The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Researching Older People During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Case of the Italian Longitudinal Study on Older People's Quality of Life During the Covid-19 Pandemic (ILQA-19)

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Abstract. The Longitudinal Study on Older People's Quality of Life during the Covid-19 pandemic (ILQA-19) is a qualitative study carried out during the 2020 lockdown on 40 older men and women living in the ten villages in northern Italy subject to the first lockdown in Europe. This study focuses on older people's lives and the role of digital technologies during the pandemic, and it has been carried out fully remotely. Despite the need to research the social consequence of pandemics for older people, there is a shortage of studies that provide guidelines on how to successfully involve this population in online qualitative studies. This paper contributes to fill this gap by discussing the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in implementing the different stages of ILQA-19 research. The best practices of qualitative studies conducted through ICTs are discussed, along with the strategies we enacted to enhance participation in the study. Specifically, panel engagement, tailoring procedures and building positive and trustworthy interactions with study members are crucial when researching older people through online methods.

Keywords: COVID 19 · Qualitative research · ICT · Older people · Online methods

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has radically changed people's lives, posing serious challenges to their well-being. Specifically, the containment measures that the government adopted to contrast the effects of the pandemic had a dramatic impact on the old age population. There is therefore an urgent need to explore the social consequences of Covid-19 in old age. With this respect, qualitative research methods are powerful tools to investigate the changes brought about by Covid-19. However, conducting qualitative research during

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pandemics poses a number of challenges because of the mobility restrictions and the need to avoid close physical contacts. In these circumstances, qualitative research methods that fully exploit the potential of Innovation and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are a feasible alternative to face-to-face based research methods. This work describes the procedures we adopted to conduct the Longitudinal Study on Older People's Quality of Life during the Covid-19 pandemic (ILQA-19). Specifically, it describes the strategies we enacted to research older people through qualitative methods of online data collection, with the view to identify best practices. ILQA-19 is a qualitative study that was carried out during the first lockdown (March 2020); it explores the social consequences of the pandemic on older people's well-being and everyday life. ILQA-19 is conducted on a panel of 40 older men and women living in ten villages located in a rural province South of Milan (in the Italian Lombardy region) subject to the first lockdown in Europe.

2 ICT Use in Doing Qualitative Research on Older People in Pandemic Times

There is still a shortage of knowledge on older people's recruitment and interviewing for qualitative studies during pandemics (Guha-Sapir et al. 2015). However, research conducted in the field of sociology of disasters has provided useful guidelines with this respect (Phillips 2014; Rodríguez et al. 2007). Scholars in this field have acknowledged the importance of early recognition and involvement of community leaders, who can provide key support in participant recruitment (Cheung et al. 2003; Johnson and Vindrola-Padros 2017) and encourage reluctant individuals' participation (Henderson et al. 2009), thus indirectly reducing selection bias. As for the interview process, they have stressed the importance of minimizing participants and interviewers' discomfort and emotional burden (Lavin et al. 2012; Parkes 2011). Despite their relevance, these studies have not provided any specific indications for situations in which in-person interviews are not feasible, as during pandemics when face-to-face social interactions are very limited or even forbidden.

Research on online synchronous interviewing methods has shown the relevance of ICT use in conducting social research, providing useful suggestions that can also be applied when carrying out qualitative studies in pandemic times. For example, Lo Iacono et al. (2016) have documented the feasibility of doing online qualitative research, especially when using technologies that allow for interviewer-interviewee visual interactions, such as video-call apps on computers and mobile devices. Specifically, the authors contribute with some practical suggestions that can be adopted when conducting qualitative interviews remotely, including in-depth investigation of participants' ability and willingness to use video-interviews, sending advance preliminary instructions (e.g., shutting down other applications, silencing phones, choosing a quiet place), and contacting participants several times before the interview to establish trust. The authors also recommended paying attention to ethical issues, such as gaining participants' informed consent and warranting data security. Specifically, the choice of the platform for video-interviewing participants depends mainly on data security evaluations (Lobe et al. 2020).

More recently, some scholars have discussed their research experience when shifting planned research from in-person interviews to online techniques of data collection.

Conducting virtual qualitative studies makes participants' recruitment more challenging, especially when recruiting populations at risk of social exclusion, due to their limited or inconsistent access to virtual tools (Saberi 2020; Sy et al. 2020). Indeed, researchers may need to undertake additional, creative, and purposive efforts to reach their target population, e.g., using digital technologies and social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, (Kobakhidze et al. 2021), or extending the study timeline to reach the established number of participants (Roberts et al. 2021). Also, dealing with ethical issues, such as obtaining consent virtually, may become a complex task. On the one hand, some scholars argue that only minor amendments to the process of obtaining informed consent are needed (Dodds & Hess, 2020), on the other, some researchers claim that gaining informed consent, along with the entire online research process, poses new challenges (Roberts et al. 2021). Obtaining consent via email is the most common way of replacing in-person consent procedures (Lobe et al. 2020); however, this procedure does not allow for the two-way conversation necessary for researchers to explain and, whenever necessary, negotiate the terms of the consent form. For this reason, Roberts and colleagues (2021) preferred a two-way interaction in real time with a digital signature, when collecting informed consent for their study. In addition, there are also mixed research experiences when focusing on remote interviewing. Indeed, there is preliminary evidence suggesting that participants benefited from feeling comfortable and more relaxed whereas researchers felt less intrusive and safer not going into people's homes (Dodds & Hess, 2020). However, transcriptions became more difficult and sometimes conversations were interrupted due to poor connectivity (Kobakhidze et al. 2021; Roberts et al. 2021). Also, online interviewing increased the workload of researchers because they needed to attend to technology-related tasks and raised participants' fatigue due to the time spent in front of a computer or holding a smartphone. For these reasons, some suggest that the interview duration should be limited to 30 min (Kobakhidyze et al., 2021).

Research that we mentioned so far acknowledges the challenges of "going online" when researching populations at risk of vulnerability (mainly referring to homeless persons or alcohol consumers). However, these studies did not focus specifically on the older population, which may pose different (or additional) challenges. More often, older people are deemed not suitable for online research because of the extra effort it requires in terms of research design and recruitment process (Newman et al. 2021). A recent study by Richardson et al. (2020) contributed to fill in the literature about researching older people online. The authors stress that, when researching older people, tailoring is the key principle that should drive the design of the recruiting and interviewing procedures. Indeed, the interview mode and interview protocol should meet older people's preferences and skills, e.g., offering those who are familiar with technology the opportunity to collect interviews using video calls, reducing respondent burden. To reach this goal the interview guide should be short and flexible, interviews should be scheduled at a time of the day most convenient for participants, the intensity of data collection should be reduced at specific points of the pandemic (i.e., during the epidemiologic peaks), as also suggested by Vindrola-Padros et al. (2020). Richardson and colleagues (2020) also acknowledge the complexity of collecting informed consent when interviewing older people remotely, because the consent form cannot be discussed in person with the

interviewers, a procedure that usually enhances study participation, by facilitating trust. Despite the relevance of Richardson et al. (2020)'s study, their contribution does not address specifically the methodological issues that arise when conducting qualitative research on older people remotely. This paper contributes to fill this gap by discussing the use of ICT in implementing the different stages of the Longitudinal Study on Older People's Quality of Life during the Covid-19 pandemic (ILQA-19), a study that is carried out fully remotely. Specifically, this work addresses the following research questions:

i) what are the strategies that need to be implemented when researching older people through online qualitative methods?
ii) which online strategies are most suitable for qualitative longitudinal research?
iii) to what extent does ICT use play a role in interviewer-interviewee interactions?

In the attempt to answer our research questions, in the next sections we will illustrate in detail our research design and discuss the specific choices we made during each stage of the data collection process.

3 The ILQA-19 Study

ILQA-19 is a qualitative longitudinal study conducted on a purposive sample of 40 men and women aged between 65 and 80, living in ten villages located in the rural area of the Lodi province (in the Lombardy region) and belonging to Europe's first Covid-19 'Red Zone'. The study aims to explore the consequences of the social distancing measures introduced to contrast the Covid-19 outbreak on older people's well-being and everyday life. In addition, it also intends to longitudinally explore the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak on older people's everyday life practices, exploring the resources enacted to react to the challenges brought about by the health emergency.

The first wave of the data collection was conducted in spring 2020, during the lockdown, using semi-structured video-interviews. The interview guide covered the following topics: changes occurred in everyday life, role of social relationships and ICT, and impact of the different containment measures on well-being. The second wave started in spring 2021 and the interview guide was updated to adapt to the changing context of the pandemic situation and the related institutional response (e.g., social distancing measures and vaccination programs). While the research design was planned jointly by the three authors, Giulia Melis carried out all interviews.

4 ILQA-19 Data Collection Stages and ICT Use

When discussing the use of ICT in the different stages of the ILQA-19 data collection, we focus on the recruitment (study advertising and participant recruitment), interviewing, and panel maintenance stages. Figure 1 provides an overview of the data collection process.

Stage	Date	ICT use
1. Recruitment	April-July-2020	
- Study advertising	April 2020	email to mayors
- Participant recruitment	May – July 2020	email to local organisations; SNS use
2. Interviewing		
-Wave 1	May-July 2020	Video-calls (i.e. WhatsApp, Google Meet, Zoom, Skype)
-Wave 2	May - October 2021	Video-calls
3. Panel maintenance		
-Wave 1	August 2020 - April 2021	Youtube videos; online seminars
-Wave 2	November 2021 - ongoing	Youtube videos

Fig. 1. Overview of the data collection process

5 Recruiting

In Spring 2020, when the data collection started, Italy was in lockdown. Therefore, in order to remotely recruit older people, we developed a two-step procedure, i.e., study advertising and participant recruitment. The protocol is described in detail in Melis, Sala and Zaccaria (2021a); here, we provide a brief overview of the steps undertaken to recruit study participants.

5.1 Study Advertising

During the study advertising phase, we informed the general population and the local authorities about the beginning of the study, published several articles in the local newspapers, and contacted by email or telephone call the mayors of the ten villages where the study was conducted, inviting them to advertise the study amongst the local community (e.g., using the city council website). This strategy proved to be successful; considering that the majors had to deal with the challenges posed by an unprecedented health emergency, six (out of ten) advertised the study on the city council website or using more traditional communication media (e.g., bulletin boards) and provided the contact details of the local stakeholders, e.g., AUSER, the most important Italian voluntary association in the field of active aging.

5.2 Participant Recruitment

The participant recruitment phase is grounded on community engagement. Specifically, to start the snowball sample, we contacted the local organizations by email, providing them with the study description and inviting them to identify, amongst their members, older people potentially interested in taking part in the study. In addition, we also activated our weak ties, facilitated by the fact that one of the team members had connections in the area where the study is based. To recruit further study participants, we fully

exploited the potential of social networking sites (SNS), posting the call to action on the local Facebook pages. All in all, either through snowballing or through spontaneous responses to our study advertisement, we managed to recruit 40 participants.

6 Interviewing

ICT played a pivotal role in contacting and interviewing study participants. During the first wave of data collection, each interview was preceded by a preliminary contact by telephone. This first call aimed to provide a general overview of the case study, present the team members, and anticipate the details of the interview process (e.g., the online nature of data collection). In addition, it also intended to establish a common ground of trust among the participants and contrast any potential barrier to participation, i.e., oppositions due to the fear of scams (Melis et al. 2021a) and unwillingness to conduct a video-call for personal discretion or lack of basic digital literacy. We responded to participants' reluctance by highlighting the advantages of video-interviews in terms of trust and informality (as also mentioned in Howlett 2021), describing them as a useful solution to implement during the lockdown. To enhance participation among the less digitally savvy, we also developed a protocol aimed at enabling each potential participant to take part in the study regardless of their ICT skills (Melis et al. 2021a). Sometimes, potential participants contacted us directly to volunteer for the study and ask for further information. In these cases, obtaining participants' cooperation was easier. In general, mentioning the support of local institutions and stakeholders, together with the study advertisement available on local newspapers and on our own Department webpage were key to provide a clear and concrete guarantee about the academic nature of the study. All in all, the contact phase was extremely important to enhance online participation, assess participants' digital skills, and present fieldwork documents. For example, the request for a clear expression of consent was anticipated in this preliminary call and the consent module was forwarded through text message or email before the date of the interview.

As previously mentioned, the interviews were carried out remotely, using video-interviews. Once the video-call was started, we ensured participants had access to a clear internet connection and a place where they could speak freely - e.g., without the presence of third parties. In addition, we reviewed together the study procedure, asked for their consent and permission to audio-record (participants' consent was also audio-recorded). In contrast to the informality described by Howlett (2021), some participants showed both eagerness and anxiety for their video-interview: whereas some called in before the interview to properly arrange their laptops and video-call software, others introduced themselves dressed up and seemed to privilege the choice of a nice room instead of the one with better signal. With this respect, whereas for some participants taking part in research might have been an unprecedented experience, we are unsure whether ICT use and specifically the use of a webcam (as a medium for the video-interview) might have played a role in inducing some forms of the so-called *observer effect* (Gregory 2020), where the presence of a webcam increased participants' attention to their performance and visual aesthetics.

In our review of the literature, the main issues about online research with older people are related to difficulties in online interaction (Newman et al. 2021). However, wave

1 interviews were conducted during the first lockdown: along with technical problems, the interviewer also had to safeguard participants' mental health in such a challenging time. Should any sign of emotional distress arise during the interviews, through verbal or nonverbal clues, the interviewer was prepared to pause the interview or shift to less intrusive contents. In the case of significant traumatic experiences, we pointed to the psychological helpline that was also provided within the research consent module. The empathic role of the interviewer (as in Lo and Fan 2021) was crucial in dealing with participants' perceived vulnerabilities and in making them feel listened to. In this case, as some studies suggest (Lo Iacono et al. 2016), the medium of online technologies should be put into perspective: as in face-to-face qualitative data collection techniques, interviewer's efforts in building a positive and trustworthy relationship with the interviewee might be more important than the choice of the medium. A few days after the interview, each participant was called back to ask whether any distress (interview-related) emerged.

In general, wave 2 interviews were more fluent and richer than the ones conducted during wave 1: due to their follow up nature, most participants anticipated the topics of our interests and provided clear and exhaustive accounts. Compared to the first data collection (in 2020), the interviewer encountered fewer technical issues ascribed to participants' poor ICT skills. Although older people auto-assessed few changes in their digital literacy, it was quite clear that after a year most of them gained more familiarity with digital technologies and online interactions within their daily lives compared to Wave 1 (as is also documented in Melis et al. 2021b).

7 Data Analysis

As we closed the fieldwork for wave 1, we integrally transcribed the interviews' audio recordings and conducted the analyses through CAQDAS software (Nvivo 12 Pro). First, every interview file has been divided into segments, where each chunk of text corresponds to a meaning unit - e.g., representations, actions, interactions, etc. We then coded each text segment using a preliminary coding frame, which has been developed through sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954; Charmaz 2003) identified in the literature review and adjusted when new meanings emerged from the data through a recursive process (Saldaña 2012). We drew on Boyatzis' (1998) inclusion/exclusion principles to label each text segment with a code, then we clustered each group of codes to a main family-code belonging to the same semantic field. In doing so, we collectively discussed the analysis between research team members, adopting an iterative approach: the analysis report was defined when intersubjective agreement amongst researchers was reached. In the end, the following macro-themes (each corresponding to a family of codes) emerges from the analysis: practices of ICT use, social interactions, experience of time, sense of self.

Wave 2 data analysis is still at its beginning. To perform it we shall adopt specific longitudinal data analysis techniques. Drawing on Grossoehme and Lipstein (2016) we plan to adopt the following steps: first, we shall conduct recurrent cross-sectional analysis, to identify themes and dimensions that are specific to each single wave; in addition, we shall perform trajectory data analysis to disentangle changes in older people's representations and experiences over time.

8 Panel Maintenance

Panel maintenance is key for the success of a longitudinal study. To enhance study participation over time, we developed a specific plan that was implemented between data collection waves, consisting of sending study participants Christmas greetings and inviting them to dissemination events (see Fig. 2). This plan, which fully exploits the potentialities of ICTs, was developed after an evaluation of panel members' digital skills.

Content & date	Description	Link	Participants' feedbacks
Christmas greetings (22/12/2020 and 23/12/2021)	WhatsApp message with a link to pre-recorded YouTube videos	2020 video: https://youtu.be/liFwZZ2-Vg0	9/40
		2021 video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHbaEQbYRTc	25/38
Invitation to Milano Digital Week Seminar (15/03/2021)	WhatsApp message with the leaflet of the seminar	2021 video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzhzR0CPWqM	13/40

Fig. 2. Between-waves panel maintenance strategy

Specifically, for Christmas, we sent WhatsApp (WA) messages with a link to pre-recorded YouTube videos in which we thanked panel members for their collaboration, updated them on our scientific activities, and sent them our Christmas greetings. Study participants seem to have appreciated our messages. Indeed, the 2020 Christmas greeting video registered 106 visualizations (on 29/11/2021); given that the link to the YouTube video was private, this suggests that study participants must have forwarded the link to their family and friends. In addition, we received several messages in reply to our Christmas greetings videos; panel members congratulated us for the study, reciprocated the greetings, and offered cooperation for further waves of the study, expressing gratitude and joy for having contributed to the research as documented in the following messages[1].

> «Congratulations on your interesting work. I heartily reciprocate. Happy Holidays, in high esteem» (Woman, 67).
>
> «Dear Giulia, thank you for the nice Christmas present! I am glad to know that my small contribution was useful for your research. Merry Christmas and a (hopefully) better 2021!» (Woman, 68)

[1] There is debate in the literature on how to transcribe qualitative interviews. We have opted for the literal transcription of the interviews, maintaining typos, use of capital letters, etc.

«Thank you Giulia for your message. While hoping that I can still help with your work, I wish you a happy Christmas. Till next time» (Man, 67)

«I am HONORED for having contributed even to a small extent to your research, and I take the opportunity to offer to all of you my best GREETINGS» (Man, 72)

On March 19th, 2021, we organised an online seminar in the context of the *Milano Digital Week*, i.e., one of the cultural events organised by the Milan City Council. On March 15th, we sent a WA message with a link to a pre-recorded YouTube video inviting study participants to the seminar and informing them of the upcoming second wave of data collection. Similar to the Christmas greeting videos, study participants appreciated the invitation; 13 panel members replied to our messages, thanking us for the invitation, apologising for not being able to attend, or confirming the attendance to the seminar (five panel members). Interestingly, as some of these messages clearly show, several participants asked for technical advice on how to participate in the online event, documenting the challenges that they face when using advanced functions of video-calling applications (e.g., Meet).

«Good evening Giulia, thank you for involving me. About Friday's event, unfortunately, I won't be able to participate because of a previous commitment. I remain available for future initiatives. Kind regards with the hope that everything is going well» (M, 65)

«Thank you for your message. I would love to attend the event, hoping that I'm able to log on (my ICT skills are limited). About the possibility of a future interview, I am always available. Till next time» (M, 67)

«Good morning Giulia .i have seen your video, on my smartphone ,because „on my laptop it was unavailable,Anyway I would like to attend the conference ,please explain to me what I should do ,thank you» (F, 66)

It is worth noticing that study members' involvement in the actions envisaged in our panel maintenance plan is key for granting study participation over time. Indeed, those who participated in wave 2 were more likely to reply to our messages than those who did not (means: 1,3 and 0,9). Given the small sample size, these findings need to be interpreted with care.

9 Wave 2 Participation

In wave 2, we managed to re-interview 32 participants. As illustrated in the previous section, when wave 2 recruitment started, a few participants had already shown availability for a second interview. Participants were contacted in groups of ten people, to schedule each interview without overlap. Specifically, the interviewer contacted participants by text message or phone call in chronological order, from the more distant to the more recent date from the first interview, before moving to the following group from the list. Surprisingly, obtaining participants' cooperation was more difficult than we expected. Most causes of reluctance were ascribed to shortage of time; with the easing of government restrictions, older people resumed their daily routines with family

and friends, as well as volunteering and caregiving activities. For this reason, we had to increase our efforts in convincing people to take part in the second interview. Many participants reported less time-availability for our study because of their busy schedule, so we extended the recruitment phase accordingly. As we introduced wave 2 data collection as a follow up on our first encounter, we also had to reassure participants that believed to have little to add to their first interview.

10 Engaging with Participants Through ICTs: The Interviewer Account

ICT use poses some specific challenges to humane interactions when it comes to researching older people. In our case study, generational differences in ICT use added up to the traits of participants within our case study: a rural community with a long-standing habit of face-to-face encounters with family members, friends, and acquaintances, wherein the use of digital technologies was unneeded. For that reason, the first issue the interviewer had to overcome was introducing the necessity to use video-call apps. Until then, as reported, most participants were only passive-recipients of video-calls. Whereas a few of them, for reasons related to their life course, had previously learned the basic functions of most devices, some of them, instead, were not familiar at all with technologies. As previously mentioned, against the risk that digital technologies could jeopardize study participation, the interviewer strengthened the efforts to build a positive relationship with each member of the panel. This effort of trust-building came to help when dealing with various issues experienced during the interview, of technical and emotional nature: in the first place, the interviewer assisted study participants with ICT issues related to the interview. The positive outcome of this exchange was shown by some participants who felt at ease in asking technical assistance unrelated to our interview. E.g., one lady asked for help with her laptop, after the interview, because she wanted to connect her smartphone and upload her pictures; another one, while showing appreciation for the step-by-step procedure that guided her through the video-interview, asked the interviewer to teach her the procedure for starting a video-call on her own; finally, the same sense of ease in asking for technical assistance was shown during the panel engagement activities, as previously illustrated in some of the excerpts. In the second place, video-interviews did not constitute an issue when the interviewer had to deal with emotional distress: the relationship between the interviewer and interviewees overcame limits of remote interviewing, thanks to preliminary communication, ice breaking chit chats and more relaxed communication after the interview. Overall, our study participants felt at ease expressing emotions and the traumatic experiences related to the sudden changes in their everyday life through online interaction with the interviewer. An emphatic position was also maintained in each interaction during the panel engagement process, wherein the interviewer made use of dissemination activities to also display a more informal interest about participants' everyday life, health, etc. Our video-messages of festivity greetings were perceived as a sign of proximity and care, and were met with an affectionate response. This was also shown by our dissemination activities: when invited to conferences and seminars, some of the participants asked for technical assistance, thus showing positive outcomes both in terms of trust and of the effectiveness of our protocol for ICT assistance.

During wave 2 data collection, different challenges were documented. On one hand, as previously mentioned, in 2021 study participants had generally more chances to spend time with their family and friends, which eventually led to less time to dedicate to our research. On the other hand, because the pandemic and its corresponding government measures were extended another year, our study participants had the chance to experiment with online interactions and appeared more confident with ICT use.

Compared to wave 1 recruitment, the interviewer had to dedicate much more time with text messages and telephone calls, in the hope to grant their participation for a second interview. Whenever study participants proposed to withdraw because they were busy with caregiving activities, medical conditions or on holiday, the interviewer had to dedicate numerous attempts to adapt to their agenda and wait for weeks, sometimes months, until they felt more comfortable with rescheduling a second interview. Discussing the extra efforts we went through in this process, we wonder whether this effort during wave 2 recruitment was to be expected in longitudinal research or it was due to the online research design: the impossibility of face-to-face connections might have loosen participants' remembrance of previous encounter with the interviewer, along with the feeling of belonging they initially showed to our research. This dynamic was experienced on both sides: in fact, the loss of memory about wave 1, also affected the research team. However, whereas the interviewer was able to gather all the information collected about each participant, either through fieldwork notes or through interviews' transcripts, the same resource was not available for our panel members.

With regard to ICT use during the second interview, as anticipated, wave 2 participants surprised us with more familiarity with online technologies. Covid-19 played a significant role in this process, as it pushed most of them to experiment with new technologies and gain more familiarity. When arranging a date for the interview, many of the participants expressed their preference to WhatsApp, as they increased the habit of using this app for text messages as well as video-calls in many activities - e.g., one participant scheduled the interview during his holidays and started the video-call from the hotel balcony. From wave 1 to wave 2 they experienced multiple occasions to strengthen their ICT skills and were eager to take the challenge: in one case, one interviewee proposed to shift from Google Meet to Zoom because of technical difficulties, and the interviewer let her lead the process autonomously and successfully. About ICT use, one last interview is worth of notice: the participant was a 73-year-old man who, in wave 1, claimed to be so many worlds apart from ICT use that, he declared, not only he used his smartphone for telephone calls only, but our interview was the first video-call he experienced in his entire life. When we met again for wave 2, he seemed more familiar with his device, he also contacted us a few hours after our interview to send us some pictures through WhatsApp that documented some events he previously mentioned.

As discussed before, some participants withdrew from all communication during the phase of panel engagement. When the interviewer started the recruitment for wave 2 interviews, some dropped out of the study without verbally informing us of their intention to stop participating. With this respect, although online interactions between the interviewer and study participants were positive in both waves, we wonder whether ICT might have played a role in engendering weaker connections between study participants and research team members that affected their participation in wave 2.

11 Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications for Future Research

This paper described waves 1 and 2 of the ILQA study, an exploratory case study about the social consequences of the pandemic for the older people living in the ten villages that constituted the first area subject to lockdown (i.e., "Red Zone") in Europe. It outlines the processes of remote recruitment, data collection, and panel engagement while looking deeper at the role of ICTs in remote qualitative research with the older population. Specifically, we addressed the following research questions: i) what are the strategies that need to be implemented when researching older people through online qualitative methods?, ii) which online strategies are most suitable for qualitative longitudinal research?, iii) to what extent does ICT use play a role in interviewer-interviewee interactions? We will summarize the main results and then discuss more in detail the pros and cons of ICT use in qualitative online research with older people that emerged during our case study.

First, we found that community engagement, building a positive and trusting relationship between study participants and research team members, and developing a tailored approach to ICT use are key factors to recruiting and interviewing older people using qualitative online. Second, we documented that planning a panel maintenance procedure, entailing study participants' active participation and the production of video-materials is effective in boosting study participation over time. Third, as previously mentioned, a positive, trustworthy, and ongoing interaction between study participants and the interviewer was most crucial in conducting online qualitative research. Indeed, a positive interviewer-interviewees' relationship was successful in mitigating the technical difficulties, e.g., related to study participants' poor ICT-skills, to the new procedures concerning gaining informed consent, or more in general to poor internet connection. To our experience, all these strategies proved effective and are to be taken as good practices of online research with older people. The efforts in relationship building and the panel engagement, in particular, allowed us to overcome the limits of online technologies and successfully research a population that is usually deemed hard-to-reach or with low ICT skills.

Moving forward, while discussing the specific challenges and strategies enacted along our research process, this study also contributes to the literature by highlighting the pros and cons about online research with older people.

The first advantage we gained through ICT use was in terms of cost-reduction: to this respect, our data collection strategy proved effective, as the research was easily conducted from home. However, the time we saved from reaching each participant for a traditional face-to-face interview was dedicated to other steps of the process. Whereas remote research is easier to start, participants' engagement might need some extra efforts during the first recruitment and in-between waves. New and creative solutions are needed in order to face the challenges represented by ICT use in social research. For example, we dedicated most of the months between wave 1 and 2 to the implementation of the panel maintenance activities. To maintain between-waves participation, we developed a systematic panel engagement protocol that proved effective and obtained a solid response rate.

The positive outcome of the panel engagement activities has to be put into perspective when considering the extra effort it sometimes took to reschedule the interview in wave 2: compared to face-to-face interactions, study participants are more difficult

to catch through online communications and it was not always easy to reconfirm their participation. To this respect, further research is needed to better discern between the influence of Covid-19 and the role of ICT use in engendering more detached interactions.

In our opinion, the ICTs might have played a more important role during wave 1 of data collection: on one hand, the establishing of trust between study participants and the research team members was at its beginning, and, on the other hand, more technical difficulties were experienced in 2020. By contrast, in wave 2 ICTs appeared to have been gradually embedded within participants' habits and daily routines. As anticipated, it is unclear whether remote video-interviewing could engender a more relaxed and informal setting, as some literature suggests (Howlett 2021), or instead create the conditions for an ICT-related observer effect (Gregory 2020).

Online research with older people also presents some pros and cons regarding ethics issues. In our experience, no significant online-related difficulties were found when dealing with traumatic experiences: as long as trust was established, the interviewer was able to reassure study participants and go on with the interview. Regarding the consent module procedures, tailoring our documents to participants' needs was key, as also recent evidence suggests: e.g., asking our participants where they preferred to receive our study documents, along with pivoting to verbal consent, allowed our panel members to read them in advance and store them in their preferred device.

Regarding informed consent, another positive outcome of online social research is worth mentioning. In our experience, online technologies provided the possibility to drop out of the study without any further explanation (by declining to respond to calls and text messages, as did some of our participants). While observing once again the role that ICT might have played for some of the participants in allowing more detached interactions, we cannot help but compare participants from wave 1 that abruptly drop out of the study with the ones that instead accepted to take part in wave 2. As online interactions grant the possibility to withdraw from communication, avoiding any further explanation as well as our attempts to prolong their participation, we might presume that by responding to our calls wave 2 participants actively chose to express their consent. Ironically, the downside of ICTs on one side might also become a sign of a more solid informed consent on the other.

In this dynamic, however, it is necessary that study participants are able to trust research team members and especially the one/s that will conduct the online fieldwork. In order to establish a trusting interaction, it is crucial that study participants receive clear and trustworthy communication by the research team members. As already noted, the interviewer-interviewees interaction is the key aspect to consider when researching older people through ICTs. When technical issues were encountered, the interviewer had a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of remote research, thus balancing this intermediation by establishing trust and seeking contacts whenever possible. In our opinion, drawing on Lo Iacono and colleagues' suggestion (2016), the effort in building a basis for human interaction is far more important than dealing with the effects of online technologies. This has been shown by the excerpts and the fieldnotes we previously discussed.

11.1 Limitations

Although this work provides useful suggestions on how to successfully involve the old age population in online qualitative studies, it has two main limitations. The first limitation can be brought back to the context in which ILQA-19 is set, i.e. a rural area of the Lombardy region characterised by very strong interpersonal social connections. Such "strong ties" (Granovetter 1973) may have facilitated the remote recruiting of study participants. However, researching older people living in different contexts may pose additional challenges to the recruitment process, because of the greater fragmentation of social connections (e.g., in urban areas). In such cases, a different remote recruiting strategy may therefore be developed. The second limitation concerns the characteristics of the study participants. Although we adopted an inclusive approach, aimed at interviewing older people with different levels of ICT proficiency, older people with no familiarity with ICTs (e.g., those who do not own a smartphone) were excluded from our study. It is currently unclear what strategies need to be implemented to remotely recruit and interview this specific group of older people, who are very likely to be excluded from social research.

11.2 Implications for Future Research

Overall, our study has shown the performative potential of ICTs in researching older people: from a segment of the population that is excluded, more often than not out of mere prejudice, from online techniques of data collection, our research has shown that it is still possible to engage older people during social distancing periods and, additionally, to profit from online qualitative research as a medium to spark their interest in ICTs. However, a segment of the older population is still excluded from ICT use and ICT-related social research, as more recent literature documents (Sala & Gaia 2019). Given that there is a group of older people with no ICT skills, there is an urgent need to develop specific remote recruiting and interviewing protocols targeted specifically to this sub-population and ensure that their views and opinions are reported in social research.

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