Research Disruptions, New Opportunities: Re-Imagining Qualitative Interview Study During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Magda Nutsa Kobakhidze[1] , **Janisa Hui[2], Janice Chui[3], and Alejandra González[3]**

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to teaching and research in universities. This has prompted the publication of a considerable number of studies, frameworks, and guidelines on teaching adaptations. Less has been written on adaptations to empirical research projects, partly because such projects have been put on hold or redesigned entirely. This paper reflects on adaptations made, challenges encountered, and lessons learned while persisting with a qualitative study involving parents, teachers, tutors, and university academics during the second and third waves of the pandemic in Hong Kong in 2020. Specifically, we reflect on the reconsideration of research design and instruments, negotiation of different kinds of access to research sites and participants, optimization of existing data sources, streamlining of data collection approaches, and consideration of the mental well-being of both researchers and respondents. The paper includes lessons learned from the use of Zoom, WhatsApp Messenger, and phone calls as technological tools, and hashtag search on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Special consideration is given to the unexpected benefits of doing research during the pandemic and the convenience of using technology and adaptability approach.

Keywords

Qualitative research, COVID-19, online research methods, digital technologies, Hong Kong

Introduction

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, online instruction has become mainstream as schools around the world were closed to safeguard public health (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Baron et al., 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Educational research involving human subjects has been severely disrupted, with researchers challenged by limited access to research sites and participants, methodological complexities related to shifting fieldwork online, and increased work and life demands during a lockdown. The pandemic has greatly affected researchers' decision-making and future plans in the medical field (American Association for Cancer Research, 2020) and other fields, including education, in which human subject research is routinely conducted. Empirical researchers have had to make tough choices over whether to redesign their research altogether, postpone data collection until an unknown time in the unforeseeable future, or use online methods to adapt to the changing environment.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, a considerable number of peer-reviewed articles have examined the impact of the pandemic on students and teachers and how to switch to online teaching (e.g., Jung et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2020; Kuhfeld, et al., 2020; Purwanto et al., 2020). Scholars have designed frameworks, offered suggestions, and summarized lessons learned to support educators and help them maintain continuity in this challenging time (Green et al., 2020; Karalis, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). When it comes to educational research, however, we have learned from many

[1]Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China
[2]College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park, MD
[3]Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Corresponding Author:
Magda Nutsa Kobakhidze, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China.
Email: nutsak@hku.hk

colleagues across the globe that their projects have been on hold. A few qualitative researchers in other fields including medicine, psychology, environmental sciences, and social sciences have contributed their experiences in making research adaptations during the pandemic (Lobe et al., 2020; Santana et al., 2021; Wherton et al., 2020; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020), including one pandemic initiative utilizing crowdsourcing to collect information on virtual fieldwork (Lupton, 2020). Perhaps, empirical researchers need to embrace the new opportunities that increased use of technologies may present. However, low digital literacy and accessibility issues in some population segments are still pressing issues when research goes online (Clay, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon and share with fellow researchers insights from our experience in conducting an empirical qualitative study during the second and third waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong. In the sections that follow this introduction, we describe our original study, modification of the study design, adaptations made to study instruments, and corresponding rationale to adapt to the changing research environment. Next, we examine the benefits and pitfalls of revised research methods, especially use of digital tools and social media. Throughout the paper, we provide critical reflections on the opportunities and challenges in doing qualitative research during the pandemic.

Disruption of the Original Design

The study described in this paper investigates kindergarten admission interview preparation in Hong Kong through semi-structured qualitative interviews with parents, kindergarten teachers, early childhood scholars, and education center representatives (tutors) providing kindergarten admission training and services. Our research objectives were to analyze the socioeconomic, cultural, and educational forces that shape parental motives, perceptions, and practices in kindergarten admission preparation and to explore the dynamics and diversity of kindergarten admission in the context of equitable access to quality early childhood education.

When the first and second waves of outbreak hit, Hong Kong was not in lockdown, unlike other countries and jurisdictions around the world, such as Australia, Singapore, Thailand, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Some companies had adopted a remote work policy while shops, restaurants, and public transportation were operating with adjustments to operating hours and under social gathering restrictions; however, schools including kindergartens were closed from late January to late May 2020 (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (GovHK, 2020a, 2020b). At the same time, registered education centers were recommended to switch from face-to-face to online instruction (GovHK, 2020c). According to our research schedule, we planned to recruit participants by contacting schools and education centers in May in order to discuss the study objectives with school leadership and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) groups. We planned to meet with the participants in person for data collection once the schools and education centers reopened in the summer.

Our team saw glimpses of hope when the Education Bureau decided to reopen schools in late May (Chor, 2020). At that time, the plan for conducting in-person interviews became more promising as Hong Kong recorded a 3-week streak of zero local cases of COVID-19 (Siu et al., 2020). However, a surge in COVID-19 cases in mid-July hit and marked the third wave of COVID-19 outbreak in Hong Kong, and the Education Bureau announced that schools would end early in July and remain closed again until late September (including summer holidays).

Despite the outbreak of COVID-19 and school closures, our team decided to move forward with the study and revise the research design. Since some parts of the revised methodology required authorization by the research ethics committee, the team also submitted a revised application for ethical approval which was granted shortly after. We have made several changes to our original design to enhance the validity of the study, including the research design, data collection, and data analysis. The changes made to the original design are described in the following sections.

Modification of the Research Design

Triangulation of Multiple Data Sources

Given that schools and education centers were closed, our team predicted that participant recruitment for semi-structured interviews could be challenging. Although Hong Kong people were mostly working remotely, we experienced difficulties in accessing our participants, especially for education center representatives. As a result of the pandemic, several small- to medium-sized tutoring companies in Hong Kong experienced economic hardships, and some shut down as they could not afford their rental costs (Kobakhidze, 2020)—a factor that also explains some of the difficulties we experienced recruiting representatives from these companies.

In order to enrich our data, we went beyond the semi-structured interviews and diversified our data sources by examining educational center marketing materials and websites. We collected the marketing materials from education centers to provide corroborating evidence and offer insights for our research questions. During the small window where education centers were opened briefly in July, we visited some education centers and their booths in shopping malls to collect brochures and flyers for their kindergarten interview preparation classes. During the period that education centers were closed, we downloaded marketing materials from their websites. Information on their websites, particularly the information under "about us" and description relating to kindergarten interview classes, are also used for content analysis.

Secondary sources were also included to provide validity to our findings because there is limited literature related to our research topic. However, the topic of our study—tutoring

young children for kindergarten admission interviews—has been a controversial topic in Hong Kong for some time, citing that they bring stress and anxiety to parents and young children. We leveraged available secondary sources such as a Facebook live stream of an educational conference hosted by a top-tier English media in Hong Kong, TV documentaries, newspaper articles, and social media content. Relevant themes were identified from these sources to juxtapose with our primary data from qualitative interviews.

Reduction of Interview Questions and Duration

Many of our targeted respondents were working remotely while managing other obligations such as childcare. Our initial prediction was that they would be more likely to participate if the interview duration was shorter. We planned for 30-minute interviews by revising our interview protocol and reduced the number of questions by focusing on those most relevant to our research questions. In the interview protocol, we also created a question bank for researchers to use if participants were available and interested in spending more time on the interview.

Ethical Considerations

Rodham and Gavin (2006) argued that when researchers are doing research online, major ethical considerations are no different from those using traditional approaches to data collection. Other scholars also shared this view (e.g., Lobe et al., 2020). That was largely true in our case except that the original ethics application required some amendments, and online interactions needed extra care to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Once the revised design was finalized, we submitted an application for an amendment to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at The University of Hong Kong and received the approval from the authorities. Following the requirements of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at The University of Hong Kong, a request to sign a consent form is usually the first step of an in-person interview. The original ethics application included only an option for written consent; however, the regulations by the HREC allowed online and email recorded consent in the revised version which gave flexibility to the team during the difficult times. Since the interviews were unlikely to occur in person, it was no longer an option to ask participants to sign a printed consent form. In order to adapt to the online environment, we created an online consent form using the Google form. The two-page bilingual online consent form was written in Traditional Chinese and English, the official languages of Hong Kong. The first page was a short demographic survey followed by the second page with a consent section.

Recruitment of Participants

Saberi (2020) reported that the recruitment of research participants has changed amid the pandemic, which echoed our

experience. With the closure of schools and education centers, we had to come up with alternative ways to gain access to research participants. Our original plan of recruiting participants through school visits was no longer a viable option due to the pandemic. While retaining the same selection criteria, multiple modes of access were attempted to diversify the participant pool and obtain a purposeful and representative sample.

First, we used convenience sampling through our personal connections and professional networks. The principal investigator (PI) and research assistants (RAs) were able to leverage their professional network to recruit some participants and obtain referrals from them. The PI, a faculty member at The University of Hong Kong, was able to recruit early childhood scholars from a range of institutions and disciplines. One RA is a full-time kindergarten teacher and was able to recruit a number of kindergarten teachers from different types of schools.

Next, we made use of digital technologies. Apart from physical communities, such as parent-teacher associations, virtual communities are channels for accessing the participants. As a working mother, the PI has been a member of several public WhatsApp Messenger (WhatsApp) chat groups targeting Hong Kong parents. These groups have diverse memberships because they cater to a range of interests, including health, schooling, learning resources, and teaching methodologies (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf). Some of our participants offered to "spread the word" in these public WhatsApp groups with a standardized recruitment text message providing the research team members' contact details. In this way, we were able to efficiently reach out to a large number of potential participants matching our selection criteria. A similar approach was used to recruit over 200 refugee caregivers for a study in Lebanon during lockdown (Chen et al., 2020).

In addition, we used internet search to identify education centers that were in business and running kindergarten admission interview classes. Our search was conducted in traditional Chinese and English, both are official languages of Hong Kong, with the keywords "kindergarten interview class" (幼稚園面試班). We identified 28 education centers and their contact information, such as e-mail address and phone number, to form a contact list. We first reached out to the education centers via email to share information about our study and invite them to participate. When we did not receive a bounce-back email or response within a week, we followed up with a phone call, most of which went to voicemail, and we left voice messages with our call-back numbers. Those education centers who did pick up our call asked us to send a second email, indicating that they will ask the management team of their business to check. Among the 28 invitations that we extended, three education center representatives contacted us to express interest in the study. One of three was unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. Other education centers that responded shared that they were too busy to participate, or they were not interested in sharing their business information with us even though we indicated that their

identifiable information would be kept confidential. The difficulty to recruit education center representatives might be explained by the nature of their operation and sensitivity of commercial information which could equally apply to a normal situation without the pandemic.

Social media, including Facebook and Instagram, also played a key role in our process of participant recruitment. The hashtag search feature of these social media platforms combines the hash symbol (#) with unspaced words or phrases to organize related conversations written by users (Otsuka et al., 2014). To identify education centers and tutors who offer kindergarten interview preparation services, we used English hashtags and their Chinese equivalents to conduct the hashtag search. The hashtags we used included #kindergarteninterview (#幼稚園面試), #kindergarteninterviewclass (#幼稚園面試班), and #kindergarteninterviewpreparation (#幼稚園面試準備). We manually screened the posts for those written by education centers and tutors and excluded those written by commercial enterprises, such as toy companies promoting educational toys, or children's clothing companies. We then contacted the potential participants through the direct messenger function of the social media platforms. Four out of 11 education center representatives who participated in our studies were recruited from social media.

Procedures and Different Modalities

When conducting semi-structured interviews, we offered participants the choice of face-to-face, teleconferencing (e.g., Zoom), or phone call based on convenience and comfort level. We were aware that participants were offering us their time out of a busy schedule. For example, some parents took time to speak with us during their child's nap time. We did not use fixed time slots but instead set up interviews to accommodate participants' schedules. In the case of parents at home with young children, interviews were inevitably interrupted. For example, we had to stop one interview due to a young child creating a lot of noise in the background and followed up with the participant over email instead.

The interview was targeted to be about 30 minutes, and some participants kindly offered their time and spoke to us for an hour. Among the 78 interviews that we conducted, 10 in-person interviews were possible because Hong Kong was not in a lockdown and there was a substantial period of zero local COVID-19 cases. We followed the social distancing and social gathering guidelines by the Hong Kong government and the World Health Organization during these in-person interviews. A majority of our participants chose to complete the interviews either on Zoom or over the phone, contributing to 35 Zoom interviews and 31 phone interviews. Two participants were interviewed via email due to their availability and particular circumstances.

Validation Strategies

We have used a number of strategies to promote our understanding of the phenomenon of using kindergarten admission services and enhance the validity of our study. To facilitate better collaboration and establish mutual understanding among the team, each team member engaged in an online journal using Google Document to reflect on their experiences, values, and biases throughout the research process. Such reflexivity enhances the quality, ethics, and results of a study while increasing self-awareness and personal growth of the researcher, which in turn benefits the research project as a whole (Probst & Berenson, 2014).

Research meetings were conducted weekly via Zoom to share findings, discuss adaptations to the research methodology, and strategize and debrief the research process. The PI served as the mutual connection between all research team members, but these members did not have the opportunity to meet in person as the project began during the pandemic. Levine et al. (2021) noted the effect of the pandemic on scholars' sense of connection, emphasizing the importance of creating online spaces for collaboration or even informal gatherings. Despite the research teams' efforts to arrange small group dinners, social gathering restrictions made this impossible. As an alternative, the team formed a chat group on WhatsApp to share not only research updates but also personal updates such as birthday greetings to build rapport.

To validate findings of the study and create a platform for exchanging views, evidence, and expertise, our team organized a knowledge exchange seminar in mid-July in 2021 and invited all study participants including parents, kindergarten teachers, representatives of education centers, and early childhood educators. This public online seminar attracted over 50 attendees, including our study participants. This online exchange session provided an opportunity not only to share findings of the study but also to seek participants' feedback on the findings which helped to strengthen the impact of the study at the grassroots level. In addition to validating preliminary findings, the interactions showed the value of community inquiry into the complex and multifaceted phenomenon under study.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Revised Research Methods

In our study, the major method of the data collection was semi-structured interviews; therefore, methodological rigor and validity of findings largely depended on quality of interactions with participants during interviews. In this study, we had a unique opportunity to collect data using different methods such as online interviews by Zoom, phone interviews, and face-to-face interviews. However, this unique opportunity came with a challenge of ensuring validity and comparability of data collected by different mediums. In the following sections, we discuss some of the differences we perceived in conducting interviews using different tools. We also reflect on the benefits and challenges of using social media during the pandemic.

Use of Zoom

The accessibility of the teleconferencing tool, Zoom, as a means of data collection is gaining attention from qualitative researchers (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). It is cost-effective as the Zoom software is free to download, and efficient since no commute time is needed. Use of Zoom saved time needed to travel for interviews across Hong Kong which overall positively contributed to a shorter data collection process than planned. Contrary to our experience, some researchers found that Zoom increased the workload of researchers because they needed to attend to technology-related tasks while doing interviews (Roberts et al., 2021). In our study, Zoom provided us with a virtual alternative to in-person interviews with participants, allowing us to establish a connection with interviewees through seeing one another's faces and expressions.

Despite the benefits of Zoom and other teleconferencing tools, technological access presents a challenge. Some participants indicated that their desktop computer, laptop, or even Zoom account was being used by their children for online school. The number of computers was not enough in some families, and the participants had to use mobile phones instead. While people in Hong Kong typically own at least one mobile phone, it is unrealistic to expect a person to hold the smartphone for a 30-minute video call.

Hong Kong is known for its expensive living conditions, and homes are generally small. Many participants were reluctant to turn on the video function and reveal their home environment, despite virtual wallpaper being an alternative. While this could impact the establishment of trust and rapport, some participants may have felt more at ease with this extra layer of identity protection, and they appeared to be more willing to share sensitive information.

For most qualitative researchers, transcription is a significant part of their research process. Although Zoom is embedded with seemingly advantageous recording capabilities, these come with difficulties related to technical issues. Conducting interviews on Zoom requires a slightly different skill set compared to in-person interviews. Internet connection instability means it is common for one or other of the parties to a Zoom call to "freeze." In these situations, our research team members explained the situation and either repeated the questions or politely asked the participants to repeat their answers. Another issue with Zoom recordings relates to the natural tendency for people to interrupt one another or talk at the same time, in which situation Zoom would mute the first speaker automatically. This resulted in some incomplete quotes and an incomplete picture of the dynamics of the interview, for instance, when a participant wanted to show agreement and interrupted halfway through a question. Such recording issues rarely happen in in-person interviews and contributed to the loss of some valuable quotes. Later, we learned that taking pauses when overlapping occurred and indicating who will talk first was a possible remedy.

Use of Phone

Recording phone calls is another challenge. Of the third-party applications available, many tried by our research team required a premium membership or were flawed. Although Hong Kong has no law against phone call recording mobile applications, Apple iPhones and Samsung's Android phones are protected from these types of recordings. When a participant used a phone that blocked call recording, even though they gave us consent to record, the recording application only recorded our voices (the caller). Two of our interviews were impacted in this way, but we were able to make use of the caller's speech, as well as the memo that our team member wrote immediately after the interview. From our experience, we learned that it is better to put the phone on speaker and use a separate device to record the conversation.

Use of Email

We used email interviews only in two cases. The first case concerned a parent who experienced an interruption during the phone interview due to childcare responsibilities and preferred email communications afterward. The second case was due to the sensitivity of a political position that a participant held. They preferred to have interview questions in advance and responded in writing. We allowed this to happen because it enabled the inclusion of hard-to-reach communities (see also Kaufmann & Tzanetakis, 2020); however, we noted a limitation to follow up with additional questions. Overall, we felt that Zoom interviews were close substitutes for face-to-face interviews, while phone interviews and email interviews were less interactive and often lacked the opportunity to probe for a deeper understanding.

Use of Social Media

During the pandemic, most social interactions shifted online, with social media platforms becoming our main tools of information exchange and communication (Kazerooni et al., 2020; Saud et al., 2020). Facebook and Instagram, in particular, are commonly used in Hong Kong for experience-sharing and marketing (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2020), and we used these platforms to gain access to further participants. We found that the use of social media was fruitful not only in terms of participant recruitment but also in terms of collecting more visual data (such as flyers and advertisements of education centers). Subsequent content analysis of publicly available information gave us extra layers of data contributing to our understanding of the phenomenon, which is understudied in Hong Kong.

Use of WhatsApp

Considering the importance of convenience and flexibility to our participants, we used WhatsApp, one of the most widely

used mobile applications for messaging in Hong Kong with a 79% penetration rate in 2020 (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2020), to recruit participants and coordinate interviews.

Teachers and parents, our main target participants, were juggling a new set of demands during the pandemic including remote working and online schooling. Reportedly, women in Hong Kong were stressed about working more than 10 hours a day (Sun, 2020). Given most of our participants were women, we believed that the success of our data collection was related to being understanding of our participants' busy schedules. We contacted the potential participants through WhatsApp and waited for them to respond in their own time. Our intention to make participation in the research would not become an added, unwanted burden. When a participant did not respond for a week, we sent a gentle follow-up message that indicated our understanding of their busy schedule while reminding them to respond. Besides, participants could easily inform us of a delay or cancel their interview if the ever-changing circumstances required.

Use of Google Workspace (Formerly G Suite)

Google Workspace provides a cloud-based system that allows easy access and file-sharing, which significantly promotes collaboration and enhances efficiency when researching during the pandemic. Similar to handling research data online, our team proceeds with caution using these virtual tools. Storing participants' personal data in a cloud-based system causes ethical and security concerns. For instance, the U.S. Patriot Act indicates that the U.S. government can access these data when they identify potential terrorist threats (Hopper et al., 2021). Therefore, the data containing personal identifiers were kept in separate offline files according to the guidelines of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Storing the recorded data requires extra attention for cybersecurity purposes. According to the guidelines from The University of Hong Kong's HREC, all our phones and laptops were password protected and some required fingerprint or facial recognition. When using Zoom, we made sure to store the recordings on our local device instead of the Zoom cloud. Other Google capabilities have been used by other researchers to facilitate data entry (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Hooper et al., 2021), and these tools certainly have helped our project in terms of flexibility and user-friendly nature.

All recorded files and transcriptions were stored in a shared Google Drive that was only accessible to the research team members using their specific e-mail accounts. Other Google files such as Google documents, Google forms, and Google sheets were secured in a similar manner. We also made use of Google's two-factor authentication where the passwords were associated with a person's devices, which provided an extra layer of security.

Using Google forms during remote data collection turned out to be an efficient way of collecting demographic data along with consent. Google Docs was also used for writing shared notes and Google Sheets to track the data collection progress. All of these documents were only accessible to the research team. To address privacy concerns, our team adopted data protection strategies and removed personal identifiers in Google forms; we used anonymized codes instead.

Research Opportunities and Considerations in the Pandemic

Research Process Creates Human Connection. Surprisingly, many participants were motivated to take part in the study despite their busy schedules and increased responsibilities. Considering the potential challenges of participant recruitment, this study aimed to gather interviews from about 40 participants. The amount of responses that we received exceeded our expectation, and we ended up with 78 participants. This experience echoes that described in *The New York Times* article "Surprising poll results: People are now happy to pick up the phone" (Russonello & Lyall, 2020), in which it was concluded that during lockdowns people are more likely to answer the phone as compensation for lost social connection. This appeared to be true in our study even for parents and teachers, two of the busiest groups during the pandemic. Some of our respondents expressed their enjoyment of the interview, and many of our 30-minute interviews ended up lasting an hour or more. Perhaps these research interviews offered welcome opportunities for personal and professional connection, and our ability to show empathy and understanding toward participants contributed to the success of our project.

Our experience echoes a paper by Averett (2021) who reported unexpected easy access to the participants during the pandemic in the United States; similar to our study, her participants were also parents, mostly mothers, who already had multiple commitments and demands on their time. One of the reasons could be that interviews provide what Averett (2021) describes as "a therapeutic" experience for parents, allowing them to express the stressful and overwhelming nature of their lives during the pandemic.

Balancing Research and Mental Health

Although the pandemic has been relatively well-managed in Hong Kong and full-scale lockdowns have not been considered necessary, studies indicate a mental health crisis (Sheng et al., 2020). Symptoms of anxiety and depression have increased drastically due to the prolonged social distancing and disruption of everyday activities (Zhao et al., 2020).

In our process of participant recruitment, one kindergarten principal declined to participate in our study to safeguard teachers' mental health. The principal noted that teachers were experiencing burnout because of the increased workload brought about by online instructions. While teachers juggled the responsibilities of home and work, they also faced

pandemic-related stressors such as the limited supply of masks (MacIntyre et al., 2020).

Similar to many of our research participants, our research team juggled multiple responsibilities brought by the changing environment in the pandemic. The PI is a working mother who had to manage her children's online schooling, her teaching responsibilities, and research projects. As most recent studies showed, due to increased childcare and home-schooling demands, working mothers were more impacted by the pandemic compared to fathers in terms of reduced work time (Collins et al., 2021; Hipp & Bunning, 2021). Other members of our team experienced various stressors, with two researchers moving abroad for further education. Another member of our team was changing jobs, which involved trying to extend her work visa while government offices were remote. Not only did the research team use online collaborative protocol to work across three different time zones (Hong Kong, the United States, and the United Kingdom) but the team members also demonstrated understanding and flexibility when it came to internal research deadlines.

It is important to acknowledge that the pandemic has impacted everyone's state of mind and behavior, in this context, both the researchers' and the participants'. In the interview protocol for this study, emphasis was placed on the demonstration of respect, humility, compassion, and appreciation. Keeping the interviews as conversations, not interrogations, was critical for building rapport between the researchers and participants. We believe that we were successful in this aim, as many of our participants expressed an interest in staying in touch and learning about our findings and also proactively referred other potential participants.

Conclusions

Working on a qualitative research project requiring a high number of semi-structured interviews in pandemic conditions has certainly posed a range of challenges. On the bright side, besides data collection and knowledge construction, the project allowed us to collect extra data on the impact of COVID-19 on the phenomenon under study. In this paper, we have showcased our adaptations in the way we collected data, recruited participants, as well as the role of technology in facilitating online interviews and interactivity. The study benefited from the flexible, adaptable, and creative approach to interview research, resulting in rich and contextual data from multiple stakeholders.

The fact that studying and working in online mode has become the new normal under COVID-19 makes online data collection more accessible as teachers, parents, educators, and business owners all become more used to a variety of online tools. Digital methods have also brought flexibility and creativity in research and, in our case, involved an extensive use of social media research methods. Using hashtags in social media turned out to be a productive way to recruit participants when interactions moved online due to the pandemic. In this

ever-changing society, it is important to be adaptive to new means of answering research questions. In the context of the ongoing pandemic, researchers can record data and perspectives on such new research methods while they are fresh. Later on, memories may fade and what is said during a crisis may be different from what is said when it is over (Robb, 2020). At the same time, it is also important to recognize some negative impacts of increased use of the digital tools, including videoconference fatigue and raised levels of stress (Bennett et al., 2021) which apply to both researchers and participants.

Disruptions in teaching and how to navigate them are important to discuss but equally important are disruptions in research. The pandemic created challenging conditions which are taking their toll on researchers' academic lives. Careers, especially those of young scholars, depend on research productivity. Levine et al. (2021) have commented that women and other caregivers especially with increased family responsibilities might experience short- and long-term career consequences from the pandemic. Oleschuk (2020) made a relevant remark that the pandemic circumstances hindered the productivity of academic women which was clearly evidenced by the journal submissions: while the overall journal submissions increased during the pandemic, the submissions authored by women have decreased. Based on the data from Elsevier journals, Squazzoni et al., (2020) came to the same conclusion that pandemic penalized the scholarly productivity of women. Jung et al. (2021) shared these sentiments, adding that academics with elderly dependents are also vulnerable. With the increasing challenges in data collection posed by the pandemic, an ongoing reflection on emergent methodological needs and adaptive and inclusive measures is vital.

In some cases, social distancing measures have made research participants more accessible. Some teachers, parents, and researchers in this study experienced flexible working schedules such as shorter working weeks and home-office arrangements. Additionally, participants' willingness to connect with others after office hours through online media, in the absence of social spaces and public facilities, might have been an important factor in their joining the study. These reflections resonate with Averett's (2021) call "to think about the pandemic sociologically."

Drawing on the works of Kathleen Thelen and Amartya Sen, Green et al. (2020) advocate for a framework of adaptability during the pandemic which allows education systems "to respond to rapidly changing circumstances while maintaining stability, promoting equality, and expanding substantive freedoms and well-being" (p. 857). In the context of teaching, Zhao and Watterston (2021) see the COVID-19 pandemic as a unique opportunity to realize much-needed educational changes in the classroom. Our paper echoes these studies from the perspective of empirical research by adding evidence and reflection on qualitative methodology while highlighting the benefits of adaptability approach and creative use of social media tools.

As shown in our study, disruptions brought by COVID-19 may encourage new ways in qualitative data collection. Researchers around the world have shared their concerns about having to change research methods midstream and going online as a consequence of public health concerns. In our experience, the overall objectives and research questions remained largely consistent; however, changes were necessary in almost all aspects of the research process, including recruitment of participants, optimizing existing data sources, and streamlining data collection approaches. Although the use of digital technologies was becoming common in social science research even before the pandemic, there is a paucity of research literature on this topic in general and especially in the field of education (Price et al., 2013). Videoconferencing applications and platforms in qualitative research have become increasingly common during the pandemic (Lobe et al., 2020). However, there is little discussion on benefits and pitfalls associated with different modes in a comparative perspective. Our experience suggests that technology, which both presents opportunities and limits them, may push researchers to think of new, flexible ways to do research, expand their methodological skill sets, and become more creative. Unexpected benefits of carrying out qualitative interview study during the pandemic together with extra challenges posed by social distancing measures created a unique learning experience for our team reflected in this paper. We hope our methodological paper will contribute to the qualitative research domain and also motivate fellow researchers to continue their work despite disruption.

ORCID iD

Magda Nutsa Kobakhidze   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5567-469X

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