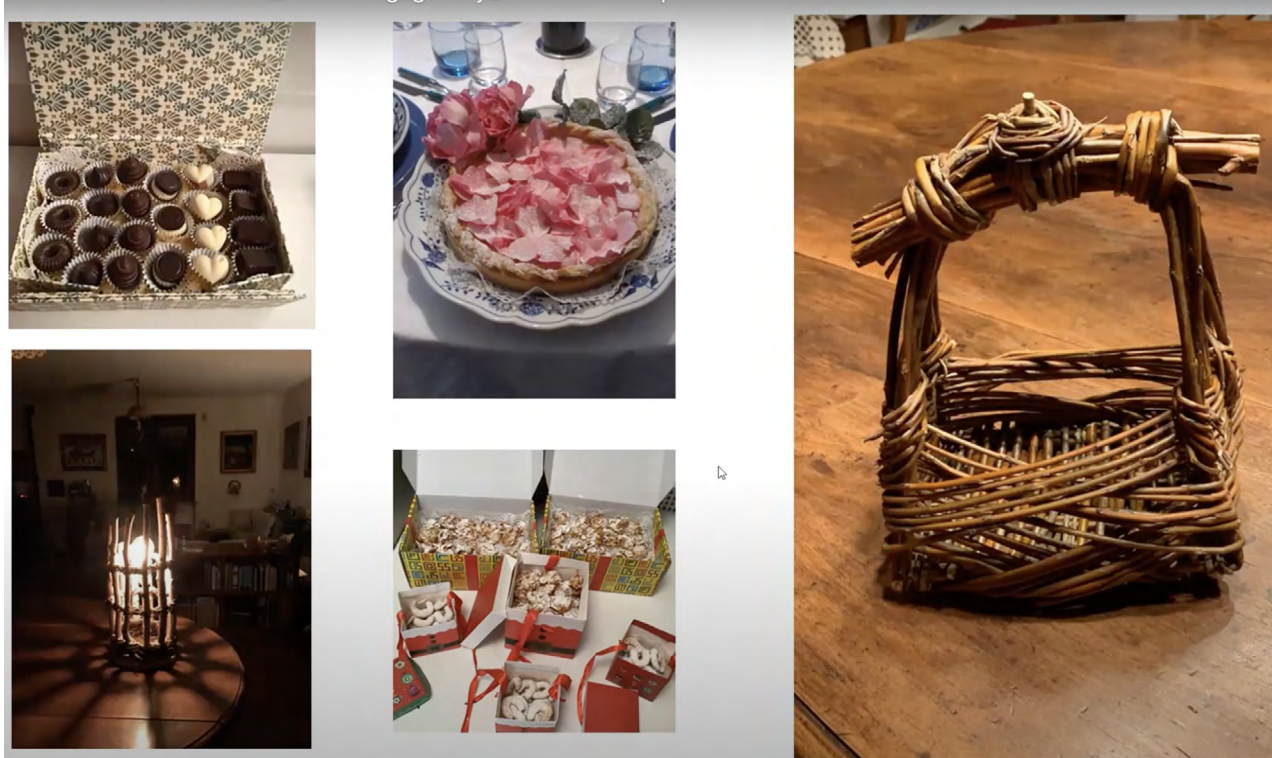
These workshops have resulted in a network of engaged stakeholders, encompassing both academics and those working in and with communities, who will continue to develop knowledge and useful insight.

This work builds on related published work by the research team including;

Dibeltulo, S., Culhane, S. & Treveri Gennari, D. (2020). Bridging the digital divide: Older adults' engagement with online cinema heritage. *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 35(4), 797-811.

Pera, R., Quinton, S., & Baima, G. (2020). I am who I am: Sharing photos on social media by older consumers and its influence on subjective wellbeing. *Psychology & Marketing*, 37(6), 782-795.

Ethical approval for this project was given by Oxford Brookes Research Ethics committee. The project was funded by an Oxford Brookes University Central Research Excellence Award 2019/2020.



# KEY FINDINGS



## 1. CREATIVITY

**Creativity enhances older people's wellbeing.**

Research participants engaged in a wide range of creative practices pre and during the pandemic, including knitting, painting, cookery, weaving, poetry, nursery rhymes, photography, and filmed theatrical performances. Creativity was understood by the participants as self-expression, experimentation and empowerment. Among our participants there was agreement about the benefits to wellbeing brought about by engaging with creative practices during but not limited to the unprecedented time of the pandemic. The main factors behind creativity's positive impact were:

- Creativity offered a chance to connect with others both within and beyond one's closest social networks at a time of severe isolation for many.
- Creativity provided a way to approach difficulties such as mental health issues linked to living under lockdown measures.

*'Creativity has been a life-line during lockdown especially, and hopefully some of these initiatives can continue beyond 2021.'*

Giulia, workshop 2, Italy

- Creativity was a way to be entertained and to entertain oneself during lockdown.
- Creativity offered the chance to explore and engage with new activities or re-engage with previous creative practices that people no longer had time to do.

*'Creativity is the recombination of something that is known. You need to be curious, looking at what happens around you and try to apply it to a specific problem. During the Pandemic the digital has encouraged me to look and search for interesting stuff that I would never have found in other ways. My passion for history is an example of this.'*

Fabio, workshop 2, Italy

- Being creative allowed people to discover skills they did not believe they had.



## 2. CREATIVITY AND DIGITAL

**Digital plays a valuable role in connecting people and facilitating creativity.**

The various digital platforms that people used acted as a connector between people, both those who knew each other already and those who didn't previously know each other. In some instances people who knew each other offline connected to each other online when the pandemic or other situations arose which meant that they could not meet in person. Pre-existing relationships were nurtured and cemented through the digital platforms and the creative activities undertaken on them.

*'Through email we have maintained about 40 people from our offline creativity group, doing and sharing things like painting. The socialiability, the solidarity and the encouragement has been great.'*

Katerina, workshop 2, UK

In addition, there were people who were strangers to each other until connecting via platforms but who interacted with a common purpose coalescing around a creative element such as a painting class, or writing or photography. In this case people who wouldn't have otherwise met, owing to geographic distance, lack of awareness etc. were brought together and new relationships and networks were established.

*'We held Zoom creative concerts as an outline for both individual and collective creativity, where there was a sharing of poetry, artwork and music.'*

Michael, workshop 2, Ireland



### DIGITAL AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO JOIN IN

Our participants widely commented that digital was a way to join in events and activities that they may otherwise not have been able to access. For example, those living in rural communities spoke about being able to engage in the arts and cultural activities and feel part of the wider world. Older people were able to submit creative outputs to local exhibitions virtually but they were also able to view and comment on others' contributions.

*'I live in the countryside and have been able to do many more creative things by doing them online, I can join in more. The technology has given me greater access.'*

Siobhan, workshop 2, Ireland

People with limited mobility were also able to engage in virtual events which they would have found challenging to do in an offline environment. Those who also felt safer in their own home environments and whose mental wellbeing might be more fragile enjoyed accessing what they wanted from the 'security' of their own familiar surroundings. Those individuals who may lack confidence in face to face groups and activities found that they could participate through digital technologies to become part of a creative community, without fear of being judged.

### DIGITAL AS A MEANS FOR GREATER ENGAGEMENT AND A NEW WAY TO SHARE

Community organisers spoke of attendance being higher in virtual activities than in many of the non-virtual organised creative activities. So, if older people were connected and comfortable with using certain technologies there was a high level of engagement in a wide variety of creative activities. In fact digital technology in itself stimulated new ways of being creative, such as sharing screens, drawing onto live screens, or being able to record interactions and play back for further reflection on a creative process. These new ways of sharing both new and old activities helped to cement connectivity between people and thus reduced feelings of isolation.

### DIGITAL CAN SHORTEN THE DISTANCE

Digital technologies played a role in not only connecting individuals and even groups but perceptually 'shortening the distance' between older people. Comments were made such as

*'It's almost like being in the same room.'*

Anne, workshop 2, UK

Examples were given of both near and distant geographic distances being shortened, such as an illustration of sharing creative ideas and outputs with an old work colleague now living in Canada, and virtually connecting with someone in the same town but who had previously been unknown. Digital technologies helped shorten these distances and facilitated a sense of being more connected to others, which is an element of wellbeing.

### DIGITAL AS A SKILL ENABLER

Many of our participants expressed that they had learnt new skills both creative and digital. While some were initially hesitant to increase their skills with technology and were concerned about getting it 'wrong', once mastered they quickly became confident on certain platforms and indeed offered support to others in their various creative groups. Opportunities were taken to develop new creative skills through digital technologies which were, in general, enthusiastically adopted. One Italian participant outlined how she had initiated a painting class on YouTube and how surprised she was to have gathered so many viewers. Using tablets, painting software, editing features and uploading photographs taken of the natural landscape all developed both creative and technical capabilities. These enhanced skills improved people's confidence and this enhanced their self-esteem.



### 3. TIME AND SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT WITH CREATIVITY

Many of our participants highlighted how the lockdown periods during Covid created the opportunity for a more sustained engagement with creativity. Where previously a lack of time presented a barrier to engagement with creative practices, lockdown gave our participants time to experiment with new and previously unexplored forms of creativity.

A greater availability of time allowed our participants to engage in creative practices in a less structured and pressurised way. This in turn had an impact on the way that participants felt about their creative outputs:

*‘It’s nice to show something that’s finished up to a standard that you feel you’re pleased with as opposed to getting three-quarters of the way through and shelving it or putting it away.’*

Sue, workshop 2, UK

### 4. INFRASTRUCTURE BENEFICIAL FOR OPTIMAL REACH OF CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

The involvement of organisations like Age UK, Age Action Ireland or the University of the Third Age (Italy) in creative projects with older people was seen as an important element in enhancing engagement and increasing participation with creative activities.

Among our participants there was a common feeling that these organisations provided the infrastructure to:

- share newly acquired knowledge and skills with others
- help cultural organisations to access and engage older people
- provide technical support via specific schemes (technical buddies, for example)
- help in connecting with those older people who normally would not engage with these type of activities (through key champions such as district nurses).

### 5. IMPACT OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH ON THE PARTICIPANTS

An unexpected depth of engagement and reflection was shown by the participants and co-researchers when asked to comment on any impact the project had provided. Valuable insights which differentiated between how they had benefited through participating in a research project and how they had benefited through being asked to consider creativity and digital technologies. Comments were made such as ‘it has given me more confidence’, ‘it’s nice to be useful’, and ‘research is more complicated than I thought’ were made by our co-researchers.

*‘Even the most tech resistant folk were glad to see other people during lockdown and the others, the tech enthusiasts made such wonderful use of it. I attended such wonderful talks and continue to do so.’*

Siobhan, co-researcher reflections, Ireland

*‘Good to see diversity in thinking about what creativity actually means.’*

David, workshop 3, Ireland

*‘I have learnt something about creativity and also about other people from doing this.’*

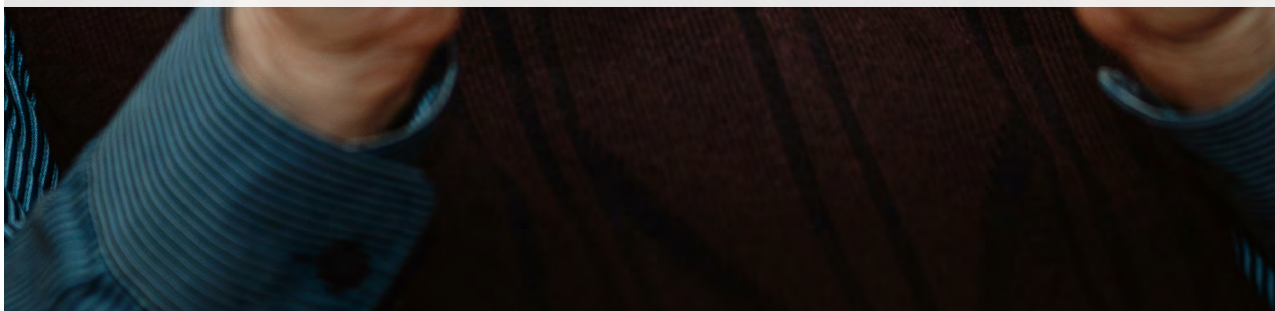
Elizabeth, co-researcher reflection, UK

Thus, it appears that personal growth through expanded knowledge and self-esteem are results of the project, both in terms of what was learnt and shared about the topic (creativity and digital technologies) and by being actively engaged in a participatory research project.



## CHALLENGES

Our participants, although overwhelmingly positive about engaging in creative activities and the role of digital technologies as a vehicle for doing this, clearly expressed some of the challenges they felt.



### DIGITAL AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO JOIN IN

A lack of confidence in one's own ability was also cited as a barrier to creative engagement. For some participants, human contact and a supportive environment are crucial in helping to build up the confidence needed to pursue creative practices. While some participants found that the move to online classes facilitated deeper levels of engagement with participants, it was clear that this was strongly influenced by the make-up and nature of individual groups. Some facilitators of creative groups highlighted the challenge of providing their participants with meaningful support and encouragement when interacting in an online setting. As Lynn noted, for less confident members of her art group, it could be more difficult to overcome:

*'The voice in the head' that can hold an individual back or derail his/her creative engagement altogether.'*

Lynn, workshop 2, UK

### INCOMPATIBILITY WITH CERTAIN CREATIVE PRACTICES

While our participants spoke positively of the way that platforms such as Zoom had been harnessed to facilitate activities like art groups and creative writing courses, the move to online was seen to be less suited to activities that depended more on the coming together of people. In particular, musical activities such as choirs were seen to be less successful and enjoyable when experienced online.

*'We tried Zoom with a choir that I'm in, but I think singing to myself in a room where I can't hear others is just no use.'*

Paul, workshop 2, UK

### THE JARGON OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Some of our participants reported that the language and terminology associated with digital technologies could have an alienating effect and potentially deter older people from using technology as a means to participate in creative activities. There was a sense that terms such as 'platforms', 'digital spaces', 'breakout rooms' and so forth could be misinterpreted or empty of meaning for an older cohort who are unfamiliar with such terms. Our research would suggest that digital technology providers and digital literacy instructors and buddies should think carefully about the language used to identify and describe different features of common digital tools and applications.

### ACCESS TO DIGITAL AND ALSO DIGITAL TRAINING/ SUPPORT SERVICES

The ability to connect and the struggles of connectivity, technical support and bandwidth were also identified as a limitation for some older people, not only those in rural locations but those in urban areas where connection and quality of connection was an issue.

*'Some of the people we most want to connect with or who could benefit are those people who are still fearful of the platforms and technical stuff and that's a shame.'*

Vera, workshop 2, Ireland

Our participants stressed that a key part of being able to successfully engage in creativity via digital technologies is having a foundation in digital literacy skills or 'tech coaching'. Given the ever evolving and rapidly changing nature of digital technologies,

our co-researchers also highlighted the need for on-going digital literacy support to prevent older adults from becoming 'overwhelmed' by the digital world.

*'As an older person, you can feel very left out and left behind [...]. Fashions come and go, so just when you get the hang of one thing something changes and all of that can seem very overwhelming.'*

Sharon, workshop 3, UK

### DIGITAL AS LACKING 'HUMANNESS'

Although the benefits of digital as a facilitator for creative endeavours were articulated by all the participants, it is important to acknowledge the caveats which some older people mentioned. Participating remotely in activities can exacerbate feelings of isolation and loneliness. A lack of face to face interaction and not being able to interpret the nuances of body language can lead to stilted interactions and a feeling of awkwardness.

*'You can feel remote when on screen.'*

James, workshops 2, UK



# GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH OLDER PEOPLE



Through taking a participatory approach in the research we have gained a depth of knowledge about creative activities undertaken and the use of digital technologies, as well as aspects of wellbeing enhanced or challenged by those technologies. Participatory research involves considerable planning, flexibility and commitment from all involved but as this project has illustrated, it can create meaningful outcomes. Our definition of participatory research with older people has been developed in conjunction with older people as co-researchers. The role that digital technologies can play was explained as:

**Digital technologies can assist participatory approaches through both the increased socialisation provided by the technologies and the opportunities enabled by these technologies for creativity, thus enhancing the knowledge that is co-created.**

Reflection by our participants involved in the research both as participants but also as co-researchers gave the academic research team aspects to consider. For example, it was necessary to recognise and explicitly appreciate the skills and abilities our older participants could bring to the project in order to instil confidence in them as co-researchers. The language frequently used by academic research and researchers can appear unintelligible to others, and this was mentioned by some of our participants.

Though the issue of language clarity is not limited to research with older people, using technical or complicated language can be particularly alienating to older people.

*‘If you use complicated jargon in the questions we won’t be able to interpret what sort of information you need, and we could end up with getting the wrong answers and confusing’ people.’*

Elizabeth, co-researcher, UK

Showing respect for their expertise through their lived experiences enabled the research team to create a positive ‘can do’ culture in the project. The need to be flexible in the approaches taken for data collection provided an example of this. Our co-researchers used a variety of interactions with others as a basis for data collection, for example a walk in a park, a conversation over WhatsApp, a focus group held in a garden, none of which was envisaged in the original research design. In addition the presentation of the co-researchers data was also varied, from a verbal report to the research team, to typed notes via an email attachment, to sending photos as illustrative examples of creativity undertaken.

**Thus, guidelines of good practice for participatory research with older people include:**

- **Explicitly valuing the lived experience**
- **Gaining mutual respect**
- **Relationship development and nurturing**
- **Establishing a common goal and shared purpose**
- **Demonstrating flexibility**
- **Providing clear communication and planning**
- **Using inclusive language**

The illustration on page 18 and 19 outlines the key factors for optimising the potential of using digital technologies in creative activities with older people.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**This project has demonstrated that through substantial involvement at all stages of the research, older people as co-researchers have a hugely valuable role to play. Research ‘with’ rather than research ‘on’ has provided a depth of insight.**

**Through foregrounding the lived experience of older people, this project has created insight for researchers and organisations working with the older community. We acknowledge that the pandemic has been a non-typical phenomenon but nonetheless it has highlighted experiences present in non-pandemic times. Here we offer practical recommendations, based on the lessons learnt from the research undertaken.**

## **Creativity:**

Opportunities for creativity and creative activities have been demonstrated in this project. In order to maximise the potential for creativity, the following actions are suggested:

- Organisations working with older people and in the cultural and creative sectors should maintain hybrid and flexible forms of creative engagement going forward. Keeping online spaces and opportunities will be beneficial since, as our research has shown, digital technology has facilitated and widened engagement with creative practices for older people. At the same time a proportion of older people have no access to digital technology or are reluctant to use it. So, it is crucial to keep catering for this category of people through off-line and in-person provision.
- Coordinating creative activities and offering support in the form of venues, technology, training, and socialisation should be at the heart of organisations working with older people. Some of these organisations (University of the Third Age, Age Action, and Age UK) have been instrumental in facilitating creative practices. These national organisations with community subgroups have implemented a number of initiatives, ranging from competitions to creating short courses aimed at helping less tech-savvy older people and, in addition adapting existing in-person activities and materials for online provision across different platforms.
- Local leaders of these groups are key to the communication and engagement of these adaptations by others. These individuals are often volunteers within the groups and require support to nurture and maintain currency with both creative activity possibilities as well as digital competency so that they can cascade both aspects to their groups.

## **Digital technologies:**

The researchers were impressed by the extent to which many of the participants had adopted differing technologies through which to engage with creativity.

The recommendations below are born out of their experiences:

- Local community champions comprising older people within the community should be identified as people who can share their confidence and positive approaches to engaging with technology to enhance engagement with creative opportunities.
- Formalised support of digital skills learning should be mindful to remove technical jargon to avoid alienation of older people.
- Our older community noted that buddying with someone who was a little more confident or digitally skilled worked well and a focus on gaining and practising a specific skill that had meaning to the individual was valuable.
- Intergenerational support was also considered to be a good idea, with older and younger people interacting to build or embed digital skills for the older people and as a vehicle through which to interact with others and lessen social isolation across the generations.
- Providing a supportive environment to learn together is also recommended. In the case of older adults who have little or no exposure to digital technologies, our co-researchers recommended one-to-one digital literacy support and training. The group discussions led by our co-researchers noted how this support is happening in organic and informal ways through the assistance offered by family, friends, librarians, public health nurses and care assistants. As such, the task of narrowing the digital divide is currently being propped up by people willing to fill a gap, however that gap would benefit from more systematic support.

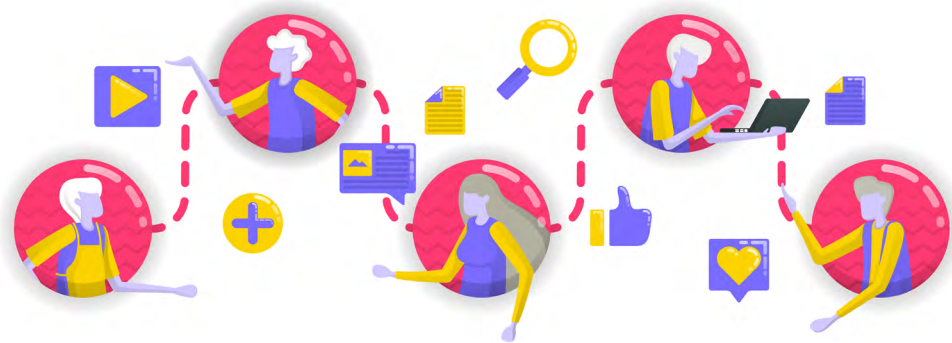
## **Losing the human connection:**

The lack of human contact was highlighted as a drawback when engaging in creative activities online. Our co-researchers suggested ways to mitigate this:

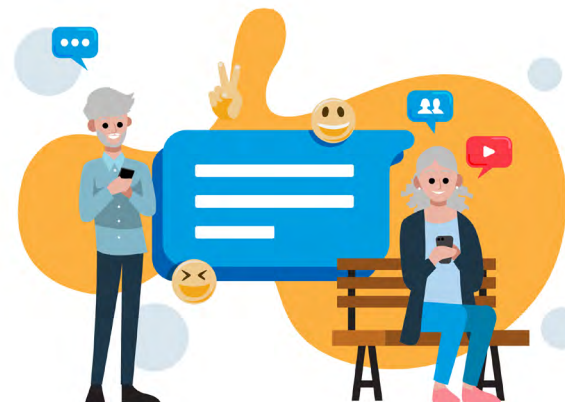
- Keep the numbers in Zoom groups small to allow for more quality engagement and interaction (ideally no more than 6 people per group).
- Where digital skills pose a significant barrier to engagement, use a real life tech support person who can act as a ‘bridge’ by assisting the older person in accessing online activities in real time so as to be able to participate in the creative activity.

# OPTIMISING CREATIVITY THROUGH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR OLDER PEOPLE

Creativity and digital technologies:



*Maintain hybrid formats for activities*



*Use digital as a communication tool for creativity*



*Recognise digital technologies can be creative in their own right*

Human connection:



*Remember local leaders are key to engagement*



*Ensure specialist organisations are used as facilitators*



*Encourage intergenerational interactions for skills building*



*Keep groups small*

## Limitations of the research: Engagement with creativity and socio-demographic profile

Our research participants comprised both men and women but did not reflect the gender imbalance, with more women than male participants already highlighted by a previous Age UK report in 2018, in relation to participation in creative and cultural activities. In addition, our research echoes the limitations outlined by a Baring Foundation Report in 2012 which highlighted that whilst an imbalance of white females in research findings does reflect the demographic balance in the UK and European older population in general it does limit the transferability of findings to men and non-white ethnic groups.

Gender, socio-economic class, ethnic diversity and disability are also components that require further research in how to engage these groups within older people participatory research. In addition, investigation is needed on how to gain better representation of different groups of people in research projects which focus on creativity specifically.

## SUMMARY

This research set out with three aims, first to initiate an interdisciplinary network which has now been established with those who are interested in creative participatory research with older people. Important issues have been identified by the emerging network regarding the planning, implementation and outputs of participatory research with older people.

Second, the role of digital technologies in creative activities and curation has clearly been identified. Digital technologies play a central role in enabling connectivity between older people and providing opportunities to engage in creativity.

Third, good practice guidelines for creative participatory research with older people has been created for use by researchers and others who wish to include and embed older people in interdisciplinary research. Finally, recommendations as to how best to embed the positive aspects of enabling creativity through digital technologies have been provided.

## INDICATIVE LIST OF CREATIVE ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN:

- Choir singing via Zoom
- Painting as a group together online via Zoom
- Painting by following a YouTube tutorial
- Online poetry sessions
- Online writing sessions with work continued offline
- Zoom basket weaving classes
- Papier mache via online group
- Family ancestry online research
- 'Visiting' art exhibitions via online links
- Accessing online creative concerts put on by older community organisers
- Taking and sharing photographs via WhatsApp, messaging or email
- Cooking a recipe and sharing the outcome visually with a group

The research team would like to thank all the participating academics, practitioners and most of all the older people across Ireland, Italy and England who participated so fully in this research. With special thanks to Age UK Oxfordshire, Unitre, Age Action Ireland and Oxford over 50s.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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Note: All the images used in this report were created during the project or have been used following good practice guidelines from the image library of Centre for Healthy Ageing:

<https://ageingbetter.resourcespace.com/pages/home.php>

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