

Conducting research activities during COVID-19

This method is an adaptation of a participatory visual-arts based course for the purpose of conducting research online during the COVID-19 pandemic with all its associated restrictions.¹ Its aim is to engage participants visually and creatively and to facilitate critical discussion while adhering to lockdown restrictions and recommendations.

The provision of art materials

The researcher can put together a sanitised package of art materials for each participant to be delivered directly to their home. It is recommended that all materials be sealed in plastic when purchased to make sanitizing the items easier. The researcher should use a surface sanitiser with 60+% alcohol (recommended for protecting against the coronavirus) to sanitise all art materials included in the package. Once sanitised, the items should be placed in a sealable plastic bag and sealed. They must not be reopened until delivered to the participants. The researcher must follow a 'no contact delivery' protocol when delivering the materials to participants. The following text is a message that can be sent to participants which explains how researchers can follow a no-contact delivery protocol:

1. *I will be personally sanitizing all contents of the art kits using a surface sanitiser with over 60% alcohol content (recommended to protect against the Coronavirus). I will place the sanitised materials inside a sealed plastic bag.*
2. *I will arrange with each of you a date and time for me to deliver the art kits to your home.*
3. *I will arrange with each of you where you would like me to place the art kit and how I can access this spot (for example, do I need to phone you to open a remote-controlled gate?).*
4. *Once there, I will place the art kit in the agreed upon spot, step 1 metre away (this is the distance recommended by the World Health Organisation²), and phone you so that you know to collect the art kit.*
5. *You should then take the bag, immediately empty the contents onto a clean surface, throw the plastic bag away, and wash your hands rigorously with soap. Make sure that in this process you do not touch anything except the bag before washing your hands.*
6. *I will then exit your property and sanitise my hands before getting back into the car.*

Researchers must give participants the option to use materials that they have at their homes if they are practicing complete self-isolation and are not comfortable with the researcher coming to their homes. The use of materials that participants have at home may also be necessary if researchers want to conduct their research during lockdown phases where they are unable to purchase art materials or drive to participants' homes.

The method

Part 1: The researcher records and shares a video introducing the theme for the week and poses a number of questions relating to the theme for participants to consider when creating their response. Participants are asked to create an artwork that responds to the theme, and then to record a video using their phones showing the group their artwork and explaining a bit about the ideas, experiences and meanings that it represents. Participants will be asked to post their video on a shared Google

¹ This novel approach to data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic was developed by Ms Kylie Kuhl from the Sociology and Social Anthropology department at Stellenbosch University. The REC thanks her and her supervisor, Professor Dennis Francis for their contribution.

² <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

Drive folder by a certain date and time, and to take some time to watch each other's. This part of the methodology is asynchronous and is best suited to reflective research aims as it allows participants to take time in developing their responses. The use of videos allows the researcher and participants to engage with each other in a way that is more personal (as opposed to text-based communication), but which does not rely on high-speed internet connection required for live video calls.

Part 2: The researcher schedules a focus group discussion with participants on WhatsApp once they have all had enough time to view each other's videos. The purpose of the focus group discussion is to discuss shared and differing experiences, and for the researcher to facilitate critical discussion about the artworks that participants created and the ideas that are represented. This part of the methodology is synchronous and allows for more spontaneous and instant responses from participants.

Ethical considerations particular to online research

The use of online methods raises new questions regarding how to ensure these principles are maintained. Researchers conducting online group research must consider how to ensure that participants protect each others' contact information (email addresses and phone numbers used to communicate with each other online). Researchers also need to consider how to protect the data that participants share in the online research context, particularly identifying photographs and videos. Google Drive is therefore suggested for the sharing of this kind of data. There is an available function where, when uploading a file to the folder, the person uploading can restrict sharing options. This is a fairly simple step and one which researchers can explain to participants at the outset of the research. Once enabled, this feature allows members of the Google Drive folder to view the video, but not to download or share it. Researchers can transcribe participants' videos in the same way they would audio recordings of face-to-face group discussion. Once the course has concluded, all files in the shared folder must be deleted.

Another issue relating to the confidentiality of what participants share in online research is how private the platforms used are. WhatsApp is therefore suggested for individual interviews and focus group discussions. As of 2016, end-to-end encryption has been implemented for all WhatsApp messages. This means that:

"WhatsApp has no ability to see the content of messages or listen to calls on WhatsApp. That's because the encryption and decryption of messages sent on WhatsApp occurs entirely on your device. Before a message ever leaves your device, it's secured with a cryptographic lock, and only the recipient has the keys. In addition, the keys change with every single message that's sent"
(<https://faq.whatsapp.com/en/android/28030015/>)

The messages shared on a WhatsApp group are therefore protected.

Online consent forms are recommended for online research. If the research involves the participation of minors, participant consent forms should be sent to participants' email addresses (if possible and depending on age) and parental consent forms should be sent to the parents/legal guardians' email addresses. Given that signatures are not possible, this is necessary to ensure that it is the participants and parents/legal guardians themselves who are providing consent.

Applying this methodology to your research

This methodology was designed to enable the researcher to conduct a three-week participatory visual arts-based course online, but the ideas and strategies involved can be adapted for a range of research aims.