

Qualitative Data Collection under the ‘New Normal’ in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The newly discovered coronavirus (COVID-19) has disrupted traditional methods of conducting research, particularly qualitative research. However, there remains a number of methods by which qualitative data can still be collected. These include the use of digital voice, video, and text-based tools, online surveys, and content analysis. Text-based sources can help to overcome the limitations of time and space, and also can be cost-effective. This chapter draws from data collected from 12 participants across Zimbabwe and demonstrates how these tools can be used to generate data or to sample data that is already available to satisfy research questions and meet research objectives. It recommends researchers to experiment with new ways of collecting qualitative data while also observing safety protocols and ethical considerations.

Key words: COVID-19, digital data collection, qualitative, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The newly discovered coronavirus (COVID-19) has disrupted traditional methods of conducting research, particularly qualitative research. The virus was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020. By then, Africa had already recorded a total of 119 cases with 2 fatalities from a total of 12 African countries. While COVID-19 has been basically a public health disaster, it has also ushered in huge changes to the ways in which research, particularly qualitative research, is to be conducted. Its associated safety protocols, including physical distancing and the need to limit one's movements to reduce exposure to the virus have disrupted traditional methods of qualitative data collection.

Qualitative studies rely on face-to-face interaction through interviews, field work, and focus group discussions for data collection, and thus, the transmissibility of COVID-19 and the responses by countries to deter it using lockdowns and physical distancing have impacted traditional qualitative data collection methods. However, there remain a number of methods by which qualitative data can still be collected. These include the use of digital voice, video, and text-based tools, online surveys, and content analysis. Text-based sources can help to overcome the limitations of time and space, and also can be cost-effective. This chapter demonstrates how these tools can be used to generate data or to sample data that is already available to satisfy research questions and meet research objectives. The chapter draws from a qualitative study on the gendered socio-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Zimbabwe which was conducted during a lockdown by the author between May and June 2020 with 12 social work practitioners from different organisations and in different provinces across the country.

The next sections discuss the importance of face-to-face research in the context of a pandemic, followed by a discussion of the data collection methods selected; their advantages and disadvantages; and the ethical issues involved. Lastly, the chapter makes conclusions and recommendations.

Qualitative Research and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Face-to-face interaction has always been the basis for qualitative research. Qualitative research deploys a range of in-depth, in-person techniques to understand how people feel, react, think, and behave in a particular manner. The aim is to generate concepts, strategies, or to understand practices that govern groups or institutions and small samples tend to be used for interviews, field work, and even focus groups. Qualitative research methods are widely used due to their flexibility and adaptability to various contexts, including crisis settings (Adams, Khan, and Raeside 2014). The qualitative approach does not compel the researcher to start with a 'hypothesis' that needs to be proved, but rather offers an open-ended methodology that can be changed and adapted during the course of the study, this enhances the quality of the data and the insights generated (Sekaran and Bougie 2014). Qualitative research is widely used in scholarly academic research and applied research. The most common qualitative methods are interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and action research. These are used for a variety of purposes and in a variety of contexts.

Interviews are possibly the most common qualitative research method. Interviews are typically one-to-one interactions that enable a thorough probe of the interviewee's understandings, thoughts, and feelings about a topic. The quality of the data generated by interviews can be exceptionally comprehensive, nuanced and valuable and a single qualitative sample can yield new insights over a number of years. Interviews may, however, be expensive due to the amount of time and logistics required to set up. They are most effective when the interviews are recorded and transcribed to reliably preserve the details and nuances of the interaction. Analysis can either be conducted manually or using computer software such as NVivo, or Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Focus groups, on the other hand, are a form of research where a moderator leads a dialogue amongst a group that shares a need, social characteristic, or lifestyle, for some specific research purpose. These are frequently used for social or market research. They are seen as being more cost-effective than interviews or ethnography because more of people's views can be included in less time.

However, due to the COVID-19 safety protocols, physical interaction is not possible. With many early-career researchers in particular having suspended data collection cross the world, this chapter provides some practical guidelines on how qualitative research can still be conducted using Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the face of a pandemic and lockdowns, while keeping in mind ethical considerations.

Potential Video, Voice and Text-based Options

To generate qualitative data under the lockdown in Zimbabwe, the researcher found the use of video and voice calling, as well as the use of prompt messaging to effectively replicate the face-to-face interview or focus group. These communications can be done using ICT tools such as computers, tablets, and cellphones. They require the use of specific computer applications, such as Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp. Skype is a Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) that enables people to make and receive voice and video calls over the internet using a computer, tablet or mobile phone. With participants located in different parts and in different organisations across the country, the author found Skype a useful tool to overcome some traditional barriers to communication. After obtaining consent to participate in the study by email, the researcher asked for the Skype contacts of participants. Interviewing participants who had Skype accounts was cost-effective as no call charge was incurred. An extra charge was however, incurred for communicating with participants without Skype accounts. Most participants confirmed that it was their first experience of participating in a research-related

video communication, and that video made telecommunications appear much more human, as both the researcher and participants felt mutually connected. While the researcher did not conduct focus group discussions, it can be posited that Zoom could also be effective as a tool for interacting with small-, medium-, and large-sized teams. An ideal size for a focus group is usually 8-10 people (Flick 2018) for in-depth research discussions. Although there are common problems such as difficulty in using the technology by some participants and poor-quality internet connection, video-calling was found to be the closest substitute to face-to-face interviews. It enabled the researcher to collect data across different provinces in rural Zimbabwe in the face of national lockdown.

In addition to video-calling, Jowett (2020) found online surveys useful for assembling qualitative data. The researcher can create an online questionnaire with open-ended questions and email it or send the link to prospective participants, requesting that they type their responses in the provided spaces. While qualitative surveys normally produce less rich data in comparison to interviews, they preserve some of the benefits of qualitative research, including generating unforeseen outcomes, while allowing researchers to collect data from a larger number of participants rather quickly.

In the same study on the gendered socio-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Zimbabwe, the researcher also used WhatsApp Messenger to collect qualitative data. WhatsApp enables users to send text and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images, videos, documents, and user locations. The WhatsApp application normally runs on mobile phones, but is also accessible from desktop computers provided the user's mobile phone remains connected to the internet while they use the desktop. While some of the participants did not have Skype accounts, all had WhatsApp. The researcher sent a list of questions to consenting participants that they could respond to through voice notes. Some participants preferred to type their responses if they thought they might be misunderstood. The researcher transcribed all the voice notes, and where clarification was needed, the researcher would make a WhatsApp call. This saved time for participants, and saved both time and expense for the researcher.

Another important method used was secondary content analysis. The researcher was able to consult a number of secondary sources, including newspaper, magazine articles, and blogs to further explore the issues under investigation. These sources provided first-person narratives relevant for analysing gender issues under the lockdown. Future qualitative researchers can also use secondary methods to study a wide range of issues under COVID-19 restrictions. Instead of suspending data collection, researchers (students in particular) could analyse social representations of their topics of interest in these sources to complete their projects. This could be effective for studies covering issues of public interest such as pandemics, land reform issues, and political issues, among others. For issues that do not make current debates, researchers could make use of textbooks and journal articles or other sources of accessible secondary information.

A variety of further secondary data sources, including television and radio discussion programmes, could be useful to inform studies about issues that are current, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Online discussions forums and social media platforms, including social networking (Facebook, WhatsApp), microblogging (Twitter), photo sharing (Snapchat, Instagram), and video sharing (Facebook Live, YouTube) can also be used in the same manner (with due attention to relevant privacy and data protection restrictions) to study a wide range of social phenomena across time and space and overcome the constraints of lockdowns. Researchers can access, assess, and use this information and articles for their work, thereby giving them a broader idea and knowledge about their subject. This form of data allows less-experienced researchers or students, for instance, to make use of easily accessible information

which they can use to examine the ‘real’ social world rather than generating data themselves specifically for the purposes of not suspending their studies.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The utilisation of ICT tools to collect qualitative data under lockdown conditions was not only convenient and effective, but also meant that the researcher did not need to suspend the study due to the lockdown. The use of video and voice calling, and prompt text messaging effectively replicated the face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions which the researcher had planned for, and thus, managed to collect large volumes of in-depth data (see Ndhlovu and Tembo, forthcoming). The tools also saved time and expenses since there was no need to travel to collect data. The tools also allowed for flexibility in data collection. The use of ICT tools also generated permanent records of phenomena which can be referred to later. In addition, the use of these tools were found to be intuitive and simple to use. Without requiring too much technical knowledge, a lot can be done through WhatsApp, a common platform that is already widely used by non-technical users in both developed and developing countries.

The disadvantages of video, voice calling, and prompt messaging were, however, that participants found it hard to focus during the interview. There were also some delays between responses. Sometimes the voice quality was poor due to poor internet connections or the equipment could fail in the middle of a discussion. This was frustrating especially where the interview was to be completed within a particular timeframe. Some participants did not have the required software applications while some did not know how to use them. This became a challenge especially when such participants were critical to the study design. However, where participants were able to use video, voice, or prompt text messages, the challenges of ICT tools were actually outweighed by the benefits of using them for research.

Other methods which the researcher used included the use of the internet sources of qualitative data. This could be a relatively cheap method that may benefit researchers facing funding constraints. Most researchers have internet access in their homes and on their mobile devices. Some universities such as the University of Western Cape and University of Johannesburg in South Africa, for instance, have also provided Internet data bundles to their students during the lockdown to enable them to study at home and this includes research students. In this study, the researcher did not have access to paywalled resources, and yet the internet still provided a comparatively inexpensive avenue for accessing information and articles which could be used for research. It is easy to access and thus, time-saving, allowing the researcher to manage the research more effectively. Through internet connectivity, the researcher sent WhatsApp voice notes to participants to get further information from them, as the research required. In this view, the internet could be considered as a powerful tool to enable study and research to continue during lockdowns.

The disadvantages of the internet included that the huge amounts of data it makes accessible may result in information overload. As time passes, the researcher could be confused by the seemingly endless flow of information. Internet information can also be misleading because much of it does not go through review processes. Information in printed books and journal articles usually go through processes of quality assurance and peer review, and therefore deemed suitable as research resources. Another internet disadvantage is the threat from computer viruses which can disrupt the normal functioning of computer systems. Computers that are connected to internet are more prone to being attacked by computer viruses. Where this obtains, researchers may even lose their work.

Ethical Considerations

The research ethics of video, voice calling, and prompt text messaging, as well as the use of the internet to conduct research are, conceptually and historically, related to information and data ethics. Ethical considerations include the need to acquire the consent of participants, ensure their privacy, confidentiality, and the security of data, respect of intellectual property, and ensure the integrity of data. How this can be accomplished depends on the context of culture and situation in which the research is conducted, how and why it is being conducted, and researcher skills, as well as the creative ability of a researcher. In the study cited above, the researcher first made invitation phone calls to all prospective participants. Upon acceptance of the invitation, the researcher requested the participants' phone numbers used for WhatsApp as an indication of their consent and willingness to participate. Initially, some participants were hesitant to provide their phone numbers due to the politicisation of COVID-19-related information in the country. However, upon detailed explanations concerning the study and the precautions that would be taken to safeguard information, they became more comfortable, and shared their details, and were willing to participate. The personal details of participants are however, not shared anywhere by the researcher to protect them from any form of harm since, as mentioned above, COVID-19 has become a political issue in Zimbabwe. All the data audios and transcripts remain in the researcher's computer where they are accessible only through a password. The other challenge related to inaudible voice notes sent by participants. Where this happened, the researcher had to follow up. This inconvenienced participants in terms of time since communication was done mainly during the daytime when participants were at work. To deal with this, the researcher allowed participants to revert at their own time. The researcher also provided phone numbers for follow up in cases of uncertainty. With appropriate adaptation, it is possible to conduct qualitative research during lockdowns without compromising the rights of participants.

It is indisputable that COVID-19 has changed the way qualitative research is conducted. This is a major challenge for students in particular. However, with the hands-on support from supervisors, both students and supervisors need to take time and reflect on how to be creative in conducting research in this 'new' normal era without compromising the ethical dimensions of research and the needs of their participants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

COVID-19 is one of the most serious health issues of our times. It is not only a danger to life and health, but has also disrupted socio-economic, political, cultural and religious systems. The way we collect qualitative data has also been particularly affected with many researchers being forced to suspend their data collection. This is despite increasing emphasis by policy institutions, such as Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and the WHO, on the needs to continue conducting research, particularly that which is COVID-19-specific. With national responses such as travel restrictions travel, national lockdowns, physical distancing, and hygiene practices having only slowed down the spread, and not eliminated the virus; and with no therapeutics available, most governments are now encouraging their populations to learn how to live with the virus.

Researchers equally need to experiment with new ways of collecting qualitative data while also observing safety protocols and ethical considerations. Without doubt, COVID-19 responses have disrupted qualitative researchers' traditional reliance on face-to-face interaction. This chapter discussed possible alternative methods in which qualitative research

can be conducted. ICT tools become handy for qualitative data collection in context of crises such as the COVID-19 with both advantages and disadvantages which researchers need to take into account. The chapter also described some ethical considerations involved in the use of digital tools. Overall, the chapter concludes that as researchers, particularly early-career research students especially those in lower-income countries, continue with their data collection (with the COVID-19 virus unlikely to abate), it is vital that video, voice, and text-based ICT tools be recognised and emphasised as an alternative way of collecting extensive and in-depth data during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

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