

Lessons Learned from Online Qualitative Data Collection in an International Collaborative Study During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Teachers' Effort to Cope with Conflict in Implementing Comprehensive Sexuality Education at Secondary Schools in Mataram City, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

An online survey was conducted for an international collaborative study from a remote area during the COVID-19 pandemic because the researchers needed to consider non-face-to-face methods of conducting an international collaborative study in situations in which social distance must be maintained. In an international collaborative study between Indonesia and Japan, we were able to conduct online qualitative data collection in Lombok, Indonesia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to evaluate the feasibility of qualitative data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations for participants of an online qualitative data collection in an international collaborative study. The results were divided into three categories to summarize the lessons learned: 1) field coordination of an online interview guide and protocol, 2) ethical considerations regarding gender and privacy, and 3) methodology focusing on the online qualitative data collection. The lessons learned revealed the advantages and disadvantages of online qualitative data collection to handle multiple challenges. The online qualitative data collection conducted for an international collaborative study during the COVID-19 pandemic overcame several challenges through protocol development.

Keywords: *Online qualitative data collection, Online methods, international collaborative study.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

An online survey was conducted for an international collaborative study from a remote area during the COVID-19 pandemic because the researchers needed to consider non-face-to-face methods of conducting an international collaborative study in situations in which social distance must be maintained. Advances in information technology (IT) have made it possible to collect qualitative data without being in the field by using online methodology [1]. However, there are few specific guidelines or manuals for online qualitative data

collection. In addition, online qualitative data collection requires a specific protocol that includes ethical considerations and detailed interview methodology [2].

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, online qualitative data collection that maintains social distance and considers ethical issues has been recommended [3,4]. Previous studies on online surveys were mainly used to conduct interviews focusing on the sensitive topics of HIV/AIDS or sexuality [5,6]. Previous studies have shown that practicing online qualitative data collection requires detailed protocol development and ethical considerations of the participants in advance [3]. Participants who had

difficulty accessing IT were recommended to obtain support to access to the online platform [4]. Moreover, a narrative review of ethical considerations of sexual health research indicated that sexual content and sensitive topics influenced the participants' confidentiality and privacy during a group discussion [7].

Although the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a challenge when conducting field research, online qualitative data collection can be advanced based on lessons learned from the present study. In an international collaborative study between Indonesia and Japan, we were able to conduct online qualitative data collection in Lombok, Indonesia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lessons learned from this study can be considered as feasible methods for implementing an international collaborative study online.

1.2. Objectives

The main objective of this study was to assess the validity of online qualitative data collection in an international collaborative study. In addition, this study evaluated the feasibility of qualitative data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations regarding the participants of an online qualitative study. The lessons learned from the online qualitative data collection should be advanced to solve challenges through discussion.

2. METHOD

2.1. Adoption of Online Methods

Prior to starting the online qualitative data collection, we planned face-to-face interviews in the field. However, we had to adopt online methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before data collection began, we conducted a pre-test to revise the protocol of an online survey for collecting qualitative data. Then, after conducting the pre-test, we updated the online qualitative data collection protocol based on the lessons learned from the results. This online qualitative data collection was conducted based on this updated protocol.

2.2. Study Design

This evaluation was carried out for the "Teachers' Effort to Cope with Conflict in Implementing Comprehensive Sexuality Education at Secondary Schools in Mataram City, Indonesia: A Qualitative Study" conducted in 10 senior high schools in Mataram, Lombok, Indonesia. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with about 50 teachers who teach subjects related to Comprehensive Sexuality Education from each school, and in-depth interviews (IDIs) were

conducted with the principals. The protocol for the online qualitative data collection was adapted from a protocol for face-to-face interviews [3]. The FGDs and IDIs were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia using an online video meeting application. After the FGDs and IDIs, recorded data were transcribed using an online application for transcription. The transcriptions were translated into English from Bahasa Indonesia by the researchers. The advantages and disadvantages of the entire process were then assessed in a FGD among the researchers (Figure 1).

2.3. Participants of the Research Team

This online qualitative data collection was conducted collaboratively by the research team comprising members from both the University of Mataram, Indonesia, and the University of the Ryukyus, Japan.

2.4. The Intervention of Online Qualitative Data Collection

This online qualitative data collection was conducted based on an interview guide specifically developed for online data collection. It was developed with the awareness that online data collection requires access to technological devices, a good internet connection, and some level of IT skills. The online interview guide created by the researchers focused on how the researchers may adapt existing in-person interview methodologies to an online format [8]. In the development of an online methodology and protocol, we conducted a simulation test to adjust the previously developed face-to-face interview protocol to online interviews before the pre-test. This simulation test was conducted in cooperation with the principal investigator's colleagues who are three master's course students at another university in Japan. Because some troubles related to the transcription procedure and participants' devices were identified during the simulation test, it was conducted several times to improve the online methods and protocol. The final online interview guide included two main subjects, IT support for the participants and the role of the Moderator and Assistant Moderator.

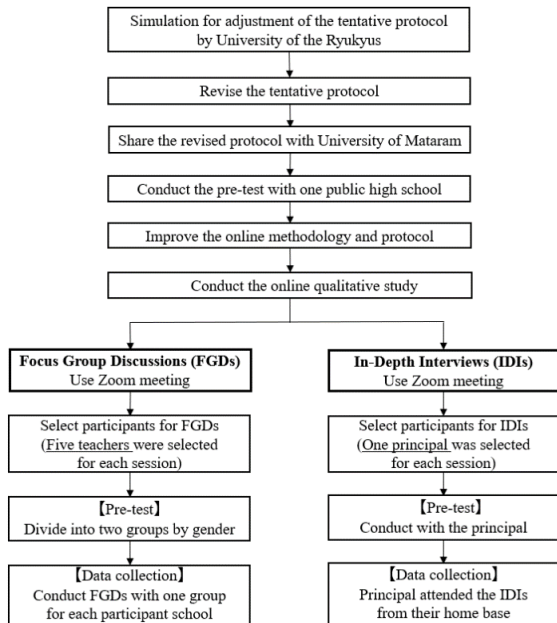


Figure 1. Flowchart of the online qualitative data collection

2.5. Stages of the Development Process

There were four stages in the development protocol, which included the process of the online qualitative study and the researchers' roles as shown in Figure 2. The research team from the University of Mataram was responsible for participant recruitment, conducting the data collection (FGD and IDI), and translating the data from Bahasa Indonesia to English.

2.5.1. Preparation

In the recruitment process, invitations to participate in the study were sent to all senior high schools in Mataram. From a list of potential teacher participants provided by the schools, the research team contacted the teachers, and informed consent was obtained from each teacher who agreed to participate. The researchers from the University of Mataram adjusted the FGD and IDI schedule for each participating school. After adjusting the interview schedule, the principal investigator set up the Zoom meeting from the University of the Ryukyus.

2.5.2. Before the interview

Participants' written consent and personal information were gathered manually using paper and

pen and later converted to digital format using Google Forms by the research team.

2.5.3. During the interview

2.5.3.1. Role of the University of Mataram

The data collection process was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and moderated by the research team from the University of Mataram. For each FGD and IDI, a moderator introduced the study and the team and moderated the discussion. An assistant moderator presented the summary of the discussion at the end of the FGD/IDI. In addition, the University of Mataram hosted the FGD participants joining the video meeting from the university's computer laboratory. A computer laboratory staff member prepared the setting and assisted participants during the video meeting.

2.5.3.2. Role of the University of the Ryukyus

The principal investigator observed the data collection process. The "Speech to Text Webcam Overlay" provided by online platform of GitHub was used to help the principal investigator understand what was discussed in Bahasa Indonesia during the FGDs/IDIs. The "Speech to Text Webcam Overlay" is an online translation application that performs translation from Bahasa Indonesia into English in real time. Although there were some inaccuracies in the translations, it was still useful to understand the conversations in real time.

2.5.3.3. After the Interview

After every interview, recorded audio data of the Zoom meeting were transcribed using Google Documents by the principal investigator. We found that the clarity of the voices influenced the accuracy of the transcription by Google Documents. It is most accurate when the speakers wear a headset microphone. Translation of the transcripts was conducted by the research team from the University of Mataram using both the Google Documents transcription and the recorded audio data of the Zoom meeting. These two materials complemented each other in the translation process. The Google Documents transcript reduced the time needed to transcribe the recording, and the recording helped to identify and correct inaccuracies in the transcript.

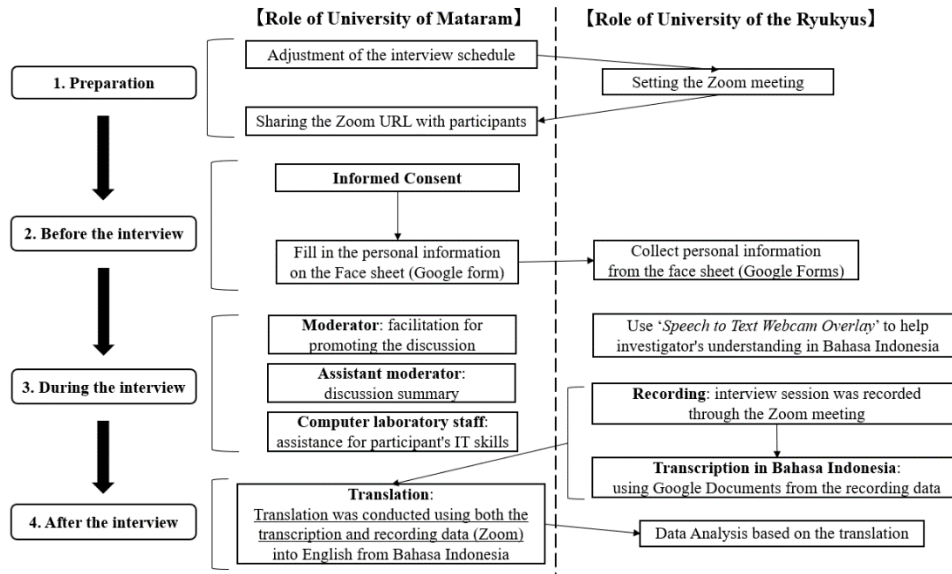


Figure 2. Process of online qualitative data collection and the researchers' role

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval of this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Mataram University in 2021. Participation in this study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from individual participants prior to data collection. Although no physical danger or harm was expected in this study, psychological pressures due to interview content or the process was anticipated. Therefore, a Participant Safety Plan was prepared in advance, and the participants were informed about it before the data collection event. The FGD was planned to be conducted separately for male and female teachers to avoid discomfort when discussing sensitive topics such as sexuality education.

Several ethical considerations were addressed regarding the online data collection process [3]. First, we needed to ensure that no participants would be excluded, either by their limitations in accessing the technology used for the data collection or their limited IT skills. Second, we did not want the online data collection process to add too much burden for the participants, including the obtaining of written informed consent. Another consideration was to ensure the participants' privacy and domestic space during the video meeting. Last was to ensure the safe and appropriate storage of the video recordings. For the first two considerations, participants were offered to be hosted at the computer laboratory of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Mataram, who provided the devices, internet connection, and assistance for the data collection. Participants who joined the meeting from their home base were recommended to find a quiet and private space and use a headset to minimize extraneous noise. The researchers stored all video recordings in the

cloud of the Zoom meeting protected by passwords known only to the research team.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Field Coordination of Online Interview Guide and Protocol

The participants of the FGD and IDI sessions included school headmasters and teachers of particular disciplines in which comprehensive sexuality education is immersed in the teaching materials such as Biology, Civic Education, Religious Education, Physical Education, and each school's in-house counsellor. The schools participating in the study were 11 senior public schools in Mataram City, with all but one fully participating in both FGD and IDI. One school dropped out from the study due to unwillingness to participate without further explanation. The schedule was set by proposing several scheduled dates, and the school confirmed the feasible date. After the dates were confirmed, the IDI sessions were held with the schools' headmasters logged on to Zoom meetings from their home base. In contrast, the teachers who participated in the FGD sessions needed to relocate to the Faculty of Medicine's computer laboratory, in which technical arrangements had been made to assure the smooth delivery of the sessions. The interview sessions were conducted through Zoom meetings, with all participants logged on to Zoom from laptops and using headsets for clear reception of and response to each question. The online method required spending to cover the Zoom meeting session costs, internet charges, and transportation costs. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a preferred method to minimize exposure to potential COVID-19 infection. Sessions were held according to health protocols such as those

requiring all participants to wear face masks and the room to be disinfected before being used. Participants with health issues such as fever, runny nose, etc., were not allowed to participate in any interview session.

Prior to each session, the participants were debriefed and given informed consent forms and fact sheets containing relevant information on the interview session. The signed consent forms were collected from the participants, and they were then directed to their seats. Each participant was seated relatively far from one other so their voice would not interrupt their peers' voices and the Zoom audio. They were also given directions on how to operate the Zoom buttons. Each FGD and IDI session was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia by one moderator assigned to distribute the interview questions to the participants and one assistant moderator who made summary conclusions from the responses. The IDI session lasted for about an hour, whereas the FGD session lasted about one and a half hours. Every session was observed and recorded by the principal researcher, and each was simultaneously translated to English.

3.2. Ethical Aspects

3.2.1. Process of Building the Relationship with Participants Based on Ethical Considerations

3.2.1.1. Informing Participants

Initially, the researchers gave information to the school representatives, who then recommended a list of potential teacher participants. Each participant was then contacted individually via phone or text messages by the researchers and invited to join a group chat with other teachers from the same school. The researchers delivered the information regarding the study through the chat group, in which the participants were also encouraged to ask questions about the study. Hence, although the school participants provided the list of teachers who were recommended to join this study, individual and group communication with the teachers prior to data collection was carried out to ensure that participation in this study was voluntary and free from coercion.

3.2.1.2. Management of Privacy and Personal Information

Participants' consent to being recorded during the FGD, both audio and video, was obtained prior to the FGD. To protect participants' privacy, the recordings and participants' personal data recorded on the face sheet were secured with a password known only to the researchers. None of participants' names or schools will be disclosed in any publication or any report about the study. Privacy during the video meeting was not a

concern for the participants who relocated to the university venue as no domestic activities occurred during the session. However, the researchers suggested that IDI participants find a private and quiet space when joining the video meeting from their home base.

3.2.1.3. Assistance in Accessing Information Technology

From the beginning, it was anticipated that the participants would need assistance for the online data collection. Through communication in the group chat, it was confirmed that access to a stable internet connection for a video meeting, the IT skills required, and experience in using the chosen video meeting platform were concerns of the participants. Therefore, the teachers unanimously agreed to come to the computer laboratory of the Faculty of Medicine for the online data collection. Compared to the teachers, the school principals had better access to technology (devices and internet connection), IT assistance, and a private space. Therefore, all of the school principals opted to join the IDI from their home base.

3.2.1.4. Building Rapport Between Participants and Researchers

To build rapport in an online data collection session, the moderator of the FGD/IDI first started by introducing themselves, the assistant moderator, and the principal investigator (FS), who also observed the FGD. Then, the moderator reiterated brief information about the study, the technical aspects of the video meeting, such as how to use the microphone and camera button, and explained the Participant Safety Plan. It was emphasized that each participant might choose not to answer the questions should they feel uncomfortable and could withdraw from the study. However, no signs of psychological stress or discomfort were observed, and no participants withdrew from the study.

3.2.2. Informed Consent

Participants in this study were adult professionals capable of making rational decisions and were not considered vulnerable people [7]. Written informed consent was obtained individually at the venue before the online FGD. Meanwhile, the IDI participants (school principals) who joined the online interview from their home base scanned and sent their informed consent form to the researchers. As an alternative, the researcher collected the form at their school as agreed by the participants, so as not to burden them. The process of informing participants about this study had been initiated long before the data collection day, as described in section 2.5.1. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw without any consequences. All information provided is

confidential, and none of the participants will be identified in any reports or publications about the study. The participants were also informed about the technical aspects of online data collection, including the audio and video recording of the FGD and IDI. The researcher also negotiated the schedule of the FGD with participants.

3.2.3. Gender

In the pre-test, participants were grouped based on their gender during the FGD to avoid discomfort in discussing sexual education topics in the presence of the opposite gender (Figure 3). However, based on the pre-test evaluation, the number of participants in each group would be too small to encourage a dynamic discussion (only 2-3 participants per group), and the discussion between participants was not as rich as expected. At the end of the discussion in the pre-test groups, the moderator asked the participants, "What do you think if we combine male and female teachers to discuss this comprehensive sex education?" They responded as follows:

In my opinion, because this concerns the FGD, I think there is no problem combining men and women, because we are talking about something that is related to our duties, functions, and roles. So that there is a similar role there. Even though some things are sensitive, I think as adults we can adjust our understanding, feelings, and other things so that we don't behave like adolescents. (Male teacher)

They don't really differentiate between the questions for men and women, so that the explanation is also not too open about women and men. This means that on this topic, it doesn't matter if it is combined. But if there is a more specific topic, it might be separated. As a suggestion, if possible, there should be distance from the male teacher so that we can talk freely. If it were to be combined, they shouldn't be next to each other, so there must be a gap or distance. But if the questions are limited just about this, I think they can be joined. (Female teacher)

Neither the female nor male participants considered that a mixed-gender group would lead to discomfort and hesitancy to speak because the questions were considered rather general and related to their role as teachers and not to their private life. Instead, a mixed-gender group was considered better to provide more comprehensive views regarding the topic, as the participants mentioned. Therefore, a mixed-gender approach to the FGDs was used for all data collection for each school.

3.3. Methodology Focusing on Online Qualitative Data Collection

3.3.1. Recordings

Audio and video recordings were integrated with the video meeting platform. Noise sometimes occurred due to a microphone or other issues. In addition, some participants' connections froze, or the participants left the Zoom meeting temporarily due to a bad connection but managed to reconnect. Although these issues influenced the clarity of the recording data, there were no serious obstacles. Even though the researchers and participants did not meet face to face, non-verbal communication through facial expressions and hand gestures was made feasible through the video meeting platform. After the FGD and IDI, the researcher could still observe the participants' non-verbal communication, including the intention to speak by watching the microphone button being turned on through the video recording. It was useful to confirm the participants' actions after the session.

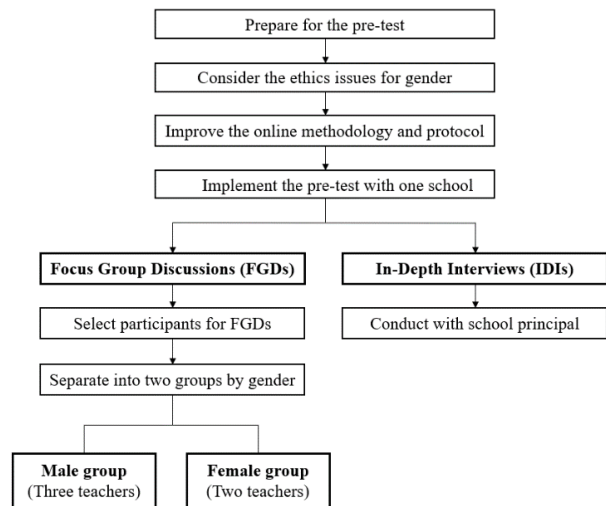


Figure 3. Flowchart of the pre-test for adjustment of ethical considerations

3.3.2. Transcription and Translation

The audio recordings were transcribed using Google Documents in Bahasa Indonesia. However, the transcribed data using Google Documents were not all valid due to the degree of the accuracy of the voice and recording data. In addition, some unclear parts of the recordings were not transcribed into Google Documents. Therefore, data from both the recordings and the transcriptions were used to ensure the validity of the data quality for translation.

The transcription and translation process was handled by three research assistants with a medical background. All research assistants perfected the

transcription results from Google Documents and simultaneously translated the interviews into English independently. The authors checked the Indonesian and English transcription, and they discussed any disagreements until consensus was reached.

4. LESSONS LEARNED

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers face difficulties when conducting face-to-face data collection in the field. Therefore, researchers must consider feasible methods to conduct an international collaborative study. The lessons learned from this study were mainly related to three challenges.

First, field coordination is essential to adjust the initial protocol developed for face-to-face data collection. An online methodology was considered to collect the qualitative data. Therefore, the protocol needs to be adjusted to ensure data quality [8]. Furthermore, we anticipated that the lack of participants' IT skills and the quality of the internet connections would challenge this study. Therefore, the participants were facilitated to attend the online FGD at the computer laboratory. Meanwhile, all IDI participants attended the interview from their home base. However, there were some device-related obstacles that influenced voice clarity.

Second, ethical considerations were important for smooth discussions. Informed consent was conducted to promote the participants' understanding of the study. The information was delivered in a chat group communication, and participants had opportunities to ask questions. To address ethical considerations regarding gender in the FGD, we conducted a mixed-gender focus group based on the results of the pre-test [7]. Evaluating the participants' technological ability and seeking input from participants enabled us to choose appropriate methods and tackle the challenges.

Third, to ensure the quality of the data, and thus the validity of the study, translation of the interviews involved two steps. First, the interviews were transcribed in Bahasa Indonesia based on the recordings. Second, the transcription and the original recording were used to translate the transcript into English. Thus, the translation process was evaluated by referring to both the original transcript and the recording.

5. STUDY STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The online collection of qualitative data conducted in an international collaborative study was generally successful. However, there are strengths and limitations of the present study. With regards to strengths, on the basis of the online protocol, we collected the raw data

between the University of Mataram and the University of the Ryukyus from a remote area during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. According to some previous online qualitative studies, we presumed that participants could smoothly discuss the contents of sexual education online compared to the face-to-face interview [7,9]. Moreover, the partnership of both universities is quite essential to conduct an online survey because researchers need to frequently contact each other and discuss the implementation of the online qualitative study.

In addition, the function of an online translation application helped to advance the process of data analysis. This strength of online qualitative data collection shows that using the function of an online translation application that translates into English from Bahasa Indonesia could support principal investigator who cannot understand Bahasa Language to follow discussion contents in real time during the FGDs and IDIs. It was supposed that a case of face-to-face interview could not follow discussion content with Bahasa Indonesia speakers who are participants and moderators because it cannot use online function in real time. Even though the function of an online translation application was not all impeccable, it supported the principal investigator's understanding. The consequence of this procedure is that the process of data analysis was supported based on understanding in real time and the transcription after the interview to analyze participants' opinions. Hence, the online qualitative data collection of the present study indicated that using an online translation application affected the data analysis.

We also identified four limitations through the process of conducting the online qualitative study. First, we suppose that the quality of the data, especially that obtained during the FGDs, was not high compared to what could be obtained through face-to-face discussions, the reason being that the participants, moderator, and assistant moderator talked virtually. If we could have conducted the FGDs face-to-face, the results would have had more depth compared to online FGD [10].

Second, the active discussion among participants was not as rich as expected due to the lack of participants. A few teachers delayed their attendance at the FGDs, and some FGDs were conducted with fewer than five teachers, therefore rich data could not be collected from every FGD.

Third, the Interviewer bias was considered as a potentiality through the online qualitative data collection. Although we conducted this study based on the researcher's experience, a discussion summary was provided by an assistant moderator to get a consensus among all participants at the end of the FGDs and IDIs to reduce the Interviewer bias. Also, when a moderator could not explain the research concept or questions well,

an assistant moderator explained further to participants during the interview. Consequently, it seems to reduce the Interviewer bias, because it promoted the roles of a moderator and assistant moderator.

Finally, legal aspects should be considered from three perspectives based on the common understanding or ground, such as data collection, data privacy, and data storing. Informed consent and personal information were stored in the Google form, and it was confirmed by only researchers. Moreover, the recording data were stored in the cloud of Zoom meeting which has a password for each interview session. Therefore, the legal aspect of data management protected the data collection. However, the online methodology of this study would be considered a specific methodology to protect data security and privacy because another online application or device might be different from the method of data management. Thus, further research should be adapted for updating the methodology of online qualitative data collection.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Our lessons learned indicated that multiple challenges must be overcome to enhance the protocol of an online qualitative study in the field. Field coordination was essential for the present online qualitative study because the interview guide and protocol need to be updated by the researchers based on the local context. In addition, ethical considerations regarding gender and privacy were needed to ensure comfortable discussion of sexual content, and appropriate informed consent helped the participants understand the study concept. Regarding the online collection of qualitative data, the researchers cooperated with both universities during the translation process. Finally, confirmation by the researchers was essential to finalize the validity of the qualitative data. Thus, an online qualitative study was evaluated by means of an international collaborative study.

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