Research in Lockdown: Lessons from Online In-Depth Interviews with School Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic.
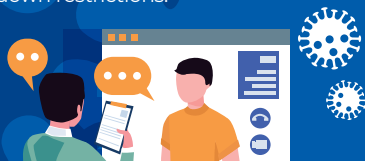
Norrafizah Jaafar[1], Aimi Nadiah Mohamad Norzlen[1], Nadia Hani Jahaya[1], Noorlaile Jasman[1] & Siti Nadiah Busyra Mat Nadzir[2]

Institutes for Health Behavioural Research[1] & National Institutes of Health[2]
Ministry of Health

MINISTRY OF HEALTH MALAYSIA

Introduction

Data collection is a critical component of research, enabling the exploration of research questions and the development of meaningful conclusions. Traditionally, in-person methods such as interviews and observations are preferred. However, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift toward virtual data collection due to lockdown restrictions.

Purpose of the study

To share lessons learned during the recruitment of adolescent as participants and the challenges encountered in conducting online in-depth interviews (IDIs) during school closures in Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO) period.
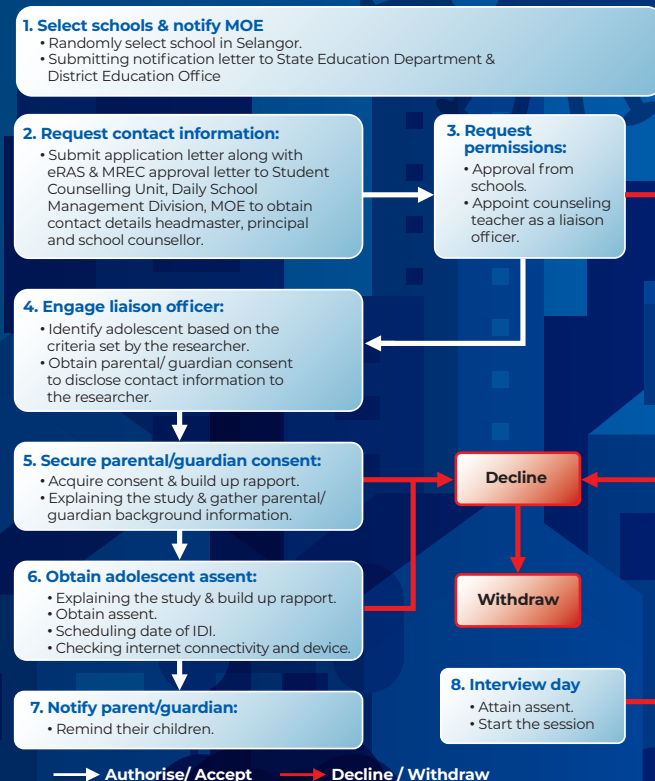
Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to explore adolescents' experiences with home-based learning and its psychological impact.
• Online face-to-face IDIs via Google Meet.
• Purposive sampling.
• Ethical protocols were adapted to the virtual format.

Results

During lockdown, recruiting school adolescent for a study is challenging, as researchers cannot conduct in-person visits or directly engage with adolescent and school personnel; many of whom were working remotely or were difficult to reach. In response, we developed a systematic flowchart of the recruitment process to address these barriers, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Process of Recruitment

1. Select schools & notify MOE
• Randomly select school in Selangor.
• Submitting notification letter to State Education Department & District Education Office

2. Request contact information:
• Submit application letter along with eRAS & MREC approval letter to Student Counselling Unit, Daily School Management Division, MOE to obtain contact details headmaster, principal and school counsellor.

3. Request permissions:
• Approval from schools.
• Appoint counseling teacher as a liaison officer.

4. Engage liaison officer:
• Identify adolescent based on the criteria set by the researcher.
• Obtain parental/ guardian consent to disclose contact information to the researcher.

5. Secure parental/guardian consent:
• Acquire consent & build up rapport.
• Explaining the study & gather parental/ guardian background information.

6. Obtain adolescent assent:
• Explaining the study & build up rapport.
• Obtain assent.
• Scheduling date of IDI.
• Checking internet connectivity and device.

7. Notify parent/guardian:
• Remind their children.

8. Interview day
• Attain assent.
• Start the session

Decline

Withdraw

→ Authorise/ Accept   → Decline / Withdraw

The study encountered five main challenges as shown in Table 1 before and during the online interview session. To address these issues, school counsellors played a key role in facilitating recruitment. Parent's consent and adolescent's assent was obtained via phone or email. Interviews were scheduled flexibly and conducted in secure online environments, ensuring privacy and participant comfort. Counsellor was also presence during each session to monitor the emotional well-being of the participants. Participant was allowed to choose a male or female interviewer and counsellor.

Table 1: Challenges Faces During Conducting a Study Amid COVID-19 And the Solutions

Challenges		Solutions	
Technology-related issues	• Unstable internet connections. • Lack of digital devices (shared usage among family members).	Flexible scheduling and adolescent support.	• Conducted trial sessions to check internet and device readiness. • Interviews scheduled at convenient times. • Option to reschedule if adolescents faced technical issues.
Access to adolescents	• School closures limited direct access. • Difficulty contacting parents/guardians.	Collaboration with schools and use of multiple contact modes.	• School counsellors assisted in identifying and contacting adolescents. • Assent obtained via phone or email.
Parental consent	• Parents hesitant due to privacy or safety concerns. • Limited awareness of research process.	Clear communication and ethical safeguards.	• Provided thorough briefing via phone/email. • Ensured verbal consent and rights to withdraw at any point.
Emotional well-being of adolescents	• Sensitivity of topics (stress, isolation) • Potential for distress during interviews.	Emotional safety protocols.	• Presence of counsellor during each session. • Interviews paused or terminated if adolescent showed signs of distress.
Privacy and environment issues	• Distractions at home. • Limited private space.	Pre-interview instructions and support.	• Adolesents were guided to prepare a quiet space. • Family members advised not to be present during interviews.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complexities of conducting adolescent research during public health emergencies. Despite the limitations of remote methods, strategic planning, ethical safeguards, and collaboration with educational and mental health professionals enabled the successful collection of rich, qualitative data. These insights are valuable for guiding future research involving vulnerable populations under similar constraints.

Keyword

Experience, Challenges, Lockdown, Adolescent