Exploring Identity Shifts and Power Relations in Online Learning of TVET College

by

Regan Jenekar

Student Number: 9823922

A Research Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Education (Adult Learning and Global Change)

UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE

in the Faculty of Education

at the

University of the Western Cape

Supervisor: Dr Mohammed Natheem Hendricks

March 2025

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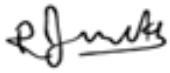
DECLARATION

Student number: 9823922

I, Regan Jenekar declare that **Exploring Identity Shifts and Power Relations in Online Learning of TVET College,** is my own original work. It was submitted at the University of the Western Cape in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Masters of Education in Adult Learning and Global Change.

Signature:  March 2025

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mother, Sophia Jenekar, who forced me to return to school when I didn't know any better. A sincere thank you to my cohort members from the start of the course and to my supervisor, Dr Mohammed Natheem Hendricks, for his support throughout. Thank you to all the participants who offered their time to contribute to this study.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of a shift in the medium of instruction from face-to-face to online learning on the identity formation of students at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. Drawing on a Foucauldian lens, the study critically analyses and problematises the shift in power relations that students and teachers encounter in online teaching and learning environments. The main themes explored in this study were the conceptions of e-learning, autonomy and challenges in e-learning, online identity in e-learning, and students' and lecturers' shifts of power relations.

The study employed a qualitative research approach, gathering data through semi-structured interviews at a TVET college in South Africa. The investigation explored how the shift to online learning has resulted in changes in students' identities, particularly in relation to how identity shifts due to moving to an online teaching and learning platform. The study examined how students and lecturers negotiate and resist the exercise of power in online learning environments and how their identities are shaped and reshaped in response to these power dynamics.

The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of the complex interplay between identity formation, power relations, and online learning in the context of TVET colleges. This research has implications for policymakers, educators, and researchers interested in understanding the multifaceted nature of student identity in the digital age. As such, the study provided insights into the challenges and opportunities that students encounter in online learning environments and suggests recommendations for educational institutions to create inclusive and empowering online learning experiences for students.

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KEYWORDS

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges

Power

Digital

Identity

Foucauldian analysis

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

DoE	Department of Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
ICT	Information Communication Technology
Identity	The self-perception of an individual and how others perceive the person.
Power	The definition of Foucault views power, as something that both restricts and shapes individuals, influencing desires and the production of knowledge.
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

There has been a noticeable rise in the use of online platforms for teaching instead of traditional face-to-face classes (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Students' dissatisfaction with the limitations, inflexibility, and impracticality of the traditional classroom setting has also prompted this shift (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Consequently, the transition to online platforms has not only led to changes in students' identities within online learning environments, but it has also sparked shifts in power dynamics (Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

Transitioning from traditional face-to-face teaching to online platforms can influence the formation of students' identities as they may feel unfamiliar with e-learning (Develotte, 2009). In an online teaching and learning environment, identity formation happens through individual profiles and interactions with others (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Language codes, such as specific terms and emoticons, influence cultural identity formation in this context. For instance, 'LOL' (laugh out loud) is a commonly used abbreviation in online communication, representing jargon or slang. This may signal that the use of the term 'LOL' associates with a particular cultural community.

This study used Foucault's analysis of power to examine students' identity and agency in relation to teaching and learning. Foucault (1980) offers a perspective on power that goes beyond its repressive nature. He argues that power is not only about controlling and limiting individuals but also has a productive aspect. Power not only suppresses and restricts, but also shapes and influences our desires and the production and understanding of knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Building upon this notion, Brookfield (2001) asserts that many adult students and educators perceive themselves as lacking power or assume that they can selectively wield their power. Furthermore, aligning with Foucault's perspective, Brookfield (2001) acknowledges the inescapable nature of power. To free adult education from power dynamics or foster a more democratic distribution of power, individuals must first recognise and acknowledge this inherent dynamic (Brookfield, 2001).

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When incorporating virtual environments into educational institutions, it is important to examine the interplay between power, technology, and education (Vander Valk, 2008). This connection becomes particularly relevant in online discussion forums where students express their understanding of the subject matter and inadvertently reveal their identities (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014). Delahunty et al. (2014) argue that when establishing a shared professional identity, there is an inherent, often unconscious, drive to acquire more power. Furthermore, online interactions not only mirror power dynamics, inequality, and social group dynamics on a larger scale, but are also influenced by individual identities which shape the interpretation of the text on a more personal level (Delahunty et al., 2014). Subsequently, the power dynamics involved in forming an identity within these contexts can impact individuals' confidence particularly if they lack the cultural knowledge that a particular group values (Delahunty et al., 2014).

Educators can tap into their creativity by utilising three-dimensional virtual environments to develop innovative computer-assisted learning approaches (Vander Valk, 2008). In addition, collaborative learning is particularly suitable for e-learning since it encourages mutual understanding and personal meaning construction among students (Hendricks, 2012). However, Vander Valk (2008) cautions that virtual environments are not neutral and can embody certain values and power relations, and educators are responsible for being aware of these issues. Therefore, when integrating digital media into learning and teaching, Hendricks (2012) advocates for a critical and mindful approach that considers the potential impact on power dynamics as they influence the form of knowledge that is produced.

Various critical factors such as power, surveillance, resistance, and knowledge production shape the online learning experience of learners. Analysing and comprehending these dynamics can help learners navigate the online learning space and gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between power and learning in the digital sphere.

1.2 Contextual Background to Teaching Online in TVET Colleges

In South Africa, the information communication technology (ICT) policy development in education can be traced back to 1995 with the establishment of Technology-Enhanced Learning Initiatives (TELI) and the subsequent Feasibility Study for a Dedicated Educational Channel

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(Isaacs, 2007). In 2001, the National Department of Education and the Department of Communication jointly released a Strategy for ICT in Education which laid the groundwork for the adoption of the e-Education White Paper in 2004 (Isaacs, 2007). The policy's objective was to ensure that all primary and secondary school students have the required ICT skills by 2013. This policy primarily focused on the school and further education and training (FET) college sectors and did not include the higher education sector or the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programme (Isaacs, 2007).

While ICTs for education at schools and in FET institutions are prioritised at the national policy level in South Africa (Department of Education, 2003), "there is no coherent national policy framework specifically steering ICTs and higher education in South Africa" (Czerniewicz, Ravjee, & Mlitwa, 2006, p. 21). Czerniewicz et al. (2006) add that there is no specific educational technology policy for higher education, nor is there any monitoring or coordination of relevant related policies. Since Czerniewicz et al.'s publication in 2006, there have been significant policy changes regarding ICTs and higher education in South Africa.

Acknowledging the need to enhance ICT skills across society, the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT) developed a SA Connect policy in 2013 to achieve the objective of providing internet connectivity to the South African population. This policy encompasses initiatives in education, government, adult e-literacy, youth development, and sector-specific programmes. Focusing on adult education, "all ICT-related portfolio organisations and partnerships" recognised the need for a revised skills approach to drive innovation in the ICT sector (Department of Telecommunication and Postal Services [DTPS], 2016, p. 153). As a result, the National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper was drafted in 2016. The National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper stressed the importance for the "coordination and collaboration in the planning process among various entities responsible for ICT skills development, such as the TVET colleges, universities, industry partners, colleges, and schools" (p. 160).

According to The Draft White Paper on e-Education (Department of Education [DoE], 2004), the continued growth of ICTs is causing major changes across many areas of human activity globally. The Draft White Paper on e-Education (DoE, 2004) states that while the use of ICTs in

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Africa experienced a 20% increase in 2002, only 6.4% of South Africans have access to and use the Internet. The Draft White Paper on e-Education (DoE, 2004) further points out that the digital divide is not only about connectivity and infrastructure disparities, but it is also about local content development in terms of the number and quality of local websites, local language content, and the use of local online content by key sectors. Integrating these considerations into the re-evaluation process will ensure that TVET colleges are well-equipped to provide inclusive and relevant education in the digital age.

The National Plan for Post-School Education and Training 2021-2030 states that to effectively meet the demands of the changing landscape, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges have set an ambitious target of achieving 2.5 million enrolments by 2030 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2023). By considering long-term implications, TVET colleges can adapt the TVET systems to benefit students and the sector through effective incorporation and utilisation of technological advancements (DHET, 2023). Moreover, the DHET states that it is essential to explore innovative approaches to education and training delivery that use technology to enhance the employability of TVET students (DHET, 2023). By effectively leveraging technology, students can develop skills and competencies that contribute to their identity formation as capable and adaptable professionals.

Designing effective learning experiences requires careful consideration of the specific context and relationships in which learning occurs. Designing effective learning experiences takes into account the influence of various factors, such as the learning environment, the relationships between students and lecturers, and the interactions among students themselves (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2014). Educators are exploring using electronic devices, such as cell phones, computers, or laptops, in the classroom with the increasing prevalence of technology (AlTameemy, 2017). Despite technological advancements, the reality remains that not all students have the means to access smartphones, WiFi, or computers (CHE, 2014).

The Draft White Paper on e-Education 2004 acknowledges the issue of unequal access, recognising that the digital divide goes beyond disparities in connectivity and infrastructure to encompass inadequate development in colleges (DoE, 2004). Addressing these challenges in

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TVET colleges requires competent teachers and digital education to optimise technology (McGrath, Mulder, Papier, Stuart, 2018).

1.3 Main Research Question

How do identity shifts and power relations influence the online learning experiences of TVET college students?

1.4 Aim of the Research

This research aims to investigate the shift in student identity formation and power relations influenced by online learning experiences at a South African TVET College. In particular, this study has focused on investigating how the transition to online learning and teaching has influenced the identities of students and lecturers in the context of TVET education, as well as whether there have been changes in their power dynamics.

1.5 Objectives of the Research

The objectives of the investigation are to:

- explore and understand the conceptions of e-learning within TVET colleges, focusing on how lecturers and students perceive with online education;
- examine the role of autonomy in e-learning and identify the challenges that arise when students navigate digital learning platforms independently;
- investigate the formation of online identities and how these identities impact learning experiences, considering individual traits, cultural factors, and platform dynamics;
- analyse power dynamics in e-learning environments within TVET colleges, with a focus on how authority, autonomy, and control manifest in digital educational settings and influence student and lecturer interactions;
- provide insights into the broader implications of e-learning on traditional educational structures, particularly in relation to identity formation, autonomy, and power relations in online learning contexts.

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1.6 Rationale for this Study

Evolving Educational Landscape:

With the increasing adoption of e-learning in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, there is a need to understand how this shift is transforming traditional educational practices and interactions. This study aims to explore how e-learning is reshaping conceptions of learning, autonomy, and identity formation within these institutions.

*Addressing Pedagogical Challenges***:**

As e-learning becomes more prevalent, both students and lecturers face new challenges related to autonomy, technical support, and the navigation of online platforms. The study seeks to identify these challenges and provide insights into how they can be addressed to improve the effectiveness of e-learning in TVET colleges.

Understanding Power Dynamics:

The study investigates how power relations are constructed and navigated in online learning environments, particularly within TVET colleges. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing inclusive and learner-centered approaches that empower students while maintaining necessary educational structures.

Cultural and Identity Considerations:

Online learning environments introduce new dynamics in identity formation, influenced by cultural norms, gender, and individual traits. This study aims to explore how these factors impact students' engagement and learning outcomes, providing a deeper understanding of the role of identity in online education.

Contribution to Educational Theory and Practice:

By examining the interplay between e-learning, autonomy, identity, and power relations, the study contributes to the broader field of educational research. It offers practical recommendations for educators and policymakers to create more effective and equitable online learning environments in TVET colleges.

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1.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has laid the groundwork for exploring the complex interplay between identity shifts and power relations in the context of online learning within South African TVET colleges. The transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online platforms has been driven by students' dissatisfaction with conventional educational settings, leading to significant changes in identity formation and power dynamics. Foucault's analysis of power provides a critical lens through which to examine these shifts, highlighting the dual nature of power as both repressive and productive. The chapter also contextualises the evolution of ICT policy in South Africa, particularly within TVET colleges, underscoring the challenges and opportunities that accompany the integration of technology in education. By investigating the impact of e-learning on student identities, autonomy, and power dynamics, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the implications of digital education, offering insights into the transformation of traditional educational structures in the digital age. The following chapter builds on this foundation by reviewing the literature on online learning, identity development, and power dynamics.

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CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This section reviews the literature on online learning, identity development, and power dynamics among students. Lowenthal and Dennen (2017) emphasise that positive and negative tensions play an important role in shaping student identity in online classes where interactions with peers, regardless of type, contribute to this process. Their research highlights the fluid nature of identity formation and power relations in online environments. In contrast, Develotte (2009) explores how limited confidentiality in online forums can affect student responses and online presence, suggesting that power dynamics are also impacted by privacy concerns. This study examines e-learning's conceptions, its challenges, the formation of online identities and its impact on learning, emotional experiences, and power dynamics within the e-learning contexts.

2.2 Conceptions of E-learning

How comfortable students and lecturers are with e-learning will depend on which generation uses these technologies. Chametzky (2021) states that "people born between 1982 and 1999 are known as digital natives and have different values and experiences from their older learner counterparts who grew up without the Internet" (p. 20). It is vital that educators understand how students experience e-learning to have effective interactions (Chametzky, 2021).

Certain experiences and perspectives either consciously or unconsciously ignore or exclude the 'e' in e-learning from discussions (Stein, Shepard & Harris, 2011). Some argue that the focus should be on learning itself rather than the technology aspect represented by the 'e' (Stein et al., 2011). They emphasise that learning occurs in a broad and universal sense and highlight theories and practices applicable in any context. It is important to note that some expressions may convey a negative sentiment towards the term 'e-learning' and its potential impact on the understanding and application of learning facilitated through electronic means (Stein et al., 2011). In a study conducted by Stein et al. (2011), a participant that was interviewed stated "ICT can improve planning and instruction, helping teachers achieve their goals and provide a more engaging learning environment for students by overcoming paper-based materials" (p. 152). E-learning is

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commonly understood as encompassing tools, equipment, hardware, and software that are utilised to facilitate and enhance teaching and learning experiences (Stein et al., 2011). There are a variety of available technologies for teaching and learning purposes, with examples including Blackboard, intranet, smart boards, web links, and discussion forums (Stein et al., 2011). The focus is more on the range and availability of technology rather than its specific utilisation, such as incorporating interactive Internet resources or delivering instruction through the Internet using tools like Blackboard and PowerPoint software (Stein et al., 2011).

An earlier conception of e-learning did not include computers, software, or the Internet at all. E-learning "encompasses all electronic methods of learning, not limited to computers, and can include the presentation of information on an overhead projector" (Czerniewicz, Ravjee, Mlitwa, 2006, p. 18). According to Czerniewcz et al. (2006), most professionals conceive e-learning as primarily linked to networked computers and the Internet, often as a collaborative learning environment on the Web facilitated by tools like email to support student learning.

In the Chinese higher education context, incorporating online cooperative learning into the teaching practices yields various positive outcomes for the teaching and learning process, such as exciting students and generating "interest and motivation in their learning" (McConnell & Zhou, 2006, p. 517). Contrary to the negative aspects of traditional lectures, which students often find "painful and boring", online cooperative learning allows for students to socially interact and intellectualise by engaging in discussions, collaborate on group projects, and "explore their 'tacit' … knowledge through peer interactions" (McConnell & Zhou, 2006, p. 517).

Furthermore, McConnell and Zhou (2006,) mention that e-learning provides access to a wider range of learning materials and that "online cooperative learning" promises positive "learning outcomes" (p. 517). Online learning offers opportunities for students to learn social behaviours and form relationships, which are not easily achieved in lecture-only formats (McConnell & Zhou, 2006).

The structure of e-learning, with its integration of technology, social interactions, accessible resources, and varied teaching approaches, shapes how students perceive and engage with their learning experiences. This environment allows students to develop and express their online identities, influencing how they see themselves within a digital context, interact with peers, and

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navigate the learning process. Such elements of e-learning contribute to students' overall sense of identity and belonging within the online educational space, impacting their motivation, participation, and engagement in digital learning environments.

2.3 Challenges in E-Learning

Students are comfortable with digital technologies and social media for communication, but keeping pace with digital advancements is essential for economic and technological transformation (McGrath et al., 2018; Mpungose, 2020). Mpungose (2020) highlights the importance of integrating digital-age tools in TVET instructor training to modernise the sector. Although students frequently use platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, universities have not yet fully incorporated these for e-learning. Mpungose advocates for including social media in education, noting that students, as 'prosumers' are adept with Web 2.0 tools and often receive free data for social media access which can help facilitate e-learning (Mpungose, 2020).

Although students use Facebook for social purposes, they are hesitant to be 'friends' with their instructors on Facebook. Students report self-censoring or adjusting their privacy settings to avoid context collapse between their social and classroom identities when using the Internet platform as part of their coursework (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). Some instructors have shared their social networking platforms with students to address feelings of isolation (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017).

It is well known that the effectiveness of e-learning sometimes raises doubts, as Van Aalst (2006) highlights, stating that students rarely revisit online discussions or threads after reading them which indicates a lack of engagement. His study also points out initial teacher hesitation to post notes to unfamiliar groups, fearing negative reactions and frustration with the lack of responses to some posts. To address these issues, Van Aalst (2006) suggests focusing more on assisting students in improving their ideas, rather than correcting them to reduce the risk of embarrassment when they share 'incorrect' ideas.

Online learning may result in a lack of confidence and students may perceive online experiences as irrational and frightening (Develotte, 2009). Develotte (2009) recounted a student's experience of feeling invaded by unpredictable and varying information and having no control

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over the situation. In addition, Kupersmith (2003) and Develotte (2009) have demonstrated that the feeling of losing control can cause technostress which refers to the relationship between a student's technical competence and their sense of insecurity. Furthermore, the findings of Kupersmith (2003) and Develotte (2009) support the idea that the less technical knowledge a student has, the greater their stress levels.

Scholars have investigated individuals' emotional expressions on social networking services (SNS), and reveal that people exhibit a range of emotions such as sadness, disorientation, and confusion (Miguel & Medina, 2011; Papaioannou, Tsohou & Karyda, 2021). This suggests that people use social networking sites (SNS) to fulfil their need for self-expression and a sense of belonging by forming online communities known as 'neo-tribes' which students join to support their learning in a blended course format (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2020; Papaioannou et al., 2021). Graduate students expressed a genuine sense of community when they could confidently express their opinions on online discussion questions (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2020).

Online learning can be a lonely and isolated experience for the learner (Chametzky, 2021). When learning online students can isolate themselves because they can complete their assignments unassisted using computer programmes and turn them in electronically without having to connect with other students (Chametzky, 2015). To improve online learning, it is important to avoid isolation and instead focus on best practices, including empowering learners, engaging in collaborative activities, encouraging course area postings, fostering increased communication, and establishing a community of practice (Chametzky, 2015).

Hendricks (2012) has investigated the emotional experiences of students in a Master of Education programme that primarily utilises e-learning. The programme consisted of geographically dispersed students from different continents who rely on computer-mediated communication for their learning. Hendricks (2012) shows that master's students navigate the e-learning platform and examines whether it replicates traditional classroom experiences or acts as a passive tool. Hendricks (2012) reveals that students take ownership of their learning through collaborative knowledge negotiation, but challenges the assumption of equality, flexibility, and anxiety reduction in e-learning. Despite these challenges, Hendricks (2012) suggests that e-

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learning can facilitate collaborative learning and contribute to our understanding of the emotional aspects of student experiences in online programmes.

Infrastructure-related problems, such as interrupted internet connections due to cable damage (Develotte, 2009), do shape students' emotional states, and are crucial in shaping students' emotions (Neilson, 2017). Online learning and teaching interruptions due to blackouts or load shedding are common occurrences in South Africa (Neilson, 2017). Load-shedding, a term now widely used in South Africa, refers to various electricity cuts and symbolises frustration and anxiety about the country's future (Neilson, 2017).

In summary, the challenges of fostering engagement and emotional well-being in e-learning are multifaceted, including issues of isolation, privacy concerns, technostress, and infrastructure-related problems. However, there are strategies and approaches, such as creating online communities and addressing identity concerns, that can lessen these challenges and enhance the emotional experiences of online learners. As education evolves, it is necessary for educators and institutions to focus students' emotional well-being in the online learning environment, which improves the effectiveness and satisfaction of the educational experience.

2.4 Online Identity Formation and its Impact on Learning

Our identities are not only shaped by our self-perception but also by how others perceive us (LeCourt, 2004). Students shape their identities from the clashes and overlaps found in public discussions, media, personal experiences, and institutional conversations (LeCourt, 2004). In addition, identity is shaped by the intersection of discourse and self, and it involves individuals choosing specific subject positions influenced by other discourses and social relationships to form their identities. This view suggests that identity is not fixed but a continuous, dynamic process shaped by individual choices within a broader social and cultural context (LeCourt, 2004).

Similarly, various aspects of personality and social interactions with others influence the complex process of forming an online identity (Papaioannou et al., 2021). Personality traits such as self-esteem, narcissism, and privacy concerns are factors that shape online identity (Papaioannou et al., 2021). Online users are also influenced by factors like information control,

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social culture, trust, and intimacy with others (Papaioannou et al., 2021). Intersubjective construction of identity links individuals' preferences, and how they present themselves to others online to their concept of identity (Papaioannou et al., 2021).

Holding similar views, Lowenthal and Dennen (2017) propose that the notion of identity in an online class is more multifaceted than simply playing the roles of a student or an instructor. They suggest that this complexity stems from online interactions, where people present various versions of themselves (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). This multifaceted presentation means that educators, especially in teacher education, must consider both the identities students portray in class and their professional development (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017).

While some students feel that online forums lower social barriers, others approach them with increased caution. In a study by Develotte (2009), a student that participated in the study stated that "sending a message online means taking a risk without knowing how others will react, and writing in a forum requires careful consideration since it cannot be changed once posted, even if it's incorrect" (p. 7) This suggests that communicating through online platforms carries a sense of uncertainty and responsibility. This apprehension may lead students to exhibit more reserved behaviour and limit the exploration of their thoughts, perspectives, and questioning abilities. Consequently, such caution could shape their identity as learners and affect their level of agency and power within the virtual learning environment. The student's observation highlights a hesitation or uneasiness in engaging with others online, resulting in a decreased inclination to ask questions compared to a physical classroom setting (Develotte, 2009).

Similarly, sharing identity online has social consequences, and some students may struggle to participate effectively due to a lack of control (Demiray, Kurubacak & Yuzer, 2011). Instructors must ensure that students understand the subject matter in online education, as anonymity may offer students space to express their feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and opinions (Demiray et al., 2011).

In summary, forming an online identity is a complex and dynamic process shaped by self-perception, social interactions, and the unique characteristics of digital platforms. In educational settings, this process becomes more nuanced as students and instructors navigate the roles and expectations tied to their online presence. While online platforms offer spaces for self-expression

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and engagement, they also present challenges such as the permanence of communication and the social consequences of disclosure. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for educators as online identity formation significantly affects students' learning experiences, self-confidence, and growth in the virtual classroom

2.5 Power Dynamics in E-learning

This section explores how Foucault's theories, particularly his concepts of power, can be applied to understand the impact of online learning on the identities and power relations of students and lecturers. By incorporating Foucault's ideas, the study provides a critical perspective for analysing the dynamics of power in educational contexts, including the formation of online identities and the regulation of behaviour. This section also highlights relevant studies that utilise Foucault's theories to examine power shifts, surveillance, and the changing roles of educators and students in online education.

The concept of power and student autonomy is becoming increasingly important, especially in light of the effectiveness and sustainability of the higher education system (Lazorak, Belkina, & Yaroslavova, 2021). Lazorak et al. (2021) suggest that autonomy includes "students feeling accountable for learning new skills and for them deciding on the extent of the distribution of their responsibility for many spheres of education" (p. 210). Firat (2016) observes that autonomy also encompasses "a student's ability to learn logically and appropriately, taking control of their learning through self-directed and self-regulated processes" (p. 219). Together, these perspectives highlight how autonomy intersects with power, influencing students' agency within educational systems.

2.5.1 Subjectivation and the construction of subjectivities

In an era where online learning reshapes educational landscapes, understanding the dynamics of identity and power relations have become increasingly essential. This study employs Foucault's conceptual framework as a theoretical lens to analyse the impact of online learning and teaching on students' and lecturers' identities and power relations. The focus centres on Foucault's theories, including power, knowledge, discourse, and surveillance. Additionally, this analysis explores Foucault's notions of disciplinary power and the panopticon as analytical tools for

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understanding power dynamics in educational contexts. By incorporating Foucault's theoretical framework, the study provides critical insights into the formation of online identities, the regulation of behaviour, and the exercise of power within digital learning environments. Ultimately, this perspective enhances the interpretation of the study's findings and its implications for education.

Clapp (2017) conducted a study focusing on how a team of e-learning experts collaborated with faculty members to develop online courses in a higher education setting. Through a comprehensive analysis of both online and offline interactions between e-learning experts and subject specialists, such as educators and scientists, this study leveraged the author's personal experiences to aid universities in enhancing their staff training methods for online course design. Additionally, it employs ideas from Michel Foucault to explain how subject specialists' views on online teaching were formed and how these views affected their relationships with e-learning experts.

Foucault (1972) illustrates this control from authority, stating, "do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same; leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order" (p. 11). Clapp (2017) asserts that we must adapt to changes imposed by those controlling our systems. When subject specialists transition from in-person to online teaching, they must acquire new knowledge and possibly change their mindsets. Their responses to this need for change will significantly affect the success of training methods. This supports Foucault's theory of 'Subjectivation and the Construction of Subjectivities' highlighting how power shapes individuals' identities and subjectivities rather than fixing them.

2.5.2 Power as a circulating and relational network

Peach and Bieber (2015), drawing on Foucault's ideas, examine how online education alters power dynamics within traditional universities. They highlight how online education reshapes power structures, influencing interactions and competition for control among various groups within the university. As online education introduces new methods of control and influence, it significantly influences the balance of power, ultimately affecting the roles of students, faculty, and administrators in the educational landscape.

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According to Foucault (1982) and Scott (2001), control is central to power, with outcomes ranging from dominance over others to autonomy. Often, individuals apply tools and methods of control so subtly embedded in regulations and practices, that they may not realise they are exercising power (Foucault, 1982; Scott, 2001). Applying Foucault's concept to higher education reveals a dynamic social structure where power continuously circulates. Professors, administrators, and students all pursue different objectives and strategies within this network, and although each employs specific methods, no individual or group maintains absolute control (Peach & Bieber, 2015).

In the context of online education, these dynamics may shift further. For example, the reliance on learning management systems (LMS) can empower administrators with data analytics capabilities that monitor student engagement which may create a sense of surveillance that alters the students' learning experience and their autonomy in the digital classroom.

2.5.3 Panopticon and Surveillance

Ovetz (2017) explores how online education and the use of adjunct faculty have transformed academic work in neoliberal higher education institutions. Using Foucault's concept of power as a structuring force, Ovetz analyses how institutions have reconfigured academic labour to achieve their objectives. He argues that online learning systems promote a form of self-discipline, where students work independently and monitor their own progress, often under the implicit gaze of online surveillance mechanisms. "By separating academic labour from the delivery of educational content while transforming learning into the self-disciplined completion of sequential tasks ... under the panoptic surveillance of online course management systems" (Ovetz, 2017, p. 48). This self-regulation occurs under the implicit gaze of online surveillance mechanisms, echoing Foucault's notion of the Panopticon, where individuals internalise monitoring, leading to changes in behaviour and identity within the educational setting.

This setup reflects Foucault's notion of the panopticon, a structure where individuals self-regulate under the awareness of potential observation. In online environments, students are aware that their actions may be monitored, fostering a constant sense of surveillance even without direct oversight. Ovetz (2017) compares the virtual classroom to a panopticon without walls

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where digital platforms enable continuous tracking, blurring the lines between self-regulation and institutional control.

Moreover, Ovetz (2017) notes that universities increasingly employ contract-based faculty, reducing their academic responsibilities to specific teaching tasks while minimising their compensation and protection. This shift parallels the panopticon's influence on labour; adjunct faculty and self-regulated students alike are subject to surveillance that controls behaviour and reinforces neoliberal ideals of efficiency and productivity (Ovetz, 2017).

In online course management systems, students and faculty may feel isolated, yet they remain part of a networked environment where their behaviours are recorded and evaluated, shaping both individual and collective actions. This "awareness of being monitored" (Ovetz, 2017, p. 64) transforms learning into task completion governed by disciplinary power.

2.5.4 Power dynamics in education using a top-down approach

Foucault (1980) argues that exploring power should involve examining everyday thoughts and actions and offers a comprehensive view from the grassroots. However, a top-down approach to power often disproportionately elevates dominant groups allowing them extensive influence over societal behaviour (Brookfield, 2001; Foucault, 1980). In the educational context, Brookfield (2001) found that while teachers often feel they control their classrooms, their autonomy is still shaped by overarching expectations. For instance, one participant stated, "Despite having to prepare students for exams based on the syllabus, they believed they controlled their teaching methods and classroom content" (Brookfield, 2001, p. 5). This dynamic illustrates the tension between perceived control and external constraints and accentuates the complexities of power relations in educational settings.

Teachers frequently view the classroom as their domain and believe they have substantial control over instructional methods and curriculum pace. While this perception can foster personalised and engaging instructional approaches, it may also limit the exploration of diverse perspectives or adaptive strategies for varied student needs (Brookfield, 2001). This sense of authority can reflect Foucault's (1980) top-down approach to power, illustrating how dominant structures

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shape behaviour and potentially reinforce traditional hierarchies. For instance, a teacher's commitment to a fixed syllabus might inhibit the integration of student-led discussions or innovative teaching methods that could enhance learning outcomes for all students.

This study seeks to understand how TVET students perceive their roles within these power dynamics in online learning, focusing on how these dynamics impact their identities. While Foucault's theory on power provides a valuable framework, it partially addresses the ways power circulates through social networks (Fenwick, 2001). It provides essential insights into power dynamics, identity development, and self-examination in education (Fenwick, 2001).

Additionally, this chapter explores the power structures in e-learning, drawing on Foucault's framework to examine the impact of online education on identities and power relations among students and educators. Studies by Clapp (2017), Peach and Bieber (2015), and Ovetz (2017) reveal new power distributions are shifting in digital education, with subtle forms of surveillance and control in online environments. These studies emphasise the importance of understanding power dynamics not only from a top-down perspective but also through grassroots interactions which reflects Foucault's broader understanding of how power circulates within social systems. This dual approach remains critical for analysing the complex forces shaping online education today.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review highlights the importance of understanding the complex interplay of identity formation and power dynamics among students and teachers in online education. Lowenthal and Dennen (2017) emphasise how tensions in these settings shape students' identities while Develotte (2009) highlights the impact of confidentiality, or lack thereof, in online forums. By examining e-learning's advantages and disadvantages, the formation of online identities, emotional dynamics, and the layered power structures at play, this study aims to deepen understanding of these critical issues. This review reveals a clear need for further research to inform best practices in online learning and enhance students' overall e-learning experiences.

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CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. The interpretive paradigm, which is consistent with the paradigmatic approach adopted in this study, considers reality to be created by individuals, drawing on personal and collective experiences, interpretations, and social backgrounds (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Higgs, Cherry, Macklin, & Ajjawi, 2010). This paradigm recognises that participants hold subjective meanings and perspectives, and rather than imposing rigid categories, the researcher aims to comprehend the differing and complex perspectives (Creswell, 2011).

3.2 Research Design

The research design of this study utilised a qualitative approach which afforded flexibility and focused on unstructured data to capture subjective experiences in detail through verbal data rather than statistical data (Cohen et al., 2018). This approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of meanings, attitudes, behaviours, and non-observable phenomena while providing participants with an opportunity to share their experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). The primary objective of this study was to investigate, observe, and describe how students constructed their online identities by examining their online learning experiences, perceptions, and interactions.

3.3 Research Methods and Data Gathering Instruments

This study conducted online semi-structured interviews at a TVET college in South Africa. Online interviews had certain advantages, including the ability to obtain valuable information when direct observation was not possible, allowing participants to provide detailed personal information, and giving the interviewer more control over the data received (Creswell, 2011). The TVET college head gave permission for the college to be used as the research site after the study was approved by the University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) (see Appendix H). The permission allowed the

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researcher to collect data, which initially aimed to interview 8 students and 2 lecturers. Despite collecting data from two lecturers, only four students participated.

The semi-structured interview questions posed to lecturers and students had been organised around themes which can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively. The length of the interview times ranged between 30 and 50 minutes.

The semi-structured interviews allowed for the emergence of new themes during the interviews (Creswell, 2011). Themes discussed were participants' experiences with online learning, comparisons between online and face-to-face learning, barriers and challenges encountered, and coping mechanisms. Additional themes included socio-emotional connections during the use of online platforms and how attitudes towards other students and the platform had impacted learning and performance. Participants' perceptions of agency in teaching and learning were examined and how these perceptions influenced power and identity formation.

The researcher recognised that bias and his presence could influence interview data and potentially influence participants' responses (Creswell, 2011). To minimise these issues, open-ended questions were used to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, exploratory interviews were heuristic and allowed participants to express their thoughts freely with candour, richness, depth, authenticity, and honesty (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.4 Sampling and Targeted Respondents

This study employed purposive sampling. This form of sampling involved "selecting units, such as individuals, organisations, papers, or departments, directly based on the research questions" (Bryman, 2012, p. 416). The study focused on investigating how the transition to online learning and teaching had influenced the identities of students and lecturers in the context of TVET education. Consequently, the participants interviewed in this study had engaged in both face-to-face and online learning and teaching with a specific focus on how their new identities had resulted in shifts in their power relations. Research questions guided the identification and selection of specific categories of individuals or units of analysis that were the primary focus of attention and included in the sampling process (Bryman, 2012). The interview questions in this

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study were guided by the themes derived from the literature review which included the conceptions of e-learning, their exploration of the potential of digital technologies in e-learning, the formation of online identities and their impact on learning, their emotional states, and the power relations within the online learning context.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were collected using semi-structured online interviews and were recorded through the Google Meet platform. The recorded data were first transcribed to assist with the analysis. This next section discusses the process that was employed during the data analysis.

After the transcriptions of the data, it was coded manually using a line-by-line or phrase-by-phrase process, known as open coding, which was then used to find major themes or sub-themes using abstract codes (Cohen et al., 2018). The data analysis, using the open coding process resulted in four major themes. These include conceptions of e-learning, autonomy and challenges in e-learning, identity formation in e-learning, and power dynamics in e-learning. Although computer technology made it possible to analyse qualitative data, it was not used in this study due to the small sample size.

The data were examined to identify any apparent flaws as interviews were audio-recorded and then subsequently transcribed (Bryman, 2012). To assist with the transcription process, an application known as *Transkriptor* was downloaded onto a cell phone and laptop, which was used for the transcription of all the recorded audio. While using the transcription, the researcher needed to be alert to possible listening mistakes that might have affected the meaning of people's replies which would have meant that the raw data were managed (Bryman, 2012). When researchers 'manage' the data, the analysis is not unidirectional. Cohen et al. (2018) stated that "the process of data analysis was recursive, non-linear, messy, and reflexive, moving backwards and forwards between data, analysis, and interpretation" (p. 644). Furthermore, it was necessary that researchers checked for bias based on their "own biography, values, knowledge, assumptions, and experiences shape or inform the data analysis, i.e., reflexivity" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 645). After preparing, organising, and interpreting the data, the researcher has to ensure accuracy, trustworthiness, coherence, corroboration, and credibility in the qualitative data analysis (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2012).

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3.6 Ethical Considerations

The interviews were conducted with four students who were currently enrolled in a TVET college situated in Cape Town. Ethics clearance was received from the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) on the 14th February 2024, as shown in Appendix H. Interviews were also conducted with two lecturers working at the same TVET college. To conduct the study, the principal's prior permission was sought, and students were invited to participate in the study. It was communicated to the participants that they had the right to refuse to participate. Before commencing with interviews, informed consent was obtained from the participants, and the purpose of the study was explained to them. The confidentiality of both the participants and the institution was maintained, and pseudonyms were used for all participants. Participants were informed that the study was solely for academic purposes and their interviews would be used only for the research report and subsequent publication. The participants were assured that their data would be securely stored on a password-protected electronic device that would only be accessible to the researcher and would be discarded after five years. Lecturers and students read these information sheets, as shown in Appendices E and D, before giving their consent and participating in interviews. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the interviews at any time if they wished, and there would not be any consequences. As shown in Appendices G and F, respectively, the lecturers and students had to sign a consent form to attest to their knowledge of the study.

To ensure participants felt at ease and comfortable participating in the study, it was crucial to explicitly state the aim of the research when requesting their consent (Cohen et al., 2018). A description of the research was given to students and lecturers when a request was sent to participants. Asking for consent without providing context could be a daunting prospect for participants, as they may not fully understand the purpose and objectives of the study (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.7 Limitations of the Study

Although the study examined the experiences of students at a TVET college in the Western Cape of South Africa, conducting research from outside the country may have required assistance in

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data collection. However, relying on electronic communication methods such as email, social media or other online platforms could have posed a challenge for participants who had limited access to devices and WIFI, possibly impeding their ability to participate in the interviews. The study focused on a specific context, which was TVET colleges in Cape Town, and may not have been representative of other educational settings or regions. The findings may have had limited generalisability to broader populations.

Since a qualitative research approach and semi-structured interviews were used, there was a possibility of subjective interpretation and bias in data collection and analysis as the researcher's perspectives and assumptions may have influenced the findings.

3.8 Assumptions

The assumption was made that students reflected on their power and agency in the context of online learning as well as on the broader institutional and hierarchical context (Cohen et al., 2018). The experiences of current TVET college students and lecturers were unique and included face-to-face, blended, and online learning which they did not necessarily choose. These institutions faced challenges reflective of those experienced by communities in South Africa, such as load-shedding, which could negatively affect students' learning and over which they had no control. These factors, combined with the socio-economic status of most TVET college students across South Africa, might have resulted in students feeling powerless and facing significant challenges. Although this was a small-scale study, the data collected provided valuable insights into cultural, societal, evaluative, and ideological perspectives. However, qualitative data should not be accepted at face value as they often contain implicit assumptions (Cohen et al., 2018). To uncover the underlying messages, Denscombe (as cited in Cohen et al., 2018) recommended deconstructing qualitative data.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research methodology which embraced a qualitative approach to explore how students constructed online identities. Utilising interpretive paradigms, the study employed online interviews, purposive sampling, and manual coding for data analysis. The study prioritised ethical considerations and acknowledged limitations and underlying assumptions. The

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chapter gave a complete outline of the study's methodology and explained its ethical basis and nuances.

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CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

My study investigated the experiences of lecturers and students and presents an analysis of the data gathered on the impact that the shift from face-to-face to online learning has on identity formation in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. The work was guided by a Foucauldian lens and critically explored the power relations in online teaching and learning environments. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 2 lecturers and 8 students.

For my analysis, I discuss the data under five major themes deducted from the interview questions. The analysis focuses on themes that include conceptions of e-learning, digital technologies, identity formation and its impact on e-learning, emotional states, and power dynamics in e-learning. Within these major themes, I coded the data manually using a line-by-line or phrase-by-phrase process, known as open coding, which was used to find other major themes or sub-themes using abstract codes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

This chapter provides insights into how the transition to online learning shaped students' identities, explores their negotiation and resistance to power dynamics, and sheds light on the relations between identity formation, power relations, and the digital landscape of TVET colleges. The study aimed to contribute perspectives to the broader discourse on student identity in the digital age and offers practical recommendations for creating inclusive and empowering online learning experiences.

4.2 Data Analysis of Interview Themes

4.2.1 Conceptions of e-learning

The exploration of e-learning conceptions within the context of TVET colleges unveils a tapestry of perspectives that collectively enriched my understanding of online education. As I delved into the diverse viewpoints presented by lecturers and students, I gained insights into the multifaceted nature of e-learning and its potential to transform the educational landscape. From practical strategies for effective course design to conceptualisations of e-learning as a technology-driven

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and interactive platform, each perspective offers unique contributions to the discourse. By examining these varied conceptions, I not only broadened my appreciation of e-learning but also uncovered opportunities for innovation and improvement within TVET institutions.

All interviewed participants expressed various views on what was important when it came to conceptions of e-learning. Lecturers conceived e-learning as a technology-based education as well as a form of learning: "*E-learning is a technology-based education where learning could be made interactive and fun through games. E-learning could also be seen as a form of blended learning*" (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024).

Consistent with this conception, students defined e-learning as a computer-based education system which is network enabled. A student stated: "*What I know about e-learning is* [it is] *a computer-based education system or a tool, and then it is also about the network-enabled which transfers skills and knowledge through that e-learning* (Student 1, Interviewed, 23 March 2024).

Students discussed how there has been a shift in the way learning resources are retrieved. One student stated:

> *I mean, I haven't gone to a library since 2020. I've never gone to a library. I've never entered the library because the library is on my laptop, you know, the library is on my schemes of work in the online learning that I'm doing* (Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024).

While the above student viewed e-learning as being enabled through the availability of information which can be accessed through computers and/or computer networks, her/his use of e-learning also signalled a sense of self-empowerment as the student decided on what and when to access information for learning purposes.

While not contradicting these conceptions, another student described e-learning as an individual interaction focused on engaging with a computer to facilitate learning. The student explained this process as "*You and the computer trying to figure out how to do things on your own and trying to get assistance from Google"* (Student 2, Interviewed, 4 April 2024).

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The conceptions of e-learning held by participants in this study is consistent with Andrews and Haythornthwaite's (2007) conception as the authors define e-learning as an electronic process, commonly associated with computer-based learning. They claim that e-learning requires "computer equipment and software, as well as networking infrastructures, to be able to share data, information, and knowledge with people at different times and places" (Andrews & Haythornthwaite, 2007, p. 6).

Indeed, e-learning includes computers and software, but it is also important to recognise what students go through when "learning in collaboration takes place" (Czerniewicz, Ravjee, & Mlitwa (2006, p. 18). Czerniewicz et al. (2006) found that most e-learning is associated with networked computers rather than stand-alone computing systems. They accordingly emphasise that e-learning usually means using the internet and email rather than just using tools like PowerPoint presentations or tutorials on individual computers (Czerniewicz et al., 2006).

TVET college e-learning concepts demonstrate the complexity and diversity of online education viewpoints. Each perspective contributes to our understanding of digital learning from course design tactics to e-learning as a dynamic and interactive platform.

4.2.2 Digital applications/platforms used for e-learning

Digital technology has significantly enhanced the integration of autonomy in e-learning within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. TVET college students use "*Google Meet, YouTube, Zoom"* (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024) and "*WhatsApp*" (Student 2, Interviewed, 4 April 2024) as digital learning tools, applications, and/or platforms to access and interact with fellow students. Students are increasingly using these applications to take charge of their learning, participating in interactive and independent activities that develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. While students perceive an increase in their autonomy, they occasionally perceive a lack of support.

In line with students' needs was the ability to organise meetings on the college's platform which provided students with a convenient and efficient way to collaborate, share ideas, and support one another's learning. Student 3 stressed the value of collaborative interaction among students by stating that the institutional platform allowed them to independently and autonomously

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"*organise a meeting between each other* [students]" for learning purposes (Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024). This demonstrated how online platforms can create an environment that promotes independence, learning from others, and active involvement.

It also suggests that the online learning environment encourages students to take personal and collaborative initiatives as students may feel a greater sense of self-reliance and responsibility. Students often have to navigate the course materials and assignments independently as the online learning space may not support immediate feedback from a tutor or learning facilitator. This requirement to take initiative for personal learning is also highlighted by Student 1: "*Sometimes no one is supporting me online. I must be myself. I must be responsible for everything when I'm online"* (Student 1, Interviewed, 23 March 2024).

The above finding is consistent with Chametzky's (2015) suggestion that in online settings, students must assume more responsibility for their learning, which can foster a greater sense of self-reliance but may also lead to feelings of isolation or lack of support.

Despite facing challenges, a topic we will be returning to in this chapter, this study has confirmed that students take initiative by joining WhatsApp groups to seek information on the Web and other digital platforms to promote personal and peer learning. This positive perspective on e-learning concurs with the literature that discusses the benefits of collaborative platforms for fostering communication and interaction among students (McConnell & Zhou, 2006). These platforms offer students an expedient and resourceful way to collaborate, share ideas, and support each other's learning and thus enhance their overall educational experience (McConnell & Zhou, 2006). Moreover, the literature underscores the importance of technology in cultivating a sense of community and collaboration in online learning environments and underlines how these platforms enable meaningful peer-to-peer interactions and contribute to the development of a supportive learning community (McConnell & Zhou, 2006).

Further analysis of the students' comments above revealed that, for example, Student 3 could independently and autonomously "organise a meeting between each other [students]" for learning purposes. This indicated that students felt empowered in online settings and were not reliant on the college to organise them into groups. The demonstrated initiative supports Foucault's (1980) assertion that "the exercise of power extends beyond the state and operates

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through various channels, as individuals possess their own sources of power and can transmit it to others" (p. 72). Foucault's statement demonstrates that society and individuals exercise power in a variety of ways and not just within formal institutions.

4.2.3 Challenges of online learning

In face-to-face learning, students identify themselves as capable learners who can resolve challenges with the help of peers or lecturers. However, in the online environment, the shift to a more isolated mode of learning introduces a change in their perceived identity. Students experience a shift from being active problem solvers to feeling de-skilled when they cannot resolve technical problems unaided. This change in their competence-based identity signals an identity shift as they transition to online learning. The challenge of a lack of technical support and working on their own is highlighted by Student 2:

> *If you have a task that you need to do but you can't figure it out on the laptop or on whatever device you're using, it becomes a bit challenging because you don't have a person where you can quickly run to for help* (Student 2, Interviewed, 4 April 2024).

The sense of disempowerment that students experience when they face technical challenges in isolation reflects an imbalance in power relations. In face-to-face settings, students share power with lecturers and peers where learning and problem solving are collaborative. In contrast, in online settings, the inability to access timely technical support creates a feeling of dependence on external systems, leaving students feeling powerless. This lack of control over their learning environment disrupts the balance of power as students become reliant on others (technical support teams or instructors) to restore their autonomy.

Another problem for students was that the response time to their online inquiries was at times unacceptable. This has negative implications for student personal learning as it "*implies that students may worry*" or be unsure whether they interpreted the course materials correctly when "*tutors*" and "*administrators*" were slow to provide feedback to students' queries (Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024).

Self-reliance and independence are important features of a student's online identity. When students do not get swift responses to their questions, they may lose confidence in their ability to

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understand course material and it can generate self-doubt and uncertainty. This can prompt a change in character from a self-assured and independent student to someone who is more passive and doubtful as they feel less confident in their learning abilities.

A delay in feedback increases anxiety and uncertainty among students who may already be uncertain about whether they interpreted the teaching materials appropriately. This emotional reaction demonstrates how the imbalance of power in the online world can make students feel less confident and inept, prompting them to experience more anxiety and stress. Students depend on timely feedback to reassure them that they understand the work

Contrary to some students, others indicated that initial fears turned into confidence and a readiness to engage in more online courses which suggested a favourable adaptation to online learning's obstacles and opportunities. A student stated: "*I was so scared when I first started, but I'm getting calmer. And I remember I told someone that once I finished the course I'm [currently] doing, I wanted to register [for] something else that's online"* (Student 2, Interviewed, 4 April 2024).

This finding reveals an identity shift among college students in online learning. Student 2 initially expressed fear when starting online courses but gradually gained confidence and a desire to enrol in more online courses, thus, reflecting a transformation from disempowerment to empowerment. This progression illustrates a shift in identity from vulnerability to autonomy as students adapt to the challenges and opportunities of online learning. The experience aligns with Foucault's (1977) theory of subjectivity, where students, initially reliant on external structures (like tutors and technology), begin to reclaim their agency and reshape their identities in the digital space. The shift also accentuates changing power relations in online learning with students moving from a position of dependence to one of greater self-efficacy and control over their learning experiences.

Students may perceive online experiences as illogical which may lead to a lack of confidence (Develotte, 2009). Develotte (2009) recounted a student's experience of feeling overwhelmed by unpredictable and fluctuating information and powerless over the situation. Infrastructure-related issues, such as the digital divide and cable damage that results in interrupted Internet connections, are significant in influencing the emotional states of students (Develotte, 2009;

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Kibuku, Ochieng & Wausi, 2020). Challenges such as load shedding often interrupt online learning and teaching in South Africa (Neilson, 2017). However, despite problems due to infrastructure or the institution, Student 2 initially stated: "*I was so scared when I first started …*" but eventually became more at ease and expressed a willingness to take additional online courses (Student 2, Interviewed, 4 April 2024). This shift in Student 2 suggests that, while technical and infrastructure barriers may affect students' emotional states and confidence, some students adapt and overcome these hurdles and reshape their identity in the process.

According to Khan, Ali and Alhourani (2022), student-centred techniques and increased student engagement are two factors that promote autonomy. Lecturer 2 mentioned that his activities involved creating '*breakout rooms*' for students to engage in group work and monitor their progress (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024). While some students experienced a sense of increased responsibility with e-learning, they also felt isolated when faced with technical difficulties. This contradicts the claims made in the literature that students, also referred to as 'prosumers', are digital natives skilled at using apps that facilitate rapid and simple communication (Mpungose, 2020). The findings of this study suggest that Students 2 and 3 struggled with learning platforms, felt disconnected, and required additional support to navigate technical issues and complete assignments (Student 2, Interviewed, 4 April 2024; Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024).

This investigation on power relations is consistent with Foucault's (1977) theory of subjectivation. The findings of this research align with Foucault's concept of power-shaping subjectivities in instances where the institutional power of tutors and administrators influence students' identities. Tutors' delayed responses subject students to the individualising effects of power, limiting their autonomy and making them feel like passive participants in the learning process. The teaching styles that promote independence concur with Foucault's (1977) view that power relations in educational settings shape students' identities and their ability to function autonomously.

4.2.4 Online identity formation and its impact on learning

In TVET colleges, exploring online identity creation and learning reveals a complex interaction of individual traits, cultural factors, and platform dynamics. In this setting, educators underline

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recognising individual learning styles and preferences and advocate for personalised education. Cultural and gender conventions also affect classroom dynamics and participation in online education. Some students prefer active interaction while others prefer online anonymity and inclusivity. This discourse highlights the complex relationship between online identity creation, personality attributes, and educational outcomes, emphasising the necessity for inclusive and nuanced online learning settings.

Lecturers further acknowledged that students bring individual features, preferences, and predispositions to the learning environment by emphasising how attitudes and motivation affect learning. Lecturer 1 noted how personality indirectly impacted learning through attitudes and motivation and stated: "*Personality has an indirect impact on learning through attitudes and motivation, resulting in distinct learning ideas, investments, and favoured approaches"* (Lecturer 1, Interviewed, 8 April 2024).

This view reflects how students' identity traits, such as motivation, attitudes toward learning, and investment in these traits, shape their learning experience. The lecturer's view further suggests that students' learning identities are dynamic, shaped by their engagement with the material, their preferred learning styles, and their adaptation to the online environment. These identity shifts may be due to the new ways in which students interact with the content and instructors which lead to a transformation in how they see themselves as learners.

A further examination of attitudes indicated how various classmates felt being on the webcam during online classes. Some students were found to be talkative in nature and some loved conversations which are examples of how personal traits can give students the confidence to be involved in online learning and which can change their learning identity. On the other hand, some students were shyer or introverted and found it harder to present themselves online. This was seen with Student 1 who stated: "*I am talkative and enjoy engaging in discussions, and I'm not afraid to express thoughts and opinions during online interactions*" (Student 1, Interviewed, 23 March 2024).

Such a statement highlights the varying power dynamics at play in the online classroom, where students like Student 1 feel more empowered to voice their thoughts, potentially shifting traditional hierarchies of classroom participation.

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Student 1's experiences, where she enjoyed being visible on webcam and actively participated in online debates, demonstrated how certain students' personalities and ease with online tools can empower them. This engagement may reinforce their identity as active learners who feel confident in navigating online platforms. However, students who feel uncomfortable with being on camera or participating may experience feelings disempowerment. This illustrates the power imbalances within the online learning context based on personal preferences and identities. In contrast to Student 1, who seemed sure of herself, Student 4 was nervous and said: "*I'm a very anxious person and I don't necessarily put my hand up or participate in class because I'm nervous or I'm shy*" (Interviewed, Student 4, 21 April 2024).

The online learning environment enabled Student 4 to significantly alter their learning style. In traditional face-to-face classes, Student 4's anxiety and shyness made them unable to fully join because they do not feel comfortable doing so. But online learning is different because the student can be anonymous and feel less social pressure, which lets them participate more easily. This change shows how the online setting can change a student's personality, turning them from a shy and nervous learner into one who feels empowered to participate in ways that are comfortable for them.

Student 4 talked about how feeling anonymous changed the balance of power in the classroom. Students who are anxious or shy may feel left out or less powerful in traditional situations because they cannot participate as much. Online learning, with its text-based interactions and low visibility, can foster more open involvement by enabling students to communicate without fear of judgment. With this change in power, students, who used to feel like they did not have much say in face-to-face classes, might find an impartial place online where they can share their thoughts without feeling as awkward.

Conversations with lecturers and students then shifted to topics of religion, culture, and gender within a teaching and learning environment. Lecturer 2's observation about religious and gender-based educational settings illustrated how cultural and religious identities can significantly shape learning experiences. Lecturer 2 said: "*Christian based schools where you have girls separately, and, you know, when you go to the Islamic culture as well, you know, you have the boys separated from the girls*" (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024).

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In traditional settings cultural and religious norms may segregate students based on gender or other criteria which can have an influence on their learning dynamics. However, online learning can mitigate some of these limitations by providing a more neutral platform where such distinctions are less visible and potentially reduce cultural and religious barriers to engagement.

Building on this, Student 3's experience highlighted how cultural identity continued to influence perceptions and interactions even in online environments. Student 3 pointed out that: "*You know, like for us Zulus, we don't question authority, but for certain races like and coloureds and white people, they will point out the errors*" (Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024).

Student 3 continued to describe his experience as a "*culture shock*" caused by the different ways other races or cultures responded to an authority figure (Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024). This demonstrated how cultural backgrounds continue to affect what students expect and how they act. When students transition from a traditional culture, where questioning authority is less common, to an online culture that supports direct feedback, they undergo a significant identity shift as they get used to the new ways of learning. Both the lecturer's and the student's points of view showed how complicated it is for ethnic identity to affect how people learn in traditional and online settings.

The relationship between personality traits and learning environments plays a crucial role in shaping students' self-perception and engagement in educational settings. For example, as students discover their preferred learning approaches and adapt to new educational environments, they may develop a stronger sense of self-awareness and confidence in their abilities. Student 4's anxiety in face-to-face learning demonstrated how their participation and sense of identity was affected in an online learning environment. However, there was a shift in Student 4's anxiety as they became more confident as teaching and learning changed from a traditional class to an online setting. Divaris et al. (2008) share this view and offer that providing students with a variety of ways to achieve their educational goals empowers them to take control of their learning which is a crucial skill for lifelong learning.

Foucault's (1980) idea of power is well aligned with the discussion about personality traits and learning environments, both of which stress the transformative potential of online learning environments. Foucault (1980) asserted that "power doesn't stop people from learning; instead, it

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actively creates knowledge" (p. 59). In Foucault's view, power doesn't simply restrict but actively contributes to the creation of knowledge, mirroring the way online learning shifts the traditional power dynamics. For Student 4, the online setting allowed a shift from anxiety to confidence, a change that reflects how new learning environments can alter personal identity and engagement. This concurs with Foucault's notion that power in learning environments, such as the flexibility and autonomy in online platforms, creates new opportunities for identity development and self-awareness.

LeCourt (2004) asserts that culture shapes identity with past experiences further supporting this perspective. The following discussion emphasises how online learning enables students to navigate and renegotiate their identities influenced by the cultural, religious, or personal power structures in place. While Student 3 experienced a 'culture shock' when confronted with more direct forms of questioning from other races, it also opened a new pathway for identity negotiation. In contrast to this view, Foucault (1971) pointed out that we are all part of the rules and, while discourse may occasionally wield power, it did so solely through our own actions. This underscores that while discourse shapes our realities and actions, it cannot influence or dominate us without our acceptance and reinforcement.

Delahunty et al. (2014) observe that interaction can strengthen classroom relationships and provide students with a sense of meeting their educational needs. Interaction can also be useful for encouraging students who may not feel comfortable with online learning as a medium (Delahunty et al., 2014). For instance, shy or English second-language students may feel hesitant to contribute due to perceived language limitations a reluctance that many students, regardless of their language background, can relate to (Delahunty et al., 2014).

Students shared their perspectives with some expressing their satisfaction with the active involvement made possible by webcams, while others voiced their appreciation for the anonymity and inclusiveness offered by online platforms. Personality traits such as vanity, low self-esteem, and privacy concerns shape online identity (Papaioannou et al., 2021). Compared to introverted students who did not engage on platforms as much, students with a more extroverted personality seemed to interact more online and expressed a preference for being visible through webcams. Cultural differences and personality features influence engagement levels, with some

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individuals finding online connections more convenient than face-to-face settings. In general, the conversation revealed the intricate relationship that exists between the construction of an online identity, personality characteristics, and educational experiences.

Participants imparted that the majority of online interactions were positive and that classmates were supportive of one another. There are more ways to think about identity in an online class than just being a student or a teacher. This level of complexity comes from "online interactions, where people present different versions of themselves" (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017, p. 138). This reveals how online learning environments foster diverse expressions of identity, creating spaces for more dynamic and multifaceted interactions.

4.2.5 Power dynamics in e-learning

The exploration of power dynamics in e-learning in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges displays the different perspectives and experiences from both educators and students. The analysis looked at the multifaceted nature of authority, autonomy, and control within online educational settings and shed light on the nuanced interactions between instructors and learners. The discourse on power dynamics in e-learning extends beyond the virtual realm, touching on broader societal constructs and relational dynamics. I will examine the analysis of power relations through the perspective of Foucault and expound on the intersections of authority, control, and agency within educational contexts. By capturing the voices and perspectives of the participants, I have a better understanding of power dynamics in TVET college environments. A lecturer claimed: "*The balance of power in the classroom has a substantial impact on the interaction between instructors and students since they comprise a teacher's power, influence, and control over their pupils*" (Lecturer 1, Interviewed, 8 April 2024).

However, the nature of digital interactions often alters the traditional power dynamics between instructors and students in an online context. Unlike face-to-face settings, where physical presence and direct supervision can reinforce authority, online learning environments tend to offer more anonymity and flexibility. This shift can democratise interactions, allowing students to engage more freely and potentially reduce the instructor's perceived authority and control over the learning process. Lecturer 1 demonstrated this flexibility in an online setting: "*With online*

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learning, learner autonomy enables students to customise the learning method, self-evaluation techniques, scheduling, and progress monitoring, therefore improving every aspect of their education" (Lecturer 1, Interviewed, 23 March 2024).

Lecturer 2's self-identification as a "strict authority" due to personal preferences for punctuality gives prominence to how an instructor's own values and personality shape their approach to teaching and authority. Lecturer 2 stated: "*I am quite a very strict authority when it comes to punctuality because I myself love to be led for most things in my life*" (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024).

This view is important to understand power relations as it reflects how personal identity influences expectations and control within the learning environment. The shift from face-to-face to online learning could challenge or reinforce these authoritative dynamics. Students may perceive the lecturer's personal standards for punctuality and authority differently in online settings, where physical presence and immediate supervision are absent. This scenario provides an opportunity to explore how the lecturer's identity and authority adapts to or conflicts with the online learning environment and how students respond to these shifts.

In contrast to this view, Lecturer 2 spoke more broadly about the teaching approach and the effects mentioning that: "*The conventional teacher is authoritarian and imposes rules, but the contemporary teacher is sympathetic and promotes proactive decision-making*" (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024).

This lecturer's perspective highlights how changes in teaching styles and authority impact on power relations and identity in learning environments providing context for how these dynamics may evolve from traditional to online settings. The lecturer also noted that various teaching styles or approaches can have different outcomes by stating: "*Both techniques are influenced by the book approach, which helps pupils grasp the benefits and drawbacks of each activity*" (Lecturer 1, Interviewed, 8 April 2024).

The literature supports these findings, particularly in terms of how different teaching styles affect power relations and student identity in learning environments. Foucault's (1980) concept of power as something that can be imposed 'top-down' corresponds with Lecturer 2's observations

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about the authoritarian nature of conventional teaching, which involves rule imposition and control over the learning environment. This highlights the way power dynamics can shape classroom interactions and student experiences and mirrors Foucault's idea of power-controlling behaviour.

These shifts in teaching styles emulate the changes students experience in online learning where greater accountability and self-reliance are emphasised. Student 3 highlighted: "*You can't be relaxed. The onus is on you to make yourself as competent as you can*" (Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024). However, not all students experience online learning in the same way. Student 2 observed that online learning can offer a more relaxed environment: "*You can be more relaxed online. You are more relaxed than in a classroom setting because you know of ways how to calm yourself down, if you are overwhelmed, if you are overworked*" (Student 2, Interviewed, 4 April 2024).

This contrast illustrates how online learning creates varied experiences for students with some feeling the pressure of increased accountability, while others find comfort in the ability to manage their stress and emotional well-being more effectively. Furthermore, Student 4 emphasised that the flexibility of online learning enables a more comfortable pace: "*Because you're in your own space, your own time. So, it is a bit more relaxed than having to rush for a lecture*" (Student 4, Interviewed, 21 April 2024).

This further shows the diverse ways students experience online learning. While some feel the pressure of increased accountability, others appreciate the autonomy and relaxed environment that allow them to manage their time and stress more effectively. Thus, the experience of power in online learning is multifaceted, offering freedom to some while imposing the need for self-discipline on others. This validates how power relations in online learning environments contribute to identity shifts and shape student experiences in different ways.

The findings also reveal that the shift to online learning introduces a significant change in power dynamics between students and lecturers. Traditional classroom hierarchies, where teachers maintain more direct control and oversight, are being challenged. This is shown when Student 1 says: "*In face-to-face, yes, there is support which I get because the tutor is there. However, in*

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online classes, students must take more responsibility for their own learning, as there is less direct oversight from the teacher" (Student 1, Interviewed, 23 March 2024).

This illustrates that online environments demand greater accountability from students, requiring them to take more responsibility for their own learning. The shift often leads to students feeling more autonomous but also highlights the need for self-discipline and self-motivation.

Due to its flexibility, online learning lets some students relax at their own pace and place. However, this increased freedom comes with the challenge of balancing independence with the need to stay engaged and proactive. The role of the teacher, while less physically present, still plays a crucial part, as appropriate support and clear rules remain essential for maintaining structure and prevents disorder in virtual interactions.

Building on these insights, the shift in power dynamics also affects classroom management in online learning environments. Students observed that the lecturer's authority in an online setting becomes less about asserting dominance and more about facilitating learning. This was evident when Student 3 said: "*You can get a sense that she didn't get any point where she needs to show authority, you know, to show authority because [she] already has the respect and the attention is already there*" (Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024). This shift suggests a transformation in the traditional power hierarchy; while the teacher still holds control during structured moments (like webinars), they rely less on overt displays of authority.

The recognition of the benefits of learner autonomy concurs with contemporary educational theories that prioritise student-centred approaches and personalised learning experiences (Brookfield, 2001; Peach & Bieber, 2015). Furthermore, advocacy for autonomy resonates with discussions on power dynamics in education, as it challenges traditional notions of authority and control by granting students greater agency in their educational journey (Foucault, 1982; Scott, 2001). This contradicts earlier views by Foucault (1977) who argued that controls and normalisation of people can lead to individuals becoming docile after they enter the disciplinary system (Sheridan, 2016). Such systems distribute power relations throughout institutions by shaping behaviour and maintaining order (Sheridan, 2016).

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Foucault's (1977) notion that power relations "produce truths and knowledge" (as cited in McHoul & Grace, 2015, p. 59) supports the findings about how students experience shifts in identity and power in online learning. For instance, Student 3's experience of feeling relaxed in the online setting demonstrated how the less direct, more facilitative power dynamic in online environments reshaped their sense of agency. Similarly, Student 2 stated that his online surroundings made him feel calmer (Student 2, Interview, April 4, 2024). This echoes Foucault's argument that power relations shape the 'truths' people live by where the truth for Student 3 becomes one of autonomy and comfort, allowing him to shape his own learning experience.

However, while some students thrive in the autonomy of online learning, others recognise its limitations and challenges. Student 4, for example, acknowledged the limitations of e-learning, particularly in managing workload and balancing studies with other obligations such as work (Student 4, Interviewed, 21 April 2024). Chametzky (2015) discusses how students in online settings often require empowerment and self-efficacy to increase confidence in completing tasks. Additionally, Chametzky (2015) accentuates that if students feel powerless, they may doubt their ability to succeed, potentially leading to higher chances of failure. In this context, Sheridan (2016) highlights Foucault's idea that creating an environment where individuals can engage more reflectively and consciously is crucial and suggests that empowering students in online settings is key to their success.

The need for empowerment in educational settings extends beyond online environments to face-to-face classrooms where lecturers wield significant influence over students' experiences. For example, Lecturer 2 placed emphasis on strict punctuality and authority in classroom management which reflected his personal preferences and expectations as an educator (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024). Lecturer 2 also aimed to instil discipline and responsibility among his students by implementing rules regarding punctuality, mirroring his own approach to leadership and organisation in his life. This underscored the lecturer's dedication to upholding order and cultivated a positive learning atmosphere that valued and respected punctuality. In addition, his practice of conducting check-ins at the beginning of class demonstrated a proactive approach to building rapport and addressed students' well-being, thereby promoting a supportive and inclusive classroom culture. This approach to classroom management parallels Foucault's (1977) broader discussions on power dynamics in educational settings where the lecturer's

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authority and the enforcement of rules shape students' realities, behaviours, and expectations, thus reinforcing the norms that govern the learning environment.

Student 1 stated that the lesson could not be interrupted if the student was absent (Student 1, Interviewed, 23 March 2024). This observation underlined a fundamental difference between online and traditional face-to-face learning environments regarding flexibility and continuity. In online learning, the absence of a student does not halt the lesson which highlights a more autonomous approach to education where individual responsibility is paramount. This contrasts with the traditional classroom setting in which the pace of instruction often adapts to the presence of students. It also highlights the shift in dynamics between student and teacher agency in online education with students assuming greater responsibility for their learning progress. This insight supports discussions on power dynamics in education where the structure of educational settings can significantly influence the distribution of control and responsibility between lecturers and students (Foucault, 1980; Peach & Bieber, 2015).

"Power is formidable, and this is evident as we progressively understand its capacity to generate impacts both in the realm of desires and in the realm of knowledge" (Foucault, 1980, p. 59). According to Foucault (1980), power does not prevent people from learning; instead, it actively creates knowledge. This perspective resonates with Student 3's observation about the evolving role of educators in online learning environments where establishing ground rules is essential to maintaining order and productivity. By setting these rules, educators exercise power in a way that not only maintains structure but also facilitates the learning process (Student 3, Interviewed, 11 April 2024). This resonates with Foucault's notion of power as a constructive force in knowledge generation.

Students perceived the need to set rules as essential due to the potential for out-of-control behaviour (Student 2, Interviewed, 4 April 2024). Similarly, a lecturer stated: "*I have to remove you from this classroom community for the moment because you are disrupting learning*" (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024). These responses stressed the need for explicit online classroom regulations. Students may become disruptive without physical supervision, but by setting rules educators can maintain order, foster courteous interactions, and reduce distractions from open, interconnected online platforms. This perspective concurs with Foucault's (1977)

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broader discourse on power relations in education, where rules and regulations are key to managing behaviour and sustaining authority. Foucault (1980) states further that power is essentially about “perpetual conflict and the use of various strategies to gain and maintain control” (p. 90). These insights show the significance of power dynamics in education, aligning with Foucault’s view of power as an ongoing struggle shaped by strategic interactions.

Lecturer 1 discussed the advantages of learner autonomy and how it provided students with the opportunity to tailor their educational experience according to their preferences (Lecturer 1, Interviewed, 8 April 2024). On the other hand, Lecturer 2 emphasised the importance of maintaining strict punctuality as a means of retaining power (Lecturer 2, Interviewed, 3 April 2024). Students discussed a wide range of themes during the discussion, such as the adaptability of online education, the various gender dynamics that were present in traditional classrooms, and the role that authority played in online interactions. Taking all into account, the discussion displayed comprehensive awareness of how power dynamics manifested itself in both traditional and online learning environments.

The exploration of power dynamics in e-learning, particularly within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, reveals a complex interplay of perspectives and experiences among educators and students. This analysis not only delves into the intricate nature of authority, autonomy, and control within online educational settings but also extends to broader societal constructs and relational dynamics. Drawing from educational theorists like Foucault and Brookfield, the discussion navigates the intricate landscape of power relations, emphasising the intersection of authority, control, and agency within educational contexts.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter focused on identifying the key findings of this investigation and the analysis of these findings.

By capturing participants’ voices and perspectives, I gained valuable insights into the power dynamics in TVET college environments and conclude with some key findings from the collected data. The key findings are as follows:

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- Students faced significant challenges with technical support in online learning environments contributing to feelings of disempowerment and frustration. The lack of immediate assistance disrupted their sense of autonomy, which could lead to self-doubt and anxiety about their learning progress.
- There was a notable shift in student identity as they transitioned to online learning. Initially, students may have felt overwhelmed and powerless, but some gradually developed confidence and a proactive attitude towards their online courses which reflected a transformation from dependence to empowerment.
- Students in online settings often felt isolated due to delays in feedback and support which contrasted with the more collaborative and supportive environment of face-to-face learning. This isolation forced students to become more self-reliant and assume greater responsibility for their own learning.
- Different stakeholders had diverse conceptions of e-learning. Lecturers viewed it as a technology-based and interactive form of education, while students saw it as a network-enabled tool that facilitated self-directed learning. These varied perspectives highlighted the complexity of defining and implementing effective e-learning strategies.
- Despite challenges, students utilised digital tools and platforms (e.g., Google Meet, WhatsApp) to enhance their learning experience. These tools supported collaboration, information sharing, and self-initiative and illustrated how technology could empower students to control their learning processes and foster a sense of community.

The chapter that follows summarises and concludes this investigation.

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CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary

This study explored the impact of online learning on the identities and power dynamics of students and lecturers within South African TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) colleges. Motivated by the growing use of online platforms and dissatisfaction with traditional classroom settings, the research examined how these shifts affected identity formation and power relations in digital learning spaces.

Drawing on Foucault's (1977) analysis of power, the study analysed how power functioned as both a repressive and a productive force shaping students' experiences in online environments. The study also examined how virtual interactions mirror societal power dynamics and shaped students' confidence and identity development.

The study traced South Africa's ICT policy development since 1995, highlighting the slow integration of technology into TVET colleges due to challenges like unequal access to technology and data costs. While the pandemic accelerated hybrid teaching approaches, infrastructure disparities continued to affect student engagement.

Key objectives of this investigation included exploring conceptions of e-learning, autonomy, identity formation, and power relations in online education. The findings show the importance of having an inclusive, learner-centered approach that accommodates diverse needs and foster student autonomy while addressing the ongoing challenges of support and the digital divide.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants involved in both online and face-to-face learning. Semi-structured interviews allowed for the emergence of themes, such as online learning experiences, comparisons with face-to-face learning, and the impact on power dynamics and identity formation. The open-ended questions were used to minimise bias and encourage authentic, in-depth responses. This approach led to a more comprehensive understanding of the

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participants' experiences and how online and face-to-face learning influenced power dynamics and identity formation in educational settings.

The study sample was initially planned to interview 8 students and 2 lecturers, but only 4 students participated due to high attrition rates. The cost of the data collection was low, and the main expense was the Transkriptor application which was used to transcribe the interviews. The findings show the importance of creating inclusive, learner-centred online environments that address diverse student and lecturer needs and experiences. Despite the challenges posed by data analysis, this research paves the way for further investigation into the changing role of technology in education and its effects on identity and power dynamics.

5.2 Key Findings

5.2.1 Conceptions of e-learning

In the examination of e-learning conceptions within TVET colleges, lecturers and students alike viewed e-learning as a technology-based and computer-enabled system which is vital in the transformation of traditional learning methods. Lecturers highlighted the interactive potential of e-learning, seeing it as a form of blended learning that integrates technology to enhance engagement. Students, on the other hand, emphasised the shift in resource accessibility, noting that libraries had become virtual spaces accessible via laptops and online platforms.

Furthermore, some students perceived e-learning as a solitary interaction with computers, relying on network-enabled tools like Google for assistance. These conceptions align with the literature which defines e-learning as inherently tied to computer technology and network infrastructures, facilitating the sharing of knowledge across time and space as revealed by Czerniewicz et al. (2006). The diverse viewpoints from TVET college lecturers and students reflected the complexity of e-learning, highlighting its role as both a dynamic educational platform and a critical component of modern learning environments.

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5.2.2 Challenges in e-learning

The challenges in e-learning in TVET colleges involve a complicated interaction between autonomy, assistance, and the utilisation of digital platforms. The study shows that incorporation of platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and WhatsApp give students more authority over their education which promotes the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. However, these platforms have also introduced significant challenges. Students said that they frequently needed more assistance, especially when dealing with technical challenges or the lack of prompt instructor feedback. Students shared that they completed assignments independently without the immediate face-to-face support from teachers which contributed to feelings of isolation.

Despite these difficulties, certain students demonstrated an impressive ability to adjust to online learning and cultivated self-assurance and a preparedness for upcoming courses. This contradiction between feeling isolated and self-assured showed the need for a balanced strategy that guaranteed the availability of support systems to promote student autonomy. The findings are consistent with existing literature debates which highlight the significance of cultivating a supportive online learning community and the role of technology in improving both collaboration and independence (Hendricks, 2012; McGrath et al., 2018). The students' experiences in a TVET college illustrated the constraints of the existing technology infrastructure and emphasised the importance of more substantial support networks to reduce feelings of isolation and technical frustration.

5.2.3 Online identity formation and its impact on learning

The exploration of online identity formation within a TVET college revealed a complex interplay of individual traits, cultural factors, and platform dynamics that significantly impacted learning experiences. The findings showed that personality attributes, cultural norms, and preferences for anonymity or interaction influenced the online identity shift.

Lecturers noted the importance of acknowledging individual learning styles and preferences to personalise education effectively while also recognising how cultural and gender conventions shaped online classroom dynamics. For example, the study showed that some students thrive on

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the active engagement afforded by webcams, expressing enjoyment in visible participation, whereas others preferred the anonymity and inclusivity of online platforms, which could reduce gender biases and foster polite interactions. Students' varied responses highlighted the role of cultural backgrounds and personal characteristics in shaping online learning experiences. For example, cultural norms around authority and questioning differed, and influenced students' ease and engagement in online settings. Furthermore, generational differences in technological familiarity affected how students interacted with online learning platforms, with newer graduates often showing greater ease with digital tools compared to their older counterparts.

LeCourt (2004) and Papaioannou et al. (2021) have highlighted that self-perception, social interactions, and the unique dynamics of digital platforms have shaped the multifaceted process of online identity formation. The study's findings support the idea that various external and internal influences continuously shape identity in online spaces. Understanding how students perceive themselves within educational contexts is crucial due to the dynamic nature of online identity. The insight that students have often felt hesitant or reserved when participating in online forums is presented by (Develotte, 2009) which has reinforced the importance of recognising the tension between identity presentation and the fear of judgement in online communication. This hesitancy can lead to a limited exploration of thoughts and perspectives, potentially impacting on students' agency and power within the online learning environment (Develotte, 2009). Consequently, the findings showed the need for educators to create supportive online environments that lessen these fears and encouraged more open and authentic self-expression as suggested by Lowenthal and Dennen (2017).

5.2.4 Power dynamics in e-learning

The study of power dynamics in e-learning within TVET colleges revealed a range of opinions and experiences from the participants that were interviewed. The analysis explored the complex nature of authority, autonomy, and control within digital educational settings, shedding light on the interactions between facilitators and learners.

Lecturers shared opposing viewpoints on the topic of student autonomy. One perspective emphasised the value of learner autonomy and highlighted its potential to empower individuals to shape their educational experiences and foster critical thinking. This approach challenges

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conventional notions of authority by granting students greater agency in the learning process. However, another viewpoint stressed the importance of punctuality and adherence to rules as essential elements for maintaining order and discipline in educational environments, reflecting a more traditional approach to governance and regulation.

The study found that students experienced power dynamics in online learning differently. While some students felt the pressure of increased accountability and self-reliance, others appreciated the more relaxed environment that allowed them to manage their emotional well-being and time more effectively. This illustrated the multifaceted nature of power in online learning, offering both freedom and the challenge of self-discipline.

Other findings suggested that online learning tends to offer students more autonomy and flexibility, allowing them to customise their learning experiences. This democratisation of power could reduce the instructor's perceived authority while increasing students' responsibility for their learning process which emphasised that greater accountability was required in online environments.

This analysis, informed by educational theorists like Foucault (1977) and Brookfield (2001), explores the complex dynamics of power relations in educational settings, emphasising the connections among authority, control, and agency. The findings support Foucault's (1977) notion of subjectivation, where power dynamics influence identities and behaviours in educational contexts. Similarly, Clapp's (2017) analysis of how subject specialists adapt to online teaching underscores the role of these power relations, highlighting the importance of understanding the inherent dynamics during such transitions. The findings suggested that the success of online education depends not only on technology but also on the management of power relations by both instructors and students.

5.3 Implications for Further Research

While the research concerned itself with exploring how e-learning influences identity shifts and power relations among students in South African TVET institutions, there appears to be a gap in comparative studies on this topic. It would be interesting to pursue further research between

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different types of educational institutions, such as TVET colleges versus university lecturers and students, and their approaches to autonomy and governance in e-learning environments.

This study also focuses on some challenges faced by lecturers and their power struggles, but more research is needed in evaluating how lecturers use of technology affects their teaching approaches and student outcomes. It will be interesting to examine lecturers' embrace of technology attitudes and the balance between institutional norms and personal teaching practices in online learning.

5.4 Concluding Comments

E-learning is perceived differently by lecturers and students, highlighting both the potential and challenges associated with technology-enhanced education. Students and lecturers acknowledge the benefits of increased access to resources and flexible learning opportunities, yet they also express concerns about technical difficulties, isolation, and the need for more robust support systems.

Autonomy is identified as a critical factor in e-learning which gives students more control over their learning experiences. However, this autonomy also presents challenges related to technical support and feelings of isolation. Balancing independence with adequate guidance is essential for maximising the benefits of online education.

The study of online identity formation demonstrates how personal traits, cultural norms, and anonymity preferences shape students' interactions with digital platforms. This understanding calls for personalised and inclusive approaches to online education that accommodates diverse identities and learning styles.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions for Educators

1. Tell me about your experience teaching online.
2. What are some challenges you have encountered with e-learning?
3. What kind of tools did you use in e-learning?
4. What have you found useful challenging with the platform /s? (Technical functions to facilitate the teaching process).
5. Were there any emotional issues that your students went through with e-learning?
6. Do you think most students felt isolated or more connected with e-learning?
7. Do online classes change students' behaviour, and if so, how?
8. How did you create a supportive learning environment when teaching online?
9. Does culture, race, gender, affect how student's express themselves online.
10. How do you think online classes affect classroom management?
11. What strategies do (or did) you maintain a sense of authority and control in online classrooms?
12. How did class rules change with online classes (Late-coming or behaviour of students).
13. Have you encountered any challenges or conflicts with e-learning? (e.g. attitudes from students).
14. How did your teaching style change with online lessons?
15. How effective are assessments when conducted online?

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Appendix B: Interview Questions for Students

1. Tell me about your experience with online learning.
2. What are some challenges you have encountered with e-learning?
3. What kind of tools did you use in e-learning?
4. What have you found useful challenging with the platform /s? (Technical functions to facilitate the teaching process).
5. Were there any emotional issues that you went through with e-learning?
6. Did you feel isolated or more connected with e-learning?
7. Do online classes change your behaviour, and if so, how?
8. How can teachers create a supportive learning environment when teaching online?
9. Does culture, race, gender, affect how student's express themselves online?
10. How do you think online classes affect classroom management?
11. What strategies do (or did) you maintain a sense of authority and control in online classrooms?
12. Do you think rules are important with online classes (Late-coming or behaviour of students).
13. Have you encountered any challenges or conflicts with e-learning? (e.g. attitudes from classmates or teachers).
14. How did your learning style change with online lessons?
15. Do you think online assessments are effective?

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University of the Western Cape

Date: **22 February 2024**

Appendix C: Permission Letter

Dear Principal

My name is Regan Jenekar, and I am pursuing my Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change degree in the Department of Education at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. I ask permission to interview eight students and two educators from your TVET college. I have included some information about my project below, and please feel free to ask questions if you'd like more information.

What is the title of my research project?

'Exploring Identity Shifts and Power Relations in Online Learning of TVET College Students'.

What is the study about?

The investigation will explore how the shift to online learning has changed students' identities, particularly how identity shifts due to moving to an online teaching and learning platform. The study examines how students and teachers negotiate and resist the exercise of power in online learning environments and how their identities are shaped and reshaped in response to these power dynamics.

Who should I contact for further information?

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me, Regan Jenekar, on my cell phone and WhatsApp (+968 92486442) or via email at 9823922@myuwc.ac.za. Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Mohamed Natheem Hendricks, in the

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Department of Education, University of the Western Cape (UWC), at mnhendricks@uwc.ac.za or via telephone: 021 9593792.

To report any adverse or unexpected effects emergent from this research, please contact our research office below:

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Department of Research Development

University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17

Bellville 7535

Tel: 021 959 4111

Email: research-ethics@uwc.ac.za

http://etd.uwc.ac.za/

University of the Western Cape

Date: **22 March 2024**

Appendix D: Information Sheet (students)

Dear student

My name is Regan Jenekar, and I am pursuing my Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change degree in the Department of Education at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. I ask permission to interview eight students and two educators from your TVET college. I have included some information about my project below, and please feel free to ask questions if you'd like more information.

What is the title of my research project?

'Exploring Identity Shifts and Power Relations in Online Learning of TVET College'.

What is the study about?

The investigation will explore how the shift to online learning has changed students' identities, particularly how identity shifts due to moving to an online teaching and learning platform. The study examines how students and teachers negotiate and resist the exercise of power in online learning environments and how their identities are shaped and reshaped in response to these power dynamics.

Why are you being invited to participate in this study?

The purpose is to gain insights from students about how online learning has influenced changes in students' identities, specifically regarding shifts in identity resulting from transitioning to an online teaching and learning platform.

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What will you be expected to do in this study?

If you are willing to be interviewed online for at least 40 minutes, we will arrange a suitable time for the interview at your convenience.

What are the potential risks involved in this study?

There is minimal risk in taking part in this study, as your participation is entirely voluntary and your informed consent is therefore required. You may withdraw your participation at any point.

What are the potential benefits involved in this study?

A deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in online learning environments could lead to more student-centered and inclusive learning experiences.

What about confidentiality, privacy and anonymity?

Your identity will remain completely confidential and anonymous throughout the research process, and all data collected will be handled with the utmost care to ensure your privacy is protected.

In terms of the requirements of the Protection of Personal Information Act (Act 4 of 2013), please note additional information:

What type of personal information will be collected?

The personal information collected will include demographic data such as gender, and occupational background.

Who at UWC is responsible for collecting and storing my personal information?

The responsible person at UWC for collecting and storing personal information is the researcher conducting the study.

Who will have access to my personal information outside of UWC?

Outside of UWC, only authorized personnel involved in the research project will have access to the personal information, ensuring confidentiality and data security.

How long will my personal information be stored?

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Electronic data will be kept on the supervisor's password protected computer for five years and deleted thereafter. Hard copies will be kept in a locked drawer for five years and deleted thereafter.

How will my personal information be processed?

Personal information will be stored securely for five years, both electronically on a password-protected computer and as hard copies in a locked drawer, after which it will be deleted to maintain data privacy.

Who do I contact for further information?

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me, Regan Jenekar, on my cell phone and WhatsApp (+968 92486442) or via email at 9823922@myuwc.ac.za. Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Mohamed Natheem Hendricks, in the Department of Education, University of the Western Cape (UWC), at mnhendricks@uwc.ac.za or via telephone: 021 9593792.

To report any adverse or unexpected effects emergent from this research, please contact our research office below:

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Department of Research Development

University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17

Bellville 7535

Tel: 021 959 4111

Email: research-ethics@uwc.ac.za

This information sheet is for you to keep so that you can be aware of the purpose of the study. With your signature on the attached consent form, you indicate that you understand the purpose of the research.

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University of the Western Cape

Date: **22 March 2024**

Appendix E: Information Sheet (Educators)

Dear Educator

My name is Regan Jenekar, and I am pursuing my Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change degree in the Department of Education at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. I ask permission to interview eight students and two educators from your TVET college. I have included some information about my project below, and please feel free to ask questions if you'd like more information.

What is the title of my research project?

'Exploring Identity Shifts and Power Relations in Online Learning of TVET College.'

What is the study about?

The investigation will explore how the shift to online learning has changed students' identities, particularly how identity shifts due to moving to an online teaching and learning platform. The study examines how students and teachers negotiate and resist the exercise of power in online learning environments and how their identities are shaped and reshaped in response to these power dynamics.

Why are you being invited to participate in this study?

You are being invited to share your experiences which will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between identity formation, power relations, and online learning in the context of TVET colleges. Your participation will aid in providing insights into the challenges and opportunities that students encounter in online learning environments, ultimately offering

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recommendations for creating inclusive and empowering online learning experiences for students.

What will you be expected to do in this study?

If you are willing to be interviewed online for at least 40 minutes, we will arrange a suitable time for the interview at your convenience.

What are the potential risks involved in this study?

There is minimal risk in taking part in this study, as your participation is entirely voluntary and your informed consent is therefore required. You may withdraw your participation at any point.

What are the potential benefits involved in this study?

Participating in the interview allows educators to reflect on their teaching practices, fostering professional development and enhancing their understanding of the dynamics of online learning.

What about confidentiality, privacy and anonymity?

Your identity will remain completely confidential and anonymous throughout the research process, and all data collected will be handled with the utmost care to ensure your privacy is protected.

In terms of the requirements of the Protection of Personal Information Act (Act 4 of 2013), please note additional information:

What type of personal information will be collected?

The personal information collected will include demographic data such as gender, and occupational background.

Who at UWC is responsible for collecting and storing my personal information?

The responsible person at UWC for collecting and storing personal information is the researcher conducting the study.

Who will have access to my personal information outside of UWC?

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Outside of UWC, only authorized personnel involved in the research project will have access to the personal information, ensuring confidentiality and data security.

How long will my personal information be stored?

Electronic data will be kept on the supervisor's password protected computer for five years and deleted thereafter. Hard copies will be kept in a locked drawer for five years and deleted thereafter.

How will my personal information be processed?

Personal information will be stored securely for five years, both electronically on a password-protected computer and as hard copies in a locked drawer, after which it will be deleted to maintain data privacy.

Who do I contact for further information?

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me, Regan Jenekar, on my cell phone and WhatsApp (+968 92486442) or via email at 9823922@myuwc.ac.za. Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor, Dr Mohamed Natheem Hendricks, in the Department of Education, University of the Western Cape (UWC), at mnhendricks@uwc.ac.za or via telephone: 021 9593792.

To report any adverse or unexpected effects emergent from this research, please contact our research office below:

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee Department of Research Development

University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17

Bellville 7535

Tel: 021 959 4111

Email: research-ethics@uwc.ac.za

This information sheet is for you to keep so that you can be aware of the purpose of the study. With your signature on the attached consent form, you indicate that you understand the purpose of the exercise.

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Appendix F: Participant (Interview)

Consent Form – Students University of the Western Cape

Project Title: Exploring Identity Shifts and Power Relations in Online Learning of TVET College

Researcher: Regan Jenekar

Please initial the boxes to show your agreement and understanding of what is expected for this study.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I wish to withdraw, I may contact the lead researcher at any time to do so). ☐
3. I understand my responses and personal data will be kept strictly confidential. ☐
4. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my responses without revealing any part of my identity. ☐
5. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and that I will not be identified or identifiable in the reports or publications that result for the research. ☐
6. I agree for the **anonymized** data collected to be used in future research. (*Circle the appropriate answer*). Yes / No
7. I hereby agree to be audio recorded. (*Circle the appropriate answer*). Yes / No

In terms of the requirements of the Protection of Personal Information Act (Act 4 of 2013), personal information will be collected and processed:

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☐ I hereby give consent for my personal information to be collected, stored, processed and shared as described in the information sheet.

☐ I do not give consent for my personal information to be collected, stored, processed and shared as described in the information sheet.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

(*or legal representative*)

_____	_____	_____ _____
Name of person taking consent *(If different from lead researcher)*	Date	Signature

_____	_____	____ _____
Supervisor	Date	Signature

Copies: All participants will receive a copy of the signed and dated version of the consent form and information sheet for themselves. A copy of this will be filed and kept in a secure location for research purposes only.

Researcher:	**Supervisor:**	**HOD:**
Regan Jenekar Contact number: +968 99661274 or +968 92486442.	Dr. Mohammed Natheem Hendricks Contact number: +27 (0) 21 9593792.	Dr. Seamus Needham Contact number: +27 (0) 21 959 9592

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Appendix G: Participant (Interview)

Consent Form - Educators University of the Western Cape

Project Title: Exploring Identity Shifts and Power Relations in Online Learning of TVET College

Researcher: Regan Jenekar

Please initial the boxes to show your agreement and understanding of what is expected for this study.

6. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐

7. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I wish to withdraw, I may contact the lead researcher at any time to do so). ☐

8. I understand my responses and personal data will be kept strictly confidential. ☐

9. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my responses without revealing any part of my identity. ☐

10. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and that I will not be identified or identifiable in the reports or publications that result for the research. ☐

6. I agree for the **anonymized** data collected to be used in future research. (*Circle the appropriate answer*). Yes / No

7. I hereby agree to be audio recorded. (*Circle the appropriate answer*). Yes / No

In terms of the requirements of the Protection of Personal Information Act (Act 4 of 2013), personal information will be collected and processed:

http://etd.uwc.ac.za/

☐ I hereby give consent for my personal information to be collected, stored, processed and shared as described in the information sheet.

☐ I do not give consent for my personal information to be collected, stored, processed and shared as described in the information sheet.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant (*or legal representative*)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____ _____
Name of person taking consent *(If different from lead researcher)*	Date	Signature
_____	_____	____ _____
Supervisor	Date	Signature

Copies: All participants will receive a copy of the signed and dated version of the consent form and information sheet for themselves. A copy of this will be filed and kept in a secure location for research purposes only.

Researcher:

Regan Jenekar

Contact number: +968 99661274 or +968 92486442.

Supervisor:

Dr. Mohammed Natheem Hendricks

Contact number: +27 (0) 21 9593792.

HOD:

Dr. Seamus Needham

Contact number: +27 (0) 21 959 9592

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Appendix H: UWC Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE

Directorate: DVC: Research and Innovation
Research Development & Postgraduate Support
Tel: +27 21 959 4111
Email: research-ethics@uwc.ac.za

14 February 2024

Mr R Jenekar
IPSS
Faculty of Education

HSSREC Reference Number:	HS23/10/43
Project Title:	Exploring identity shifts and power relations in online learning of TVET College students in South Africa.
Approval Period:	14 February 2024 – 13 February 2025

I hereby certify that the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape approved the methodology, and ethics of the above-mentioned research project.

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for approval.

Please remember to submit an annual progress report at least two months before expiry date. Failure to submit your annual progress report on time will result in the immediate lapse of your ethics approval and you will have to resubmit an entirely new ethics application.

For permission to conduct research using student and/or staff data or to distribute research surveys/questionnaires please apply via: https://sites.google.com/uwc.ac.za/permissionresearch/home

The permission letter must then be submitted to HSSREC for record keeping purposes.

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse events and/or termination of the study.

Ms Patricia Josias
Coordinator: Research Ethics
University of the Western Cape

NHREC Registration Number: REC-130416-049

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