

REINVENTING QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION BOUNDARIES IN PANDEMIC DISPENSATIONS LIKE THE COVID-19



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Abstract

The newly discovered coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed the traditional methods of conducting qualitative research which, by nature, heavily relies on face-to-face interaction through interviews, field work, and focus group discussions for data collection. However, the various COVID-19 safety protocols, including physical distancing, mask wearing, quarantines, restrictions of national and international travels as well as the need to limit one's movements to reduce exposure to the virus, have all disrupted traditional methods of qualitative data collection, thereby leaving researchers stranded. This article explores a number of other methods which researchers can utilize to achieve the same results released by face-to-face interactions. These methods include the use of digital voice, video, and text-based tools, online surveys, and content analysis. Drawing from a qualitative study conducted during a lockdown in Zimbabwe between May and June 2020, the article 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.

1. Introduction

In late December 2019, a highly infectious virus called the Coronavirus (COVID-19) was first detected in Wuhan, China. Its signs and symptoms include dry cough, fever, sneezing tiredness, high body temperatures, and difficulties in breathing or shortness of breath, and chest pains (Elham, 2020). The virus is transmitted both by infected individuals or those with dormant symptoms through cough and sneeze, close personal contact, including as touching infected surfaces or shaking hands and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes before washing your hands or sanitising them (Ou, Wu, Yang, Tan, Zhang, and Gu, 2020). Within a few months, the virus had spread across the world thereby prompting the World Health Organisation (WHO), on 11 March 2020, to declare it as a global pandemic.

Massive studies on COVID-19 therapeutics and vaccines are currently underway. There is no vaccine that has been pinpointed yet. As a result, countries have embarked on a number of mechanisms intended to suppress transmission. These mechanisms include the introduction of preparedness and

response actions; awareness campaigns, restriction on movements, both national and international, social distancing and cancellation of gatherings; adoption of self-isolation and mandatory quarantines for a minimum of 14 days. These mechanisms directly impact on how qualitative research is conducted and have forced many researchers, particularly students and early careers scholars to postpone, abandon fieldwork, or change their intended research methodologies as the COVID-19 conditions constrain face-to-face relations through interviews, field work, and focus group discussions. However, there are other methods, namely; the use of digital voice, video, and text-based tools, online surveys, and content analysis, through which qualitative data can still be collected. This article seeks to demonstrate 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 main research objectives of the article are to (i) explore ICTs as an alternative qualitative data collection method in the context of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and (ii) identify the

ethical issues surrounding the use of ICTs as qualitative data collection tools. The article partly draws from a qualitative study in which the author was part of (Ndhlovu and Tembo, 2020). The study was conducted at the height of a highly policed and militarised national COVID-19 lockdown between May and June 2020 in Zimbabwe. The study was conducted with a total of 12 social work practitioners from different organisations and in different provinces across the country. While the study focused on the gendered socio-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Zimbabwe, it presented the author an opportunity to explore the various alternatives of qualitative data collection in the COVID-19 dispensation. This article also benefits from the review of secondary sources and research methods debates as well as conferences which the author has been engaging in since the onset of the pandemic.

After the introduction, the next section discusses the status of qualitative research in the context of a pandemic. This is followed by a discussion on selected ICTs as potential tools for qualitative data collection; their advantages and disadvantages; and the ethical issues involved. Lastly, the chapter makes conclusions and recommendations.

2. Qualitative Research and the COVID-19 Pandemic

There are different views scattered in literature on what exactly qualitative research constitutes. While the aim of this article is not to exhaust these debates, it is useful here to point out its basic components so as to flag how this strand of research has been impacted on by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the reviewed literature, the term 'qualitative research' has been found to be a little vague (Strauss 2003) and that many angles of viewing qualitative research exists (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). As a result, a one-size-fits-all definition cannot be pinpointed. Flick (2018) considers the term to be problematic and that it can mean different things to different people. Hammersley (2013) states that the task of providing a description of the idiosyncratic components of qualitative research is simply not a straightforward exercise. In this article, qualitative research is presented simply as method of data collection and analysis which uses non-numerical strategies to acquire an in-depth understanding of experiences, concepts, or opinions, and is therefore, by outlook, very different from quantitative research which collects and analyses numerical data for statistical analysis. Face-to-face interaction has always been the basis for traditional qualitative research. This description is convenient as it allows the author to discuss the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on this method. The description also speaks closely to one of the

concise attempts at defining the concept by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) who posit that:

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives.

This description shows that what is known as qualitative research highly relies on, and also deploys, a wide range of close contact or interaction activities which are meant to generate an in-depth view of how and why people feel, react, think, and behave in a particular manner. The aim of qualitative research is to generate concepts, strategies, or to understand practices that govern groups or institutions. As a result, unlike its quantitative cousin whose generalizability relies of huge samples, qualitative research makes use of small samples meant to release an in-depth understanding of phenomenon. De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, and Delpont (2011) posit that in qualitative studies, saturation can be reached even with a minimum of 12 participants, and therefore, researchers necessarily need not to work with very large samples. Qualitative research is also widely used due to its 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). This makes it suitable to students or inexperienced researchers who may not need to commence their studies with a hypothesis. Qualitative research is widely used both in academic and applied research where it has continued to yield important outcomes which have triggered further qualitative or quantitative investigation. The most common qualitative methods discussed due to their relevance in the current work are interviews, focus groups, and ethnography. These are used for a variety of purposes and in a variety of contexts. Their success highly depends on the researcher's physical interaction with the participants. For all the qualitative research methods discussed below, data analysis can either be conducted manually or can be carried out using computer software such as NVivo, or Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

2.1. Interviews

Interviews are possibly the most common qualitative research method. Interviews are typically one-on-one interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee to discuss whatever issues are under investigation (Gravetter and Forzao, 2016; Leavy, 2017; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2016). An interview can be done through face-to-face or through the use of modern technologies (phone call, Skype, Zoom, and many others). Where the interview question items are open-ended, and where they allow contributors to give exhaustive information about each question item, the interview method can be very beneficial in the acquisition of in-depth understanding of the issues related to the study. Interviews also allow participants to contribute any information which they think is relevant and which the researcher will have not asked (Creswell, 2018). This engenders a fruitful engagement with participants (Bryman and Bell, 2014). Interviews thus, allow for a variety of issues to be discussed than would be possible when using questionnaires (Flick, 2018). Interviews offer the highest response rate as participants are approached physically. Interviews allow the interviewer to judge the non-verbal behaviour of the interviewees; decide a conducive location for the interview, have control over the order of questions, and also make use of as many probing questions as possible.

The quality of the data generated by interviews can be exceptionally comprehensive, nuanced and valuable. 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. An interview can also be biased as responses by the interviewee can be affected by the reaction to the interviewer's position, class, race, or even gender (Leavy, 2017). Interviews are most effective when they are recorded and transcribed to reliably preserve the details and nuances of the interaction. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the liberty to make use of face-to-face interviews has become under siege, not only by COVID-19 safety protocols, but also by the fear by researchers and participants to expose themselves to the disease.

2.2. Focus Group Discussions

A focus group is defined as in-depth interviews in which a small group of people between 6-12 are selected and assembled to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research under the guidance of a moderator (Creswell 2018). Focus group discussions are important in that interaction with participants can lead to new issues being identified in the research (Sekaran and Bougie, 2014). Focus groups deal with a group(s) that shares a need, social characteristic, or lifestyle, for some specific research purpose. They are frequently used for social or market research (Flick,

2018). They allow researchers to gather data within a short space of time and may be cost effective since a group of participants is interviewed at a single sitting. It is therefore suitable particularly where the research is self-funded.

Like interviews, however, the success of focus group discussions is based on the physical interaction of participants and the moderator (interviewer). This therefore, presents a challenge under the contemporary COVID-19 restrictions in which people may not be easily assembled or may refuse to assemble due to the fear of contacting the virus.

2.3. Ethnography

Broadly speaking, ethnography is the study of cases in their own environment through the use of methods such as face-to-face interviews and participant observation. It is used by researchers to understand behaviour in particular environments and to understand the people's own interpretation of such behaviour. As a qualitative research method, ethnography enables researchers to capture the lived experiences of their participants and affords researchers an opportunity to "... inductively observe, interpret, and reflect on what ... [social actors say and do] in specific social contexts while the researcher simultaneously reflects on her/his experiences and interpretations" (Burawoy, 2009, p.39). Ethnography affords researchers to access a rich source of data and it helps to disclose unarticulated details (Leavy, 2017). By its nature, ethnographic research requires the physical interaction of the researcher with the people whose circumstances is being studied. This means the researcher may need to migrate to the research site. This presents huge challenges where the researcher needs to travel to other countries or places that have particular COVID-19 restrictions. Researchers may also be reluctant to take the risk of going into such areas. Most of the COVID-19 safety protocols either prohibit or limit physical interaction and travel, thereby, making it very difficult for qualitative researchers to conduct their studies. Some students and some early-career researchers had to even suspend their data collection particularly at the height of the pandemic between March and August 2020 (Jowett, 2020; Ndhlovu, 2020).

The next section 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.

3. Potential Video, Voice and Text-based Options

To generate qualitative data on the socio-economic implications of the COVID-19 under the lockdown in Zimbabwe (Ndhlovu and Tembo, 2020), 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 discussions. These communications can be done using ICT tools such as computers, tablets, and smart cellphones. They require the use of specific computer applications, such as Skype, Zoom, and the WhatsApp Messenger. Each of these methods is detailed in the next sub-sections. These ICTs are categorised into video, voice, and text technologies.

3.1. Video Technology

The video technologies used in the study were Skype and the WhatsApp Messenger. However, Zoom could also be an important tool for collecting qualitative data. The first tool used was Skype. 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 10 different provinces and in different organisations across the country, Skype was found to be an important tool in overcoming some traditional barriers to communication and for actually offering a ‘face-to-face’ engagement with participants. Potential participants were first communicated to through emails. The prospective participants were provided with the details of the study and its requirements. After obtaining consent to participate in the study by email, the researcher further 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 who had no Skype accounts. Skype calling was effective as it afforded the researcher to also observe non-verbal actions as would have been the case in a physical face-to-face interaction.

In an era when every individual is supposed to wear a face mask in public, Skype enabled the researcher to closely observe facial reactions as participants expressed the seriousness of gender-based violence which had emerged as the second pandemic across the country. Facial reactions were easier to notice since the participants did not wear masks during the Skype interviews. Particular attention could also be easily paid to other body movements which could aid understanding. For instance, female participants tended to emphasise their facts by pointing at their body parts thereby making it easier for the author to understand the nature of violence which was being unleashed on women during the COVID-19 national lockdown in Zimbabwe. The researcher understood that while there were many physical negative implications of the pandemic on women, much of the effects were psychological as women struggled to source food for their households during a national lockdown. Participants regularly pointed at their heads with forefingers, thereby indicating that much of the challenge occurred in the head. Some

participants constantly touched their stomachs, an indication that the other challenge was related to food or hunger. These are gesturing that qualitative researchers usually look for during face-to-face physical interviews.

Most participants confirmed that video engagement made telecommunications appear much more human, as both the researcher and participants felt mutually connected (see Ndhlovu, 2020). The challenge however, was that not all participants had a Skype account. Thus, the researcher had to incur extra call costs for participants who had to be contacted directly on their phone numbers. Where this obtains, researchers without adequate funding can experience an additional challenge. Despite common challenges such as the lack of Skype accounts by some participants, difficulties in technology use by some, and poor-quality internet connection, video-calling through Skype was found to be the closest substitute to face-to-face interviews.

The WhatsApp Messenger was also used to collect qualitative data. The WhatsApp Messenger allows users to send text and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images, videos, documents, and user locations. The WhatsApp application runs on mobile smart phones, but can also be accessed from desktop computers provided the user’s mobile phone remains connected to the internet while they use the desktop. While not all participants had Skype accounts, all had the WhatsApp Messenger. The WhatsApp video service was found to be as effective as a Skype calling.

While the researchers in the mentioned study (Ndhlovu and Tembo, 2020) did not conduct focus group discussions, the author opines that that Zoom – a cloud-based peer-to-peer application used for conferencing and telecommunication - could also offer an important opportunity to conduct focus group discussions since it is usually only 8-12 people who make an ideal focus group size (Flick, 2018). Zoom could even be more effective than physical face-to-face interactions since the researcher can easily control who should talk at a time than can be done when all participants are assembled together physically. The most talkative participants can dominate others, thereby, eroding the sense of the focus group.

3.2. Voice Technologies

The voice technologies used in the study to collect data were direct phone calls, WhatsApp Messenger calls and WhatsApp voice notes. To enhance an effective conversation, participants were first recruited through emails and their phone numbers requested as stated above. Upon acceptance, a list of questions (interview guide) was sent to consenting participants in advance. The researcher would then make a phone call to discuss the

questions on the interview guide. Phone calls allowed the researchers to engage participants who did not have other means to participate and yet who possessed the needed information. All the conversations were recorded for transcription and analysis just like in a normal interview. Direct phone calls were, however, expensive to conduct. Poor network connection was also another challenge which should be anticipated. In some instance, both the researcher and the interviewees had to ask for pardon due to the inaudibility of some parts of the conversation.

The same procedure used for direct phone calls was also used for WhatsApp calling. This service had the same challenges as phone calling, but had an added challenge of voice bounce-backs as well as sudden disconnections. Several times, the researcher would have to apologise to participants for calling again ones the calling had been disconnected. Patience and skill are therefore, important virtues when using this sort of tool for research. The WhatsApp voice notes service is another important tool. After sending a list of questions to prospective participants as detailed above, participants were allowed to respond through voice notes if it was convenient for them. Some participants preferred to type their responses where they thought they could be misunderstood. All the voice notes were transcribed, and where clarification was needed, a follow up WhatsApp call was made. The advantage of WhatsApp voice notes is that they can be stored for a very long time for reference purposes. In general, WhatsApp billing was found to be cost effective as compared to the other tools mentioned above. The cost of using this service can be afforded even by students from low income households conducting school studies which are self-funded, and therefore, data collection necessarily need not to be suspended due to COVID-19 safety protocols and restrictions.

3.3. Text-based Technologies

Text-based technologies are also useful for qualitative data collection. In the study by Ndhlovu and Tembo (2020), consenting participants can be allowed to type their responses as texts through WhatsApp. While this could be laborious for participants, the researcher will enjoy the acquisition of data which is already transcribed. Texts are also physical and can be stored for a long time.

Jowett (2020) also found online surveys as an important text-based tool for collecting qualitative data. The researcher can develop an online questionnaire with open-ended questions and email it or send the link to prospective participants requesting them to type their responses in the provided spaces. Although qualitative surveys tend to generate fewer rich data when compared to interviews, they preserve most of the qualitative research benefits, including generating unanticipated results,

while also allowing researchers to collect data from a larger number of participants rather quickly. However, online surveys suffer the same basic challenges of poor internet connections and detachment of the researcher from participants thereby making probing impossible. It can also be laborious for participants who will need a significant amount of their time to type their responses. It may also be difficult to recruit participants, particularly for students and early career researchers. However, where students have the support of their supervisors and universities which can allow them to recruit participants on student portals, for instance, the method can be very rewarding, satisfactory, and afford researchers not to interfere with the COVID-19 pandemic safety requirements.

Content analysis on text-based secondary sources, including newspaper, magazine articles, and blogs can also serve as important qualitative data sources (Ndhlovu, 2020). These sources can provide first-person narratives which are relevant for analysing a variety of issues that require a qualitative focus. The use of these sources of information do not interfere with COVID-19 safety protocols. Secondary sources can be obtained from local libraries or can be downloaded from the internet and thus, there is no need to travel. Students can analyse social representations in these data sources to complete their dissertations. When intending to make use of these secondary sources, it is important to develop topics and research objectives that are of public interest, such as pandemics, land issues, politics, and so forth, which can easily be covered in available secondary sources. Where the researcher is interested in issues that are not of public interest, textbooks and journal articles or other sources of accessible secondary information may be used.

The other important text-based method to use for qualitative data conditions under COVID-19 duress conditions is the internet. Most researchers and students have internet access in their homes and on their mobile devices. South African universities, such as the University of South Africa (UNISA), the University of Western Cape (UWC), and the University of Johannesburg (UJ), for instance, have been providing students based in South Africa with some internet data bundles since the declaration of a COVID-19 national lockdown in March 2020. This was meant to enable students to study at home. Research students could use these data bundles to conduct research on the internet. For such students, the internet could provide a relatively low-cost avenue for gaining access to information and articles which could be used for research. Internet is easy to access thereby, time-saving, while also allowing researchers to manage the research more effectively. In this view, the internet could be considered as a powerful tool to enable study and research to continue during lockdowns.

3.4. Miscellaneous

A variety of other secondary data sources which researchers can use include television and radio discussion programmes. These data sources can be useful particularly on dominant issues which, as stated above, are of public interest. Online discussion forums and social media platforms, such as social networking (Facebook, WhatsApp), microblogging (Twitter), photo sharing (Snapchat, Instagram), and video sharing (Facebook Live, You Tube) can also be used taking into consideration germane privacy and data protection requirements. These sources can be used even under extreme COVID-19 lockdown conditions, and they could allow less-experienced researchers or students, for instance, to make use of easily accessible data to examine the social world rather than generate data themselves.

4. Opportunities for and Constraints of ‘Going Technology’ on Qualitative Research

There a number of opportunities for and constraints on deploying ICTs to collect qualitative data. While these tools were found to be convenient and effective under heavily policed and militarised national lockdown conditions in Zimbabwe, they were not without their own constraints (Ndhlovu and Tembo, 2020). The major advantage was that the use of video and voice calling, and prompt text messaging commendably replicated qualitative research data collection methods (interviews, focus group discussions). These tools produced large volumes of in-depth data (see Ndhlovu and Tembo, 2020; Ndhlovu, 2020). ICT tools also save time and are cost-effective since there may be no need to travel around to collect data. The tools also offer flexibility both in data collection and analysis. The use of ICT tools can also generate permanent records which can be referred to later as mentioned earlier. Some ICT tools such as WhatsApp are also simple to use and do not require too much technical knowledge. WhatsApp is already widely used by non-technical users in both developed and developing countries and therefore, can be deployed as an effective qualitative data collection tool (Ndhlovu, 2020).

The shortcomings of video, and voice calling are, however, that participants can find it hard to focus during the interview possibly due to the environment which they choose as ideal for the interview. The researcher has no control on the location chosen by participants to take the interview. This is a major challenge since in a qualitative study, it is always at the researcher’s responsibility to identify a location ideal for interviews. From time to time, ICTs can be disrupted by poor network connections as experienced in Zimbabwe (Ndhlovu and Tembo, 2020). Sometimes there would be delays between responses while in

some instances, the voice quality was poor. This can be due to poor internet connections or the failure of equipment in the middle of a discussion. The use of ICTs can be a challenge in countries such as Zimbabwe where electricity load shedding can last up to 24 hours a day (Nyathi, 2019). This can be very frustrating especially where there are time limits for the interview. Some participants did not have the required software applications such as Skype. This became a challenge particularly when the success of the study rests on the involvement of such participants. However, where participants are able to use these ICTs, the challenges surrounding them can actually be outweighed by the benefits of using them for qualitative research. The other disadvantage, which pertains particularly to the use of the internet, include that the internet provides huge amounts of data. This can result in information overload for students and inexperienced researchers. This can also be very confusing. Internet data can also be deceptive and make researchers to arrive at false conclusions since much of it does not go through peer review processes unlike data found in printed books and journal articles. Peer review processes of books and journal articles ensure information quality assurance, and therefore, makes such data sources suitable as research resources. The other disadvantage regarding the internet as a data source is the threat from computer viruses which can damage the normal functioning of computer systems. Computers that are connected to internet are more prone to virus attacks. Where this happens, researchers may lose their information thereby frustrating research progress.

There are also some huge ethical issues to grapple with when collecting qualitative data using ICTs.

5. Ethical Considerations

One of the key principles for research is the need to observe research ethics. The basic ethical requirements, including academic originality and a truthful reporting of findings, cannot be overemphasized. A huge spectrum of ethical requirements, however, arise when a study directly involves people. The ethical issues regarding ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, privacy rights, and protection from harm are basic for every study and should be satisfied. However, where the researcher is physically removed from participants, the observation of ethics becomes very complex and demanding as people are more suspicious and reluctant to participate. Where this obtains, the researcher’s skills and creative ability become of critical importance. Inexperienced researchers would need to work closely with study supervisors to ensure that their progress is not undermined by an inability to satisfy or break through ethical barriers.

In the study cited above (Ndhlovu and Tembo, 2020), the researchers first made invitation phone calls to all prospective participants. Upon acceptance of the invitation, the researchers requested the participants' Skype accounts or 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 politicization of COVID-19-related information in Zimbabwe. However, upon detailed explanations concerning the study and the precautions that would be taken to safeguard information, prospective participants became more comfortable and shared their details, and were willing to participate. Their participation, therefore, was entirely based on the satisfaction of all the basic research ethics requirements.

Participants' personal details were safeguarded and were not shared anywhere. All the data - audios and transcripts - were saved in the computer of one of the researchers where it was only accessible through a password. The researchers also made sure to consult the participants on the appropriate times in which the interviews could be conducted. The aim was to make sure that participants were not inconvenienced since most of them participated from their work offices.

Academic moral degeneration in the form of plagiarism is one of the ethical challenges that may easily arise where inexperienced researchers make use of secondary, tertiary, internet or other text-based sources as data sources. Thus, researchers need to be abreast with the methods that can safeguard them from this academic misconduct. These methods could include proper referencing and originality in writing. During write-up, the researcher needs to develop the art of paraphrasing and properly referencing sources including the provision of page numbers where the information from another source is reproduced. Links should also be provided for online sources. Originality-detecting software should also be used as part of an effort to improve the originality of the write-up. In all these research ethics struggles, students need to work closely with their study supervisors to ensure that they can still conduct their research even under COVID-19 restrictions without compromising the ethical dimensions of research and the needs of their participants and their sources of information.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The focus of this article was to explore ICTs as an alternative qualitative data collection method in the context of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The article also identified the ethical issues surrounding the use of ICTs for this purpose. It posits that while the COVID-19 pandemic has been a public health issues, it has also disrupted the way research is conducted. Qualitative

research data collection, in particular, has been particularly affected thereby forcing many researchers to either suspend their data collection or completely change their research methodologies. Traditional qualitative research is based on face-to-face human interaction, and yet the COVID-19 pandemic has ignited travel restrictions, national lockdowns, and physical distancing as some of the safety protocols. All of these prohibit human interaction on which qualitative research relies upon.

As a result, the article recommends that researchers now experiment with new ways of collecting qualitative data while also observing safety protocols and ethical considerations. The article posits that ICT tools become handy for qualitative data collection in context of crises such as the COVID-19 with both advantages and disadvantages. The article described some of the ethical considerations involved in the use of digital tools and also concludes that in no time had the expertise of study supervisors been more vital for students than it is now in the COVID-19 dispensation. It recommends that as early-career researchers and students struggle with their data collection due to COVID-19 safety protocols, it is vital that video, voice, and text-based ICT tools be recognized and emphasized as an alternative way of qualitative data collection during this chaotic pandemic.

Declaration of ownership of manuscript

I to confirm that the manuscript titled "Reinventing Qualitative Data Collection in Pandemic Dispensations like the COVID-19" co-authored by Dr David Mhlanga and Dr Emmanuel Ndhlovu is our own work. The manuscript was first submitted to Turnitin under the Vaal University of Technology by Dr Ndhlovu. Any similarity index which links the manuscript to the Vaal University of Technology should, therefore, be disregarded. If there is any additional information required, please contact us in this regard.

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