Methodological Reflections on Conducting Qualitative Research During Uncertain Periods

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a methodological reflection on conducting qualitative research during uncertain periods, drawing from the experience of a study undertaken with chefs in Malaysia's hotel sector during the COVID 19 pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to examine how researchers can maintain methodological rigor, ethical sensitivity, and reflexivity when traditional fieldwork is constrained by external disruptions. The discussion highlights the challenges faced, the adaptive strategies employed, and the lessons learned from conducting research during an environment of uncertainty. A qualitative case study approach guided by the interpretivist paradigm was used to explore the lived experiences of ten chefs working in Klang Valley hotels. Semi structured interviews were conducted virtually through online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet to overcome restrictions on physical access. Data management and analysis involved iterative coding, reflective journaling, and maintaining an audit trail to ensure transparency and dependability. Regular discussions with academic supervisors and validation with participants enhanced the credibility of the study and reduced interpretive bias. This methodological reflection identifies three central lessons. First, adaptability is essential for preserving the quality and depth of qualitative inquiry in disrupted contexts. Second, reflexivity and empathy are critical in developing rapport and ethical awareness in virtual environments. Third, methodological flexibility enables researchers to transform limitations into opportunities for innovation and learning. The paper concludes that qualitative research can remain credible, rigorous, and contextually meaningful when guided by preparedness, reflection, and a human centered approach. The lessons derived from this experience provide valuable implications for future research undertaken in similarly uncertain or crisis driven conditions.

Keywords: Qualitative research; Methodological reflection; Uncertain periods; Hospitality industry; COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Periods of uncertainty have repeatedly tested the stability of global industries, with events such as the COVID19 pandemic serving as stark reminders of how fragile professional ecosystems can be. In times of crisis, the hospitality sector is often among the most affected, as disruptions to travel, tourism, and dining significantly reshape business operations. In Malaysia, many hotel employees experienced job insecurity and psychological distress as hotels adjusted to unpredictable demand and temporary closures (Appannan et al., 2022). These challenges extended beyond economic consequences, forcing workers and organizations alike to reconsider how to sustain professional engagement during disruption. Scholars have observed that the COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing vulnerabilities in the hospitality workforce, particularly in areas such as job precarity, mental strain, and the need to build structured career resilience for future challenges (Baum et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021). These lessons underscore the need for practitioners and researchers to continuously adapt, ensuring preparedness for future crises that may emerge in new and unexpected forms.

For researchers, the pandemic created unique methodological challenges. Traditional fieldwork practices such as in-person interviews, workplace observation, and rapport building were suddenly constrained by lockdown measures and safety regulations. Researchers were forced to innovate in their data collection methods to maintain the credibility, ethics, and trustworthiness of their studies. The shift toward virtual communication tools became a defining methodological adaptation in qualitative research conducted during this period (Archibald et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2022). These constraints raised essential questions about how qualitative inquiry could remain authentic and contextually grounded when social interaction was mediated by technology.

Although numerous studies have examined the social and economic impact of COVID-19 on hospitality employees, relatively few have explored how the research process itself evolved in response to these restrictions. This absence of methodological reflection is noteworthy because qualitative research depends on interaction, empathy, and context. When these elements are disrupted, researchers must devise new strategies to capture lived experiences without compromising data richness or ethical responsibility.

This paper draws from a qualitative study that investigated how chefs working in Klang Valley hotels sustained their careers during the pandemic. Instead of revisiting empirical findings, the focus here is on methodological reflection, on how the study was designed, adjusted, and ethically maintained in a restricted environment. This reflection aims to offer practical insights for researchers conducting studies in similar constrained contexts, emphasizing methodological transparency, flexibility, and sensitivity.

In summary, the purpose of this methodological reflection is twofold. First, it documents the challenges and adaptive strategies used in conducting qualitative research with chefs during a period of movement restrictions. Second, it contributes to the broader discussion of how methodological flexibility can enhance trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative inquiry, particularly within the hospitality research domains. The following sections elaborate on the study background, research design, sampling approach, data collection process, and strategies used to ensure credibility and dependability. Through these reflections, the paper seeks to illustrate how adaptability and researcher reflexivity can transform methodological obstacles into opportunities for learning and growth.

Background Of the Study

This study explored how professional chefs employed in Klang Valley hotels sustained their careers during the period of crisis and uncertainty that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic. The research addressed three main objectives: first, to identify the challenges faced by chefs as the hospitality industry contracted during lockdowns; second, to examine how both individuals and organizations employed strategies to preserve employment and professional identity; and third, to understand how these experiences could guide future training and education for culinary professionals. These objectives justified the use of a qualitative approach that emphasizes depth, context, and lived experience rather than numerical generalization.

The Malaysian hospitality industry was among the sectors most affected by the pandemic because of its reliance on tourism, events, and international travel. As of November 2020, over 200 tourism and hotel operators in Malaysia had shut down due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Movement Control Order restrictions. According to the World Tourism Organization, the hotel workforce declined by 10%, from 233,800 workers in 2019 to 208,500 in 2020, while the Malaysian Association of Hotel Owners (MAHO) estimated that the industry lost about half of its total workforce to other sectors and self-employment during the pandemic (The Edge Malaysia, 2022). Chefs in particular faced the challenge of adapting their culinary roles to meet operational and financial constraints, including reduced team sizes, simplified menus, and the shift to delivery-based services. Many were forced to innovate and develop new skills to sustain employability under uncertainty. Globally, the foodservice industry faced disruptions that required professionals to adapt to new forms of service delivery, such as contactless or delivery-based operations (Rizou et al., 2020; Jiang & Wen, 2020).

Within this context, the study contributed to a growing discussion on workforce resilience and the capacity of vocational professionals to respond to crisis. Understanding how chefs adapted to the volatile environment provided insights not only into individual career sustainability but also into the preparedness of vocational

education systems to cultivate adaptability among future professionals. This intersection between hospitality practice, career resilience, and reflective learning forms the foundation for the methodological discussion that follows.

Research Design and Methodological Approach

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to capture the lived experiences of chefs within their real-life professional contexts. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explain, a case study approach enables researchers to explore bounded systems in depth, allowing for a nuanced understanding of complex social and organizational phenomena. In this study, the bounded system was the professional world of hotel chefs, where work routines, career identity, and survival strategies converged during a period of crisis.

The research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm that views knowledge as socially constructed through human experience and interaction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher's role was that of an active listener and co-learner who sought to interpret how chefs made sense of uncertainty and professional transformation. This philosophical orientation aligned well with the study's aim to understand meaning rather than measure outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were selected, with attention to systematic guide development to promote participant openness and meaningful dialogue (Kallio et al., 2016).

Originally, the researcher intended to conduct in-person interviews within hotel premises to observe kitchen dynamics and work environments. However, Malaysia's Movement Control Orders restricted face-to-face interaction for most of the data collection period. Consequently, interviews were conducted virtually through platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp calls. Although the change limited physical observation, it expanded participation by allowing chefs to join interviews from their homes or workplaces at convenient times. Similar to the observations of Gray et al. (2020) and Dodds and Hess (2021), this adaptation demonstrated that virtual interviews can still generate authentic and meaningful qualitative data when guided by empathy and careful planning.

Transitioning to digital interviews also required new skills in online communication, rapport building, and data security. Establishing trust virtually demanded deliberate strategies such as attentive listening, gentle pacing, and verbal affirmation to replace non-verbal cues (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Through these relational practices, the researcher fostered a sense of comfort that encouraged participants to speak candidly about their challenges and coping mechanisms.

The research design continued to evolve throughout the process, guided by reflexivity and ethical awareness. Rather than treating the methodology as a fixed blueprint, the researcher viewed it as a flexible framework that could adapt to emerging realities while maintaining rigor. This responsiveness reflects what Tracy (2020) refers to as methodological integrity, the balance between coherence, transparency, and contextual sensitivity. Overall, the methodological approach ensured that the study remained credible and reflective, yielding valuable insights into how hospitality professionals sustain their careers in times of crisis.

Sampling And Participant Recruitment

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into how chefs sustained their careers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling was particularly suitable because it allows the deliberate selection of individuals who possess specific knowledge, experiences, or characteristics that directly relate to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this case, chefs employed in Klang Valley hotels during the pandemic represented a group that experienced the crisis firsthand and could articulate the challenges, coping mechanisms, and adaptive strategies developed within their professional roles.

A total of ten chefs participated in the study, representing both four-star and five-star hotel establishments. The inclusion criteria required that participants had a minimum of two years of professional experience and were

actively engaged in hotel kitchen operations during the pandemic period. The sample included chefs at various career levels ranging from commis to executive chef. This diversity enabled the researcher to capture experiences across multiple professional hierarchies, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how career resilience was developed and sustained. The variation in participants' backgrounds also allowed for the exploration of differences in leadership responsibilities, workload management, and emotional responses to the crisis.

Recruitment was carried out through multiple channels to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. The researcher initially approached potential participants through professional culinary networks, alumni associations, and industry contacts within the hospitality sector. As restrictions on physical interaction persisted, digital platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook culinary groups, and WhatsApp communities became essential recruitment tools. These networks enabled the researcher to reach potential participants who were otherwise inaccessible due to hotel closures or reduced staffing. Consistent with Robinson's (2014) emphasis on thoughtful and respectful recruitment practices, the researcher used personalized communication to build trust and encourage participation during a period of limited mobility.

Despite these efforts, recruitment during a crisis presented several challenges. Many chefs were emotionally exhausted or hesitant to participate because of employment uncertainty and increased workloads. Some were reluctant to discuss their situations for fear of revealing sensitive information about their organizations. To address these issues, the researcher emphasized confidentiality and voluntary participation at every stage. Each potential participant was informed about the study objectives, data handling procedures, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Building trust required patience and empathy, qualities that are essential in qualitative research when participants face personal and professional stress (Fujii, 2018). Through repeated informal communication and reassurance of anonymity, participants gradually felt comfortable enough to share their experiences in detail.

Research on sampling strategy emphasises that the definition of the sample universe, the sampling strategy and the sourcing of participants are key to coherence and credibility in qualitative studies (Robinson, 2014). Moreover, empirical work on saturation highlights how sample characteristics influence the adequacy of data (Guest et al., 2020). Although these studies do not directly address geographic diversity, their findings imply that including a wider range of participant contexts may strengthen transferability and highlight contextual variation in adaptation strategies.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Putra Malaysia Ethics Committee before data collection commenced. All participants provided informed consent electronically through a digital form that outlined their rights and the scope of their participation. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and all identifying details about hotel names and locations were omitted. The use of digital consent and encrypted data storage ensured that ethical standards were maintained despite the absence of in-person meetings. These measures align with recommendations by Lobe et al. (2020), who emphasize the importance of ethical sensitivity, flexibility, and transparency when conducting qualitative research in virtual settings.

In addition to procedural ethics, relational ethics were also prioritized throughout the recruitment process. The researcher adopted a respectful and caring stance, acknowledging participants' emotional fatigue while expressing gratitude for their contributions. This relational approach reflects an understanding that ethics in qualitative research extend beyond formal approval to encompass the day-to-day interactions that shape participant well-being (Ellis, 2007). By maintaining open communication and genuine appreciation, the researcher strengthened rapport and trust, which later enhanced the quality of data shared during interviews.

The purposive sampling and recruitment strategies ultimately resulted in a balanced and information-rich dataset that reflected diverse culinary perspectives across managerial levels and hotel types. This outcome demonstrated that even in restrictive environments, meaningful participation can be achieved through strategic use of digital networks, ethical mindfulness, and interpersonal engagement. The following section discusses how data were collected through virtual interviews and how these procedures were managed to preserve depth and authenticity in the narratives shared by the participating chefs.

Data Collection Process

The data collection process was designed to capture the lived experiences of chefs as they navigated professional uncertainty and personal stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi structured interviews served as the primary method of data gathering because they provided a balance between flexibility and structure. This method encouraged participants to share detailed personal narratives while allowing the researcher to explore emerging issues as the conversations unfolded. Semi structured interviews are widely recognized for their ability to reveal nuanced insights into participants' perceptions, beliefs, and emotions (Adams, 2015). They are particularly effective in vocational and hospitality research, where understanding the intersection between personal resilience and organizational context requires openness and depth of dialogue.

Ten interviews were conducted between June and September 2021. Each session lasted between forty-five and seventy minutes depending on the participants' availability and comfort levels. Given Malaysia's Movement Control Orders, all interviews were conducted virtually through online platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp calls. The choice of digital communication tools was guided by practicality and accessibility, as many chefs were working unpredictable shifts or residing in staff accommodations with limited mobility. The use of multiple virtual platforms reflected the researcher's commitment to inclusivity and flexibility, ensuring that every participant could take part despite varying technological constraints. Recent studies have demonstrated that online interviewing can generate data comparable in quality to in-person discussions when handled with care and empathy (Irani, 2019; Lobe et al., 2020).

Conducting interviews in virtual environments required heightened attention to communication dynamics. The absence of physical presence meant that subtle cues such as body language and tone shifts were sometimes difficult to interpret. To address this limitation, the researcher employed strategies to sustain connection and engagement, including maintaining direct eye contact through the camera, using active listening cues, and allowing pauses for reflection. The interviews began with casual conversation to create a relaxed atmosphere, such as discussing current culinary trends or the participants' daily routines. This approach helped to ease tension and foster familiarity before delving into more personal questions about career sustainability and emotional resilience. Building rapport in digital spaces is often a gradual process that relies on warmth, respect, and attentiveness (Seitz, 2016; Dodds & Hess, 2021). These relational qualities were crucial in enabling participants to speak openly about their challenges and coping mechanisms.

The researcher also demonstrated sensitivity to participants' mental and physical fatigue. The pandemic period was marked by long working hours, reduced teams, and heightened uncertainty within hotel operations. Some participants joined interviews immediately after demanding shifts, while others faced connectivity interruptions during the sessions. To accommodate these realities, the researcher allowed flexible scheduling and offered breaks or rescheduling options when participants appeared tired or distracted. This flexibility not only reflected ethical care but also reinforced the trust and respect that underpin qualitative research relationships (Whiting, 2008). The researcher's willingness to adapt to participants' circumstances was central to maintaining the authenticity and comfort necessary for rich narrative data.

All interviews were audio recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic nuances and emotional tone. Field notes were written immediately after each session to capture the researcher's observations, thoughts, and emotional responses. These notes served as an important reflexive tool that documented the evolving relationship between researcher and participant. Reflexivity in qualitative research is not merely a methodological practice but also an ethical commitment to acknowledge the researcher's influence on interpretation (Berger, 2015). The reflective journal kept throughout data collection provided a space for continuous self-assessment and methodological transparency.

While virtual interviewing ensured continuity during movement restrictions, it also shaped the nature of participant engagement and data depth. Compared to in-person settings where researchers can rely on non-verbal cues and spontaneous interaction, online environments require greater attentiveness to tone, pauses, and silence (Hayati &

Sinha, 2024). Video interviews in qualitative research provide options for contextual data acquisition, improved communication quality, and less trip time; yet, they necessitate experienced participants, high-quality video technology, and practice (De Villiers et al., 2021). These differences highlight how digital contexts not only change the logistics of data collection but also influence the rhythm, trust, and emotional tone of qualitative exchanges.

In summary, the data collection process required adaptability, empathy, and reflexivity. The transition from face-to-face to virtual interviewing reshaped the researcher's understanding of qualitative engagement, demonstrating that meaningful interaction can be sustained even without physical proximity. The success of the data collection process lay not only in technological proficiency but also in the researcher's relational awareness and ethical sensitivity. These experiences underscored that the heart of qualitative research lies in the human connection that fosters honest storytelling, regardless of the medium through which it occurs.

Data Management and Analysis

The process of managing and analyzing the data was guided by the principles of rigor, organization, and transparency. All interviews were transcribed verbatim shortly after each session to retain the authenticity and richness of participants' expressions. The researcher adopted an iterative approach, where transcription, reading, and initial coding occurred simultaneously with data collection. This process enabled the researcher to identify early insights that informed subsequent interviews and to refine probing questions as themes began to emerge. Working iteratively also allowed the researcher to remain reflexive, constantly comparing new information with earlier data to identify developing meanings and connections.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019). The researcher first became deeply familiar with the transcripts through repeated reading, which facilitated immersion in the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively to capture recurring ideas, patterns, and emotions expressed by the participants. These codes were later grouped into broader themes that represented shared meanings related to professional resilience, emotional adaptation, skill diversification, and organizational support. Each theme was grounded in the participants' narratives to ensure that the interpretation reflected their lived experiences accurately.

As the analysis progressed, the researcher continuously monitored the point of data saturation by assessing whether new interviews produced additional insights. Saturation was reached after the tenth interview, as no new codes or themes emerged at that stage, confirming that the collected data sufficiently addressed the research objectives. This decision followed the approach recommended by Guest et al. (2020), which emphasizes documenting saturation through systematic reflection and comparison across transcripts.

NVivo 12 software was used to manage and organize the data efficiently. The software assisted in systematic coding, retrieval of text segments, and visual mapping of relationships among themes. However, while NVivo provided technical support for organization, the interpretive process remained firmly grounded in the researcher's critical reflection and judgment. To ensure transparency, analytic notes were written after each coding session to capture evolving interpretations, questions, and reflexive thoughts. These notes functioned as an audit trail that documented the researcher's analytical reasoning and contributed to the study's overall trustworthiness, in line with the recommendations of Nowell et al. (2017).

Throughout the analysis, the researcher was mindful of ensuring accuracy, fairness, and credibility in interpreting participants' accounts. Each transcript was reviewed several times to verify that the coding and thematic representation aligned with what participants had expressed. The researcher also engaged in discussions with academic supervisors to validate emerging patterns and interpretations. This collaborative process helped minimize potential bias and strengthened the credibility of the findings. Managing and analyzing the data in this systematic manner deepened the researcher's understanding of how transparency and reflection contribute to the rigor of qualitative research.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness was a crucial part of this qualitative study to confirm that the findings genuinely represented the experiences of the participating chefs. The researcher applied the framework developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), focusing on two key components most relevant to the study context: credibility and dependability. These elements were emphasized because of the limitations imposed by the pandemic and the need to maintain research integrity in a constrained field environment.

Credibility was strengthened through consistent engagement and ongoing validation with participants. After each interview, the researcher followed up with participants to verify meanings, clarify statements, and confirm the accuracy of interpretations. This process, often referred to as member checking, minimized the risk of misinterpretation and enhanced the reliability of the findings. Feedback from academic supervisors further reinforced credibility, as regular discussions on coding and theme development ensured that emerging patterns were coherent and firmly grounded in the data. These combined validation efforts from participants and supervisors supported a balanced and trustworthy interpretation of the study's outcomes.

Dependability was achieved through detailed documentation of the entire research process. The researcher maintained an audit trail that recorded each step taken during data collection and analysis, including notes on challenges encountered, decisions made, and reflective observations. This documentation served as a transparent account of how the research evolved and how methodological decisions were adjusted in response to the constraints of virtual fieldwork. The audit trail was complemented by continuous consultation with supervisors, who provided external perspectives and helped ensure that the methodological approach remained consistent and logically sound. These practices reinforced the dependability of the research and demonstrated that the findings were developed through a systematic and traceable process.

Conducting interviews virtually also introduced unique ethical dilemmas. Ensuring confidentiality in shared workspaces or homes was sometimes challenging, particularly when background noise or interruptions occurred. Moreover, prolonged screen time contributed to participant fatigue, requiring the researcher to monitor emotional well-being closely. These experiences underline the ethical responsibility to balance data depth with participant care, reinforcing that digital interviewing must prioritise emotional safety alongside procedural ethics (Lobe et al., 2020; Ellis, 2007).

Overall, the strategies applied to strengthen credibility and dependability ensured the methodological rigor of the study. They showed that even when data collection is conducted virtually, careful validation, reflexive engagement, and transparent documentation can uphold the quality and integrity of qualitative research. These measures confirmed that the insights drawn from the study were both authentic and ethically grounded.

Methodological Reflections and Lessons Learned

Reflecting on the overall research journey, conducting a qualitative study during the COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique and valuable learning experience that extended beyond methodological understanding. The researcher initially designed the study for face-to-face interviews and field observations, yet the sudden introduction of movement restrictions transformed every stage of the research process. What began as a challenge evolved into an opportunity to practice adaptability, problem-solving, and ethical judgment in an unpredictable environment. The experience revealed how qualitative researchers must often operate within fluid and changing conditions while maintaining the integrity of their work. It also demonstrated that resilience and creativity are not only essential for participants coping with crisis but equally important for researchers striving to collect meaningful data amid constraints.

Comparing virtual and traditional qualitative methods revealed distinct strengths and challenges. While inperson interviews allow richer environmental observation and spontaneous dialogue, virtual sessions offered convenience, privacy, and broader accessibility. Interestingly, several participants found online interviews less intimidating, which enhanced openness. These contrasts suggest that digital interviewing should not be seen as a

substitute but as an evolving complement that expands methodological possibilities in qualitative hospitality research (Gray et al., 2020).

The first significant lesson learned was the importance of adaptability in managing the research process. The abrupt transition from physical to online interviews required flexibility not only in terms of logistics but also in mindset. The researcher had to develop technical proficiency in digital communication platforms and learn how to navigate challenges such as unstable internet connections, background noise, and limited visual cues. Adjusting to these changes highlighted the need for patience and perseverance, as well as the ability to think quickly when faced with unexpected difficulties. More importantly, it showed that adaptability is not a sign of methodological weakness but a strength that allows research to continue effectively under restricted conditions. This lesson reinforced the understanding that qualitative research designs should remain open to modification without compromising rigor or ethical principles.

The second key lesson concerned preparation, time management, and empathy in participant engagement. Scheduling interviews with chefs who had demanding and irregular work schedules proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the study. Many participants were managing long hours and emotional fatigue, which required the researcher to be sensitive and accommodating. Offering multiple time slots, rescheduling sessions, and allowing rest breaks demonstrated respect for participants' circumstances and promoted a supportive interview atmosphere. These practices emphasized that ethical research extends beyond procedural approval to include respect for participants' well-being. Through this process, the researcher learned that empathy and understanding are critical components of successful data collection, especially when participants are experiencing professional and emotional strain.

The third reflection focused on the role of reflexivity throughout the research process. The researcher became increasingly aware of how personal assumptions, emotional responses, and positionality could shape interpretation and interaction with participants. Keeping a reflexive journal after each interview provided a structured way to examine thoughts, decisions, and emotional reactions, helping to minimize bias and maintain attention on participants' perspectives. Reflexivity also created space for ongoing learning, enabling the researcher to recognize emerging patterns in practice and refine methodological decisions accordingly. This process of reflective evaluation deepened the researcher's understanding of qualitative inquiry as a dynamic and evolving endeavour that requires both intellectual sensitivity and emotional attentiveness.

Finally, the experience reinforced that methodological challenges can serve as catalysts for personal and professional growth. Each obstacle encountered during the study, from recruitment difficulties to digital communication barriers, ultimately enhanced the researcher's confidence and methodological maturity. The journey illustrated that rigor in qualitative research is not defined by strict adherence to predetermined steps but by the researcher's ability to make transparent, ethical, and contextually appropriate decisions. Reflecting on these experiences fostered a more holistic understanding of research practice as an iterative and human-centered endeavor. The lessons learned will continue to guide the researcher in future projects, encouraging an approach grounded in adaptability, integrity, and respect for the complex realities of social inquiry.

CONCLUSION

Undertaking qualitative research during the COVID-19 pandemic demanded patience, resilience, and constant adjustment. The study involving chefs from Klang Valley hotels revealed that meaningful and trustworthy insights can still be achieved when researchers demonstrate flexibility and ethical awareness in times of crisis. Although the original design relied on physical interviews and field immersion, the researcher learned to transform these limitations into opportunities for innovation through the use of virtual communication. The transition to online data collection not only protected participants' safety but also highlighted the potential of digital tools to foster inclusivity and participation. This process confirmed that the success of qualitative research lies not merely in physical proximity but in the authenticity of human interaction and the researcher's commitment to understanding lived experiences.

The study provided several valuable lessons on sustaining methodological integrity under constrained conditions. Adaptability emerged as a crucial element for ensuring data quality when external factors restricted direct access to participants. Empathy and relational awareness were equally vital for maintaining trust and open communication throughout the virtual engagement process. The researcher's sensitivity to participants' emotional and professional challenges reinforced the ethical foundation of the inquiry. Additionally, systematic documentation, reflexive journaling, and transparent analytical decisions strengthened the credibility and dependability of the findings. Collectively, these practices demonstrated that rigor in qualitative research is achieved through reflective awareness rather than strict procedural conformity.

From a broader perspective, this methodological reflection offers a reminder that research is not a static or mechanical process but a human endeavor shaped by context, uncertainty, and learning. Conducting the study during a global health crisis allowed the researcher to appreciate the balance between structure and flexibility, as well as the importance of humility and openness in fieldwork. The process also reaffirmed that researchers, much like their participants, are affected by the realities they study. By acknowledging this interconnectedness, qualitative inquiry becomes a space not only for knowledge creation but also for empathy, growth, and shared understanding.

Moving forward, this experience serves as a foundation for future methodological exploration in hospitality and vocational education research. The lessons learned here underscore the need for research designs that remain adaptable and ethically grounded in the face of disruption. Future scholars can draw upon these reflections to strengthen methodological preparedness for crises, whether social, environmental, or technological. Ultimately, this study reinforces the notion that qualitative research thrives when guided by reflection, compassion, and intellectual curiosity, qualities that ensure scholarship remains relevant and resilient even in uncertain times.
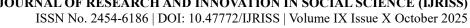
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