

Online data collection strategies in qualitative nursing research



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ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of technology and the widespread dissemination of the Internet have provided a significant transformation in the field of qualitative research in nursing. This chapter seeks to briefly discuss data collection strategies in

qualitative research. To this end, this literature review is divided into two moments: initially, it focuses on the historical evolution of these data collection instruments, since the emergence of writing and, subsequently, it synthesizes the online data collection strategies that are being used in qualitative research in nursing, based on an integrative review in the Virtual Health Library. The search in the database resulted in 150 findings, to which the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, leaving 6 articles for inclusion in the study, submitted to a careful analysis. The results of this study are presented in four discussion topics, namely: Cuneiform writing and data recording: a brief history; Contemporary applications of online data collection *in* qualitative research in nursing; Benefits and limitations of online data collection; Trends and future perspectives in *online research*. Online data collection strategies are highly viable in qualitative research, especially because they are far-reaching, low-cost, and easily accessible.

Keywords: Methodological research in nursing, eLearning, Science, Technology and society.

1 INTRODUCTION

The great technological advances that have emerged in the world have provided changes in the most diverse areas of knowledge, including the way scientific research is done. Technological developments and the advent of the internet have contributed to the adaptation of data collection strategies so that they can overcome barriers that limit face-to-face research, such as the distance between researchers and participants, and emerge as accessible and innovative tools for conducting more comprehensive studies.

Thus, these strategies are being increasingly used in qualitative research and have reached another level in this type of scientific investigation, as they allow the research to be developed in different virtual environments such as forums, social networks, messaging applications and video calls. Such possibilities have aroused the interest of researchers (Salvador *et al.*, 2020), since this relatively new field needs to be better understood, and as new technologies and tools are introduced, new discussions are emerging, especially in the field of research ethics.



In addition, the Covid 19 pandemic has significantly contributed to the use of online platforms in data collection, as well as in the continuity of research that was once started, but prevented from progressing due to health restrictions. Such tools were already used long before the pandemic, there was already a whole movement towards research reinventing itself with the advent of digital technologies, but this process proved to be much faster after the events that began in China in 2019 (Michelon and Santos, 2002; Alhejaili, Wharrad, and Windle, 2022).

Recent discussions on the use of online tools for data collection involve the adaptation of traditional methods to the virtual environment, the use of messaging apps in data collection, advantages and disadvantages of online interviews, and ethical issues (Bueno-Roldan and Röder, 2022).

In this sense, this chapter seeks to discuss the strategies of data collection in qualitative research and the historical evolution of these instruments since the emergence of writing. In addition to synthesizing the online data collection strategies that are being used in qualitative research in nursing, through an integrative literature review.

The results of this study are presented in three discussion topics. In the first topic, there is a theoretical discussion about the written historical evolution and its importance for current technological advances, as well as for the field of qualitative research. In the second topic, an integrative review of the literature on online data collection instruments used in qualitative research in the field of nursing is developed, emphasizing which are the most used instruments. Finally, in the third topic, some benefits and limitations of these strategies are presented.

2 METHODOLOGY

Of a qualitative nature, this study is a literature review that is divided into two moments: first, through a narrative review, the evolution of writing, technological advances, and the impact on data collection strategies in qualitative research are discussed; and, in the second moment, the contemporary applications of online data collection in qualitative research in nursing are addressed through an integrative review.

To carry out the second stage of this study, the six phases or steps of the ILL were followed, namely: 1) elaboration of the theme and the guiding question; 2) Elaboration of inclusion and exclusion criteria and search of studies in the literature; 3) Data collection; 4) Critical analysis of the included studies; 5) Discussion of the results; 6) Presentation of the integrative review (Teixeira *et al.*, 2013).

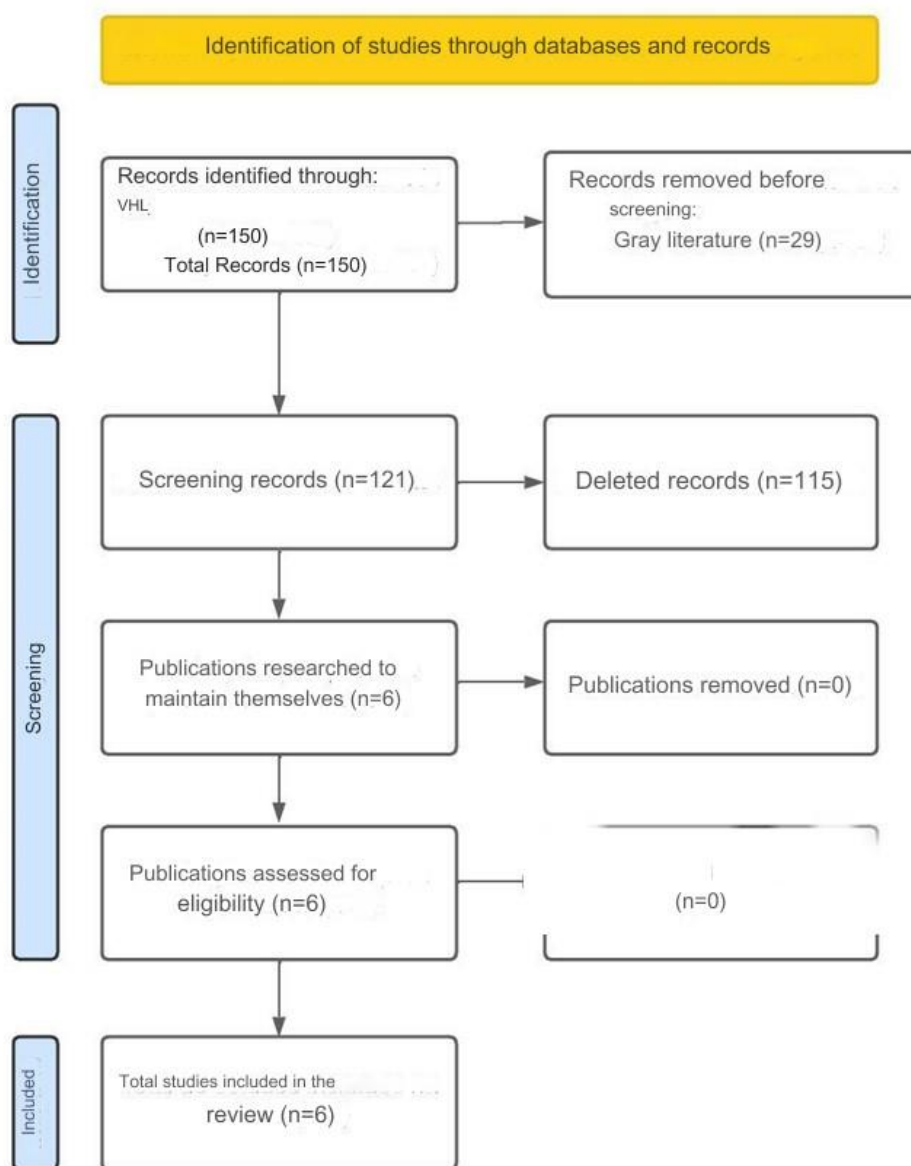
A combination of indexed descriptors of the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) and synonyms were used to search the articles, in order to expand the searches, since a previous search only with DeCS descriptors yielded little or no results. The Boolean operators "AND" and "OR" were also used, generating the following combination: ("Qualitative research" OR "Qualitative method") AND ("Online research" OR Internet) AND (Data collection) AND (Nursing).



Data collection was carried out at the Virtual Health Library (VHL). Included in this review were studies published in the form of an article, in Portuguese, available in full, and published in the last 5 years. Gray literature (books, abstracts, term papers, theses and dissertations) were excluded.

Database searches resulted in 150 papers. Excluding the grey literature, 121 articles remained. From then on, the abstracts were read to select only those who used online data collection strategies. From this selection, 6 articles remained to be read in full and data analyzed. Figure 1 illustrates the steps for selecting the papers in this integrative review, by means of an adaptation of the flowchart of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA).

Figure 1 - Flowchart adapted from the PRISMA model (2020), with the steps followed for the selection of articles included in the integrative review.



Source: Prepared by the authors (2023), adapted from Prisma (2020).



The articles selected for this review were carefully analyzed in order to achieve the objective of this study. For a better organization and presentation of the selected studies, they were organized in the form of a table, displayed in the session "Contemporary applications of online data collection in qualitative research in nursing".

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented in four discussion topics, namely: Cuneiform writing and data recording: a brief history; Contemporary applications of online data collection in qualitative research in nursing; Benefits and limitations of online data collection; Trends and future perspectives in online research.

3.1 CUNEIFORM WRITING AND DATA RECORDING: A BRIEF HISTORY

3.1.1 Verba volant, scripta manent

The quest for knowledge is not something that can be dated back to human evolution. We cannot define for sure at what moment man decided to know the world and everything that surrounded him, systematizing this knowledge. Whereas, mathematics, philosophy, and science have been rediscovered by various civilizations in distinct periods of history. However, we can highlight important milestones in this evolution throughout its trajectory (Gaines, 2013).

Humanity, throughout its history, has sought and found different forms of communication. There is evidence that since the post-glacial Neolithic era, humans have already had behaviors aimed at transmitting information. Cave paintings, for example, generally treated as art, can also be interpreted as knowledge acquired and transmitted for educational purposes (Gaines, 2013).

Since the acquisition of human language about 60,000 years ago, Homo Sapiens has been looking for ways to transmit their knowledge. In this sense, it is understood that only language, written and oral, can unveil the meaning of the world for the personal subject and, at the same time, sharing it for other subjects. This communication system allows, for example, the transmission of knowledge (Severino, 2001; Greydanus and Merrick, 2016)

The earliest form of symbolic knowledge capture dates to Sumer, around 3100 B.C., with the development of cuneiform writing, it gets its name from the ancient Sumerians learned to make marks on wedge-shaped wet clay tablets, hence the name "cuneiform" (Gaines, 2013). The records contained in these clay tablets, which have withstood time and human action, hold records on medicine, religion, laws, and other aspects of daily and commercial life, in addition, the tablets stored military information, mathematical procedures, and astronomical and climatic phenomena (Greydanus and Merrick, 2016; Gaines, 2013).



With cuneiform writing, it was possible to preserve complex information and knowledge, which goes back to scholars who suggested it much later, influenced by this archival culture (Greydanus and Merrick, 2016). Reinforcing the role of writing as a privileged way of constructing the cultural heritage of humanity (Severino, 2001). In addition, there are important parallels between the development of cuneiform writing and the later creation of knowledge capture technologies, such as computers (Gaines, 2013).

Another major milestone, which impacted the development of human knowledge, can be attributed to the Greek Enlightenment, around 2,500 years B.C. In this period, Euclidean geometry, Socratic dialectics, Platonic philosophy, metaphysics, science, and Aristotelian ethics developed. All this knowledge captured by writing was fundamental for the creation of the first libraries, such as the grandiose Library of Alexandria, and relied on the intense work of scribes, who copied, translated and altered the texts according to the audience (Gaines, 2013).

The invention of printing facilitated the dissemination of copies of these records, as well as enabling them to survive time and catastrophes (Gaines, 2013). Subsequently, another major revolution in data recording and the spread of writing can be traced to the invention of paper, around 105 A.D. in China by court official T'sai Lun. The discovery of paper revolutionized the Chinese empire and the world by replacing heavier and bulkier materials, such as clay tablets and parchment, with a lighter, more accessible, and easier way to write, store, and disseminate information (Fritoli and Krüger, 2016).

In this way, manuscripts have become even more common, making it possible to share ideas. And despite technological advances, paper consumption has never been as high as it is today. Awareness of the importance of preserving books and documents can help us to know the past and know who we are (Fritoli and Krüger, 2016).

Writing was the great technological advance of humanity, which favored the development of many other technologies, such as the internet, the computer, e-mails. However, the greatest impact on recent knowledge processes can be attributed to the invention of digital computers in the 1940s and integrated circuits in the 1960s. In addition, the web today provides access to a large amount of human knowledge (Gaines, 2013).

We see the advent of recording and storing information in digital media as a possible solution to make access to information more democratic (Fritoli and Krüger, 2016). Currently, highly sophisticated data storage and analysis systems allow the collection, organization and interpretation of large volumes of information. Electronic databases, cloud computing, data processing algorithms, and visualization tools have transformed the way we handle information and data.

History has shown the importance of preserving and sharing information over time, and how essential this was for the emergence of many technological advances. The basis of the teaching/learning process is centered on language, especially on the provision of information through



written language (Severino, 2001) and with so many changes occurring in the world and in science, possibly, many transformations will still occur in data records.

In the field of science, all these changes in the course of history also imply new ways of producing knowledge. Qualitative research has been increasingly influenced by Communication and Information Technologies (ICT's) and research based on online data collection is a reality, bringing benefits and challenges to researchers (Severino, 2001).

In addition to new data collection techniques, new forms of analysis and new research methods are needed (Melo and Dourado, 2022), which keep up with the technological advances that are developing in the world.

3.2 CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS OF ONLINE DATA COLLECTION IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN NURSING

The main tools used for online data collection were selected, based on an integrative literature review carried out in the VHL, covering the period from 2018 to July 2023, which are shown in chart 1 below.

Chart 1 - Characterization of the selected studies and collection strategies used

Author	Title	Year of Publication	Strategy Used	Digital platform
Santos, P. et al	Simulation and interdisciplinary and interinstitutional cooperation: development of nursing student competencies in disasters	2023	Online <i>Focus Group</i>	Skype
Santos, A. et al	Challenges for the practice of health advocacy for hospitalized children during the COVID-19 pandemic	2023	Online Interview & Online Form	Google Meet e Google Forms
Silva et al	Structure of nursing's social representations of death due to COVID-19	2023	<i>Chat Forms</i>	Google Forms
Bicalho et al	Coping strategies used by nurses in the face of <i>stress</i> in the management of the covid-19 crisis	2022	Online form	Not informed
Sousa et al	Intervening factors in the care of home-based elderly: analyses of primary health care nurses	2021	Online Interview	Zoom
Melo et al	Conceptions, challenges and competencies of nurses in palliative care in primary health care	2021	Online Questionnaire	Google Docs

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

Although the data collection period covers the last 5 years (2018-2023), the selected articles were published between 2021-2023. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, a greater number of publications was expected, since this type of research gained emphasis during this period, due to the



limitations imposed by the disease (Michelon and Santos, 2002). The 6 articles are available in the Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS) repository.

Regarding the reason why the authors decided to opt for an online data collection strategy, the studies by Sousa *et al.* (2021) and Silva *et al.* (2023) pointed to the Covid-19 pandemic as the main reason. The social distancing practices imposed from 2019 onwards forced field research to be moved online, requiring creativity from researchers so that studies were conducted ethically, safely, and robustly (Alhejaili, Wharrad, and Windle, 2022). Santos, P. *et al.* (2023) highlighted the ease of reaching a large number of participants as a reason for conducting the online survey. Access to many participants is pointed out in other studies (Salvador *et al.*, 2020) as one of the benefits of using online tools for data collection.

In the findings, the use of forms as a data collection instrument prevailed, with the help of Google platforms for their application, especially due to the ease of access to these instruments, free of charge and didactics of the tools (Michelon and Santos, 2002). Online interviews also have great potential for qualitative research because, as in face-to-face interviews, in addition to the speech itself, it is possible to analyze non-verbal cues such as voice intonation and gestures (Bueno-Roldan and Röder, 2022).

Regarding the data analysis procedure, the use of Content Analysis, also observed in another study (Salvador *et al.*, 2020), followed by Discursive Textual Analysis, prevailed among 6 selected articles. Also noteworthy is the use of software in this stage of the research, such as IRAMUTEQ and Atlas.ti 8.4.15. The use of digital tools for this stage of data analysis has been increasingly frequent, and is a necessity, since researchers are able to access an increasing number of information through the internet.

It is important to highlight that in some of the selected articles, the authors refer to the use of other technologies in the research, not necessarily in data collection, such as the use of messaging applications such as *Whatsapp*, and social networks such as Instagram, to invite the subjects to participate in their studies, a fact that has also been observed previously (Michelon and Santos, 2002).

Regarding *Whatsapp*, the application has great potential for conducting online research, especially interviews, since it offers, among other features, the option of voice videoconferences, phone calls, and written and voice notes (Bueno-Roldan and Röder, 2022). These new possibilities arise both from the advances in these technologies and from the creativity of researchers in unveiling new scenarios and instruments for carrying out their studies.

Online research requires, like any other data collection strategy, ethical procedures. Thus, one of the few references pointed out about this in the selected studies, highlights the care of the research participant to remain with the camera of the equipment (cell phone or computer) turned off, so that only the participant's voice was recorded. Another important issue regarding ethics in *online* research



involves data security on the part of service providers, something that cannot be guaranteed by the researcher, as it is related to the companies' terms of use and privacy policies (Bueno-Roldan and Röder, 2022).

Some ethical needs may arise only in the course of the research, as well as issues related to data protection. Thus, it is necessary that these themes are always revisited and updated, as new technologies and adaptations of new tools by researchers emerge.

As in other studies (Salvador *et al.*, 2020), participatory research methods predominated in this review. In addition, it is possible to classify the different online tools *used in the selected studies into: Synchronous (online interviews, chat-forms and online focus group) and asynchronous (questionnaires and online forms).*

It is important to note that new modalities in the use of these tools are being widely discussed, such as the use of asynchronous interviews, either with voice notes or combinations of audios and written messages. This technique may be promising for application in groups that cannot commit to a long interview, or when it is not possible to use a single interview (Bueno-Roldan and Röder, 2022).

Also noteworthy is the number of white literature found in this review, of the 150 studies found through the selected keywords, 121 were scientific articles. This fact is pointed out as something positive, given the ease of access and possibility of replicability of the studies (Salvador *et al.*, 2020).

Online research has shown promise, especially in the area of health (Michelon and Santos, 2002). And the use of unconventional methods for data collection requires creativity, planning and methodological rigor. In addition, the internet is a widely used tool for the production and collection of quantitative data, but the discussion about the production of qualitative data is still very incipient (Salvador *et al.*, 2020). Mainly, with regard to the production of robust qualitative data and attracting participants for research.

3.3 BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF ONLINE DATA COLLECTION

The articles selected in the review presented above do not provide comprehensive information on the benefits and limitations found in the use of online data collection tools by researchers. Thus, in this session, a brief discussion will be held on this topic, so that other researches, when making use of these strategies, can consider the possibilities and barriers to be faced in the use of these tools.

Online data collection tools show promise in the field of scientific research, especially due to their high coverage associated with low cost (Michelon and Santos, 2002). In addition, other benefits such as neutrality in data collection, anonymity, wide geographic coverage, and collection of sensitive data are also observed (Salvador *et al.*, 2020). These strategies have proven to be efficient and advantageous, as they allow researchers to gather information quickly, cost-effectively, and conveniently.



Thus, the possibility of reaching a large number of participants from different geographic regions, eliminating physical and temporal barriers, allows the inclusion of a larger number of people in the research, which contributes to the representativeness of the results.

In addition, the ease of access and participation of the subjects in the research allows them to answer the questionnaires or participate in the interviews at the time and place they wish, which increases convenience and flexibility, reducing possible resistance to participation.

Online data collection *strategies* also offer the possibility of using different types of media, such as videos, audios and images, enriching the collection of information and favoring data triangulation in qualitative research and a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon studied.

However, it is important to highlight that online data collection strategies also have their limitations. It is necessary to ensure the security and confidentiality of the information collected, as well as the reliability and validity of the data. In addition, it is necessary to be aware of the possible biases that may arise in this type of approach.

It is also noteworthy that one of the studies included in the review presented in the previous session highlighted the low adherence of people to answer the *online* questionnaire, this point is also discussed by other authors, who reinforce that the perishability, volatility and impersonality of the internet are factors that lead to this low adherence, emphasizing that this harms not only researchers, but also researchers. that they are unable to continue research, but also society in general, which cannot count on the benefits of these studies (Michelon and Santos, 2002).

Other limitations discussed include: shallow depth of answers, selection bias, impossibility of access to some data due to privacy settings, impossibility of clarifying and debating answers, delay in answers, lack of spontaneity, low depth of answers (character limit) (Salvador *et al.*, 2020).

There is also the idea that new sociabilities emerge in the virtual environment, as technological development enables new social interactions, which reinforces the need for the development of new methodological procedures. This phenomenon breaks with the conception that online social relationships *and interactions* would never reach the same degree of complexity and richness as face-to-face interactions (Melo and Dourado, 2022).

Therefore, online *data collection strategies* have been shown to be a viable and effective option in qualitative research, especially in the area of health (Michelon and Santos, 2002). However, it is necessary to pay attention to the limitations that these tools present, as well as a good planning of the research so that their objectives are achieved.

3.4 FUTURE TRENDS AND PERSPECTIVES IN *ONLINE RESEARCH*

Online surveys have become increasingly relevant and popular (Alhejaili, Wharrad, and Windle, 2022). As our lives in the virtual world become increasingly integrated with the social and



cultural life lived in person, any movement that considers *online* research partial or incomplete is useless (Melo and Dourado, 2022). Thus, future perspectives point to continuous growth, since the internet has become increasingly accessible, and research in this environment can be more generalizable.

The development of research in the virtual environment dates back to the 1990s, however, the limitations related to access to the web in this period made it difficult to develop methods for this new scenario. This fact led researchers to only transpose traditional research methods to the new environment (Melo and Dourado, 2022). This question reinforces that new trends related to *online* research may also be related to the development of new research tools and formats, such as visual assessments, video responses, and interactive polls.

New methodological proposals are emerging to meet the demands of online qualitative research. For example, considering the issues related to new sociabilities and identities in the virtual environment, research can focus on public "profiles" and "voices" that represent important aspects of social dynamics. In addition, it is necessary to consider the new uses of language and the need for researchers to be familiar with these novelties and "netiquette" (Melo and Dourado, 2022).

In addition, emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence are currently in the spotlight and may increasingly be part of *online* research. This issue reinforces the need to discuss more deeply the ethical issues surrounding online data collection strategies *and* the impacts of possible violations on *offline life* (Melo and Dourado, 2022).

Finally, *online research* allows for a certain balance of power, since, in this environment, once favorable to the researcher, it now gives autonomy to participants in choosing not to answer the video call, in addition to being able to select what to show or what to say (Melo and Dourado, 2022). In this sense, it is necessary for researchers to reflect more on the experiences that are being offered to the participants of the studies, as well as the real benefits of this to society, prioritizing the experiences, using the term of Alvin Toffler, from *prosumer*.

4 FINAL THOUGHTS

The history of data records is marked by continuous evolution, from cuneiform writing and the invention of paper to contemporary digital systems. Each technological advance has brought new possibilities and tools to scientific research and the most diverse areas of knowledge.

Online data collection strategies are highly viable in qualitative research, especially because they are far-reaching, low-cost, and easily accessible. From the times of the Sumerians, when clay tablets were used to record relevant information, to the current scenario in which digital technology plays a key role, the possibilities of data collection have evolved exponentially. And, with the advances



that have been taking place in the world, mainly related to the use of Artificial Intelligence, we will soon see more transformations in online data collection strategies.

However, these tools have limitations like any other data collection method, especially with regard to ethical procedures and confidentiality of information in the virtual environment. Thus, it is essential that the academic community keeps up to date on the new technologies that emerge, as well as reviewing the procedures and ethical precepts that govern scientific research, always seeking to make the best use of technologies for the common good.

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