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# Adapting Qualitative Methods during the COVID-19 Era: Factors to Consider for Successful Use of Online Photovoice

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# Adapting Qualitative Methods during the COVID-19 Era: Factors to Consider for Successful Use of Online Photovoice

## Abstract

The pandemic has led researchers to adapt their research methods to the social distance imposed to combat COVID-19. Technology created many difficulties in reaching certain population targets, however it was often the only way during the lockdown to do more research. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers made use of remote data collection methods that allowed researchers to mitigate the challenges of physical distancing and improve the researchers' toolbox. This paper aims to highlight the factors to consider for successful use of online Photovoice. The participatory action research project involved 130 young adults who took part in a Photovoice online activity with the theme "Living with COVID-19: practical and emotional aspects". We present analysis of the online Photovoice process, giving voice to the participants; they reflected on the proposed technique, through individual reflective practices and they have highlighted the relevant group dynamics with a group reflection. The data collected were analyzed, on the basis of grounded theory, with NVivo 12 software. Functional factors and factors to considerer for a successful use of on-line Photovoice are discussed. This project has allowed the creation of new social networks, a space for reflection and activation for individual and community empowerment.

## Keywords

online Photovoice, young adults, reflective practices, empowerment

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## Acknowledgements

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The pandemic has led researchers to adapt their research methods to the social distance imposed to combat COVID-19. Technology created many difficulties in reaching certain population targets, however it was often the only way during the lockdown to do more research. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers made use of remote data collection methods that allowed researchers to mitigate the challenges of physical distancing and improve the researchers' toolbox. This paper aims to highlight the factors to consider for successful use of online Photovoice. The participatory action research project involved 130 young adults who took part in a Photovoice online activity with the theme "Living with COVID-19: practical and emotional aspects". We present analysis of the online Photovoice process, giving voice to the participants; they reflected on the proposed technique, through individual reflective practices and they have highlighted the relevant group dynamics with a group reflection. The data collected were analyzed, on the basis of grounded theory, with NVivo 12 software. Functional factors and factors to considerer for a successful use of online Photovoice are discussed. This project has allowed the creation of new social networks, a space for reflection and activation for individual and community empowerment.

*Keywords:* online Photovoice, young adults, reflective practices, empowerment

The COVID-19 pandemic spread worldwide in early 2020 and continues to exert a global impact (Callaway, 2020; Caycho-Rodríguez et al., 2021). The population has had to adapt to new behavioural norms, primarily social distancing (Das et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021; Melo & Soares, 2020) and the use of masks to reduce the spread of the virus and protect their own health and that of their relatives. Faced with such unprecedented social changes, which have now become the daily normal confronting both adults and children, scholars of different disciplines at this historical moment have also had to adapt their methodological reference frameworks to continue conducting research. Many scholars did not stop working even during the lockdown, but they have gone from using standard face to face research practices to an online mode (Johnson et al., 2021).

Quantitative research does not seem to have been considerably hampered. Indeed, numerous quantitative studies with data collected during lockdown periods have been published in various fields, addressing the medical aspect of the pandemic (Lu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020) or its psychological repercussions for healthcare workers (Lai et al., 2020; Şahin et al., 2020) or psychological consequences such as symptoms of anxiety, depression, lower mental well-being and psychological distress in the general population, both internationally (Abbas et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020) and nationally (Casagrande et al., 2020; Moccia et al., 2020). Some international studies (Brown et al., 2020; Daks et al., 2020; Westrupp et al., 2020) and Italian studies (Lagomarsino et al., 2020; Manzo & Minello, 2020; Rania et al., 2020) have focused on the family dimension and on the parenting role in the COVID-19 era. Concerning qualitative studies (Bender et al., 2021; Fawaz et al., 2021;

Galehdar et al., 2020), specific consideration must be given as they have been adapted to the tools and platforms available online (Dodds & Hess, 2020) due to present limitations caused by the impossibility of carrying out face-to-face research (Fawaz et al., 2021). Now that several months have elapsed since the first wave, it is necessary to reflect on how researchers have had to adapt to the new relational modalities and shape their methodological frameworks to conduct research in a changing context in which the relational dimension and the understanding of nonverbal language are hindered by social distancing and masking.

## COVID-19 Pandemic and Online Qualitative Methods

The COVID-19 pandemic has required adaptation to established methodologies to continue to carry out our research projects in the social field although, as some authors have highlighted, many academic women report a drastic decline in the publication of scientific articles in this pandemic period, specifically those by women and mothers (Cordero & Granados, 2020; Fazackerley, 2020; Minello, 2020). More often, it was mothers rather than fathers who reduced their working hours or worked with less attention and concentration to enable them to devote themselves to their children's needs (Collins et al., 2020; Saban Orsini & Barone, 2020).

Some authors argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the use of virtual research methods (Bania & Dubey, 2020) and that research previously conducted face-to-face is now finding space in the online context (Dodds & Hess, 2020). In general, in an increasingly digital reality, online focus group discussion is a method that is gaining increasing popularity (Woodyatt et al., 2016).

In this particular period researchers had to adapt the qualitative methods to the new situation; many researchers, moreover, during the pandemic used qualitative methods to explore the different perceptions of the period we are facing (Lovrić et al., 2020). Indeed, it has been found that qualitative methods, such as interviews, discussions, and observations, are the most adequate to collect social responses to the pandemic, allowing different points of view, meanings, and motivations, to emerge (Teti et al., 2020). Furthermore, Bania and Dubey (2020) affirm how a virtual qualitative survey, using online interviews and video conferences, is significant for grasping insights and for exploring and interpreting various phenomena and social realities during a pandemic. The use of online platforms can be a solution to the limitations dictated by the face-to-face methodology (Tuttas, 2015) since it allows us to obtain more substantive answers from the participants (Bruggen & Willems, 2009; Woodyatt et al., 2016). By providing a more comfortable environment for the participants, the online environment frees them to interact equitably and to share sensitive information (Woodyatt et al., 2016).

The online dimension in qualitative research has proven particularly effective for younger participants, as its safe and more comfortable environment helps participants feel more relaxed and less intimidated than in the face-to-face context, where participants have been shown to avoid eye contact and speak less (Dodds & Hess, 2020). However, this methodology poses a challenge for qualitative researchers, who will have to hone their technological skills to take advantage of it while protecting participants (Bania & Dubey, 2020).

Finally, the literature shows that there are both limitations and advantages to the use of this methodology. The limitations concern both the richness of the content, which may be less thorough due to the difficulty of conducting online discussion (Abrams et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2015; Woodyatt et al., 2016) and the lack of involvement of participants due to physical distance (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017; Reid & Reid, 2005), as well as the limited technological knowledge of some participants (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015) and poor Wi-Fi connection (Jowett, 2020).

However, online methodology also offers numerous advantages, particularly as the pandemic has increased the use of and confidence regarding videoconferencing (Batat, 2020; Dodds & Hess, 2020). Tools such as video calling and text-based instant messaging (e.g., WhatsApp; Jowett, 2020) are seen as a substitute for in-person interviews or focus groups that allow data to be collected in different geographical areas even in periods of forced physical distancing (Jowett, 2020; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015). Finally, as stated by Bania and Dubey (2020), virtual research in the social sciences will continue to increase given the greater accessibility to the Internet and the growing number of Internet users.

## The Photovoice Technique During the COVID-19

Starting from the framework proposed above, we analyse the adaptation of a qualitative tool, the Photovoice process, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This tool, Participatory Action Research Technique, has been used in the first time by Wang and Burris (1994) and subsequently in various areas of psychology as a social tool (Rania et al., 2014; Rania et al., 2015; Migliorini & Rania, 2017) and a health tool (Olumide et al., 2018). Additionally, due to the pandemic situation, Photovoice has recently been implemented remotely with college students (Jackman et al., 2020; Tanhan & Strack, 2020) and vulnerable people (Liegghio & Caragata, 2020).

## Aims

The research was conducted by researchers of the Department of Education of the University of Genoa, who wanted to focus on the possibility of adapting and using the Photovoice tool, despite the social distancing imposed during the pandemic. The aim of this work is to describe use of an online Photovoice approach. The online Photovoice process is analysed for its ability to give voice to the participants, who, through individual reflective practices, have reasoned on the proposed technique and, through group reflection, have highlighted the relevant group dynamics. The strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the use and effectiveness of online Photovoice are investigated, with the aim of creating a space for reflection, discussion, and activation for individual and community empowerment.

## Materials and Methods

### Participants

The participatory action research project involved 130 young adults (111 females (85.4%) who took part in an online Photovoice activity to deepen the theme proposed to them "Living with COVID-19: practical and emotional aspects", through the Photovoice technique. They lived in northwestern Italy and had a mean age of 27.5 years (22–56 years, SD = 7.52). The participants, recruited in various degree courses of the University of Genoa, were randomly divided into 23 groups of 4–9 members to realize the "SHOWeD" method.

### Procedure

The participants took part in two meetings online, each of which was attended by approximately 60 people. During these meetings (Phase 1), the researcher presented the purpose of the Photovoice, information about the photographic technique and the use of Photovoice images and written informed consent to participate in the research. The data collection procedure complied fully with the Research Ethical Code of the Italian Association

of Psychology, the ethical recommendations of the Declaration of Helsinki and the American Psychological Association (APA) standards for the treatment of human volunteers. During the first meeting, the participants were encouraged to think about the practical and emotional aspects of living with COVID-19. In the subsequent ten days (Phase 2), participants individually photographed their everyday experiences related to living with COVID-19 and chose two or three photos to which they added a short comment (the reasons for the choice, what it represents for them and the emotions they felt in taking it) to present at the next group meeting. In Phase 3, through an online platform, each participant presented his/her photos and explained their meanings and his/her feelings related to taking them. Then, a group discussion followed, using the "SHOWeD" method (Wang, 2006): this consist in five questions: What do you *See* here? what's really *Happening* here? how does this relate to *Our* lives? *Why* does this problem or this strength exist? What can we *D*o about this?, where words in italics form the acronym SHOWeD.

In a subsequent meeting (Phase 4), each group produced a billboard or a PowerPoint presentation in an online initiative with local stakeholders that was accessible to university students and their families. At the end of the Photovoice path (Phase 5), each group participant compiled an individual guided reflective practice that allowed us to elucidate the positive and negative aspects of the experience, what had or had not worked in the online dimension, and the feelings experienced in relation to the empowerment experience. Furthermore, each group, together with the researcher (Phase 6), held a group reflection to highlight the relevant group dynamics, with particular attention to the dimension of the online process.

Each participant was assigned an individual code from 1 to 130 (for example: participant 1 female was assigned the code P1F while participant 43 male was assigned the code PM 43) and a group code from 1 to 23 (for example Group 1 that followed SHOWeD method was assigned the code SG1).

In Figure 1, the different phases of the Photovoice online technique are presented.

**Figure 1**
*Phases of the Photovoice Technique*
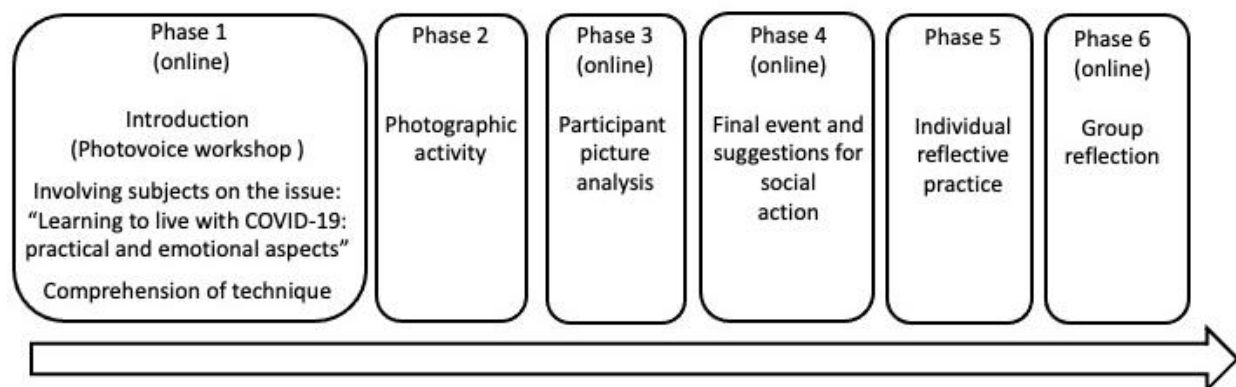


**Research Methods**

The study was conducted using the Teams online platform following the Photovoice technique (Wang, 2006), according to the steps described in the Procedures paragraph. The data collected through individual reflective practices and the transcripts of the group reflection on the Photovoice. Data were analyzed according to constructivist Grounded Theory by Charmaz (2012), which has its basis by Grounded Theory founded by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and deepened by other authors (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Chun Tie et al.,

2019; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) This theory is both a method of studying processes, but it is also a method in process (Charmaz, 2012), a structured but flexible methodology, especially useful when information on a phenomenon is not well known (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

        **Initial coding and selective coding.** Two independent researchers analysed and categorized the data using the software NVivo 9 (2011). Initially, an open coding of the data (consisting of short labels) was performed until a selection of the most significant codes was reached. Subsequently, were identified the main categorizations that emerged in the analytic process, specifying their characteristics, variations, and relationships between them (Charmaz, 2012). On the basis of the categories that emerged, graphical representation was constructed through a model (NVivo Getting Started Guide, 2011). This model contains codes relating to actions and meaning, interpreted on the basis of the data (Charmaz, 2012). The process of data analysis is described in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**
*Data Analysis Process (Modified by Rania et al., 2019)*
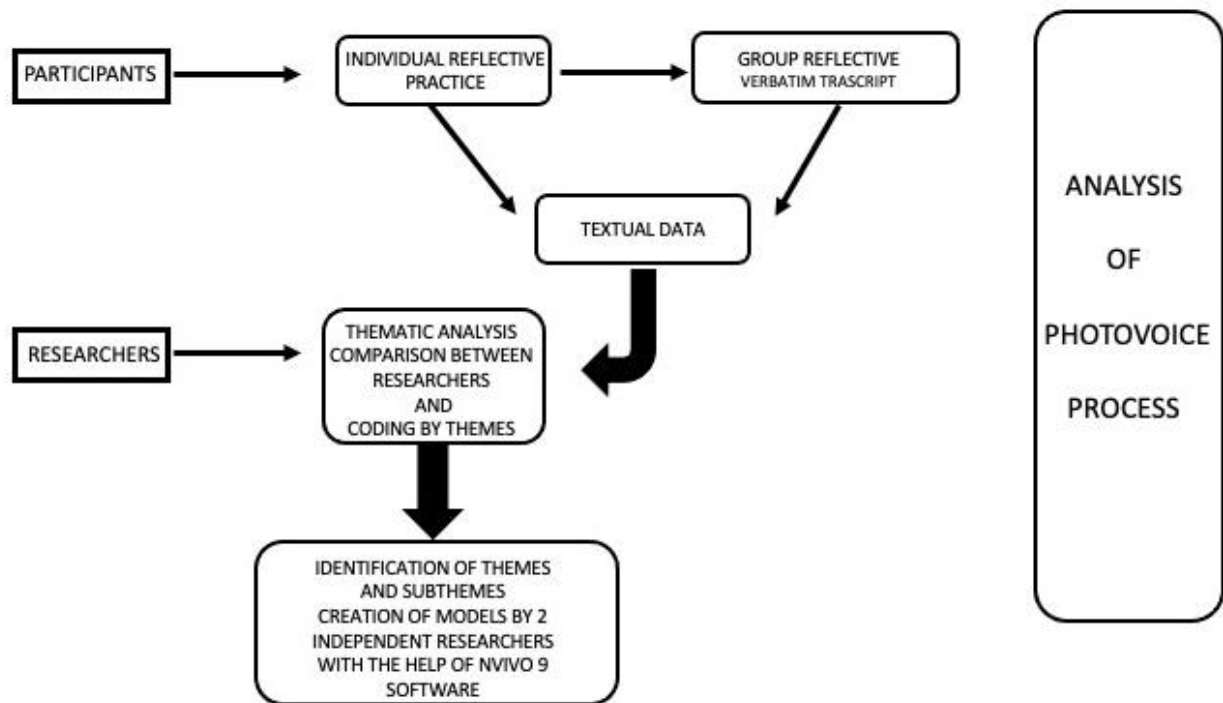


## Findings

        From the analysis of individual reflective practices and the transcripts of the group reflection different initial codes emerged who have been selected; from the selective coding two categories ("Function factors of the Photovoice online group" and "Factors to consider for a successful online Photovoice") were identified which allowed to define the theory starting from the data.

**Functional Factors of an online Photovoice Project**
In Figure 3, we show the functional factors of the use of online Photovoice.

**Figure 3**
*Functional factors of an online Photovoice*
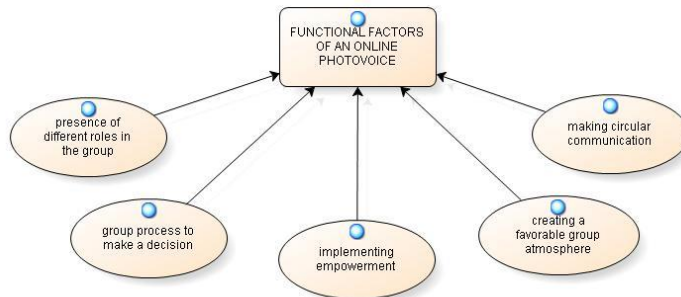


**Presence of different roles in the group.** Analyzing the different transcripts, the code "presence of different roles in the group" emerges: *"Now I am aware that in a group there are people with different roles, that can help the group both to improve relations and to achieve objectives"* (P1F). The authors interpreted the participants' expressions relating to the roles and the importance of each role within the group, necessary to make it work. The different roles within a group, which facilitated relationships and the achievement of results: The roles that emerged most were encouragement, facilitator of communication and opinion seeker, *"as at the end of each photo exhibition and commentary, everyone took care to ask the other members their opinion"* (SG15); listener, *"showing us interested and active in accepting the opinions of others"* (SG18). Furthermore, some groups underlined the dynamism of the technological tool, which allows participants to take on different roles: *"The speed with which you can move from one role to another thanks to the telematic tool is an element that can help the individual to cover different roles, avoiding the role conflict"* (SG18).

We interpreted this to mean within a group the presence of the facilitator is necessary; this figure was important and fundamental in the management of dynamics and in the achievement of objectives:

> He kept the group centred with respect to the task, he worried that we had really finished exposing our thoughts before proceeding with other photos, he kept the discussion alive, stimulating everyone's participation, valuing opinions, ideas and feelings that emerged. (SG3)

**Group process to make a decision**. From the analysis of the transcripts, particular attention of the participants emerges in relation to the code "group process to make a decision". When participating in a Photovoice study, individual work follows the group activity with the aim of identifying common points of view for the final paper. From the transcripts the emphasis on initial individual work and the difficulty in reaching a group decision emerges, since to do this it is necessary to reach a compromise, starting from the initial individual points of view: *"at the beginning of the discussion, we tried together to investigate the issues raised by the photos viewed, to then identify the resources and critical issues and finally we tried to identify possible solutions"* (P43M); *"after a first individual work, the members of the group had to make a decision about the work to do together. This part was difficult, so the choices made were very thought out from every point of view"* (P15F). As underlined by most of the groups, the decision-making process used was that of normalization: *"opinions end up converging*

towards a point of balance, the members influence each other and therefore find an intermediate position, they reach compromises" (SG22).

**Implementing empowerment**. From the analysis of the transcripts, it emerged that the participants taking part in the group discussions felt greater responsibility on an individual level; this has led to group well-being. Furthermore, from the transcripts it emerges that constructive interaction has led to an increase in cognitive and social skills. The participants, in their feeling of being a group, saw participation in online discussions and dialogues as a way to "implementing empowerment". The following extracts are examples to support the way we have interpreted the flow of this process: *"the conversation stimulated dialogue and reflexivity, the group gave rise to a productive confrontation"* (SG1); "individual responsibility and constructive interaction has allowed the increase of cognitive and social skills" (SG9); *"maturation of a general, individual and collective well-being, born in a climate of growth and stimulation, through positive relational networks, motivation and collaboration, each component felt not in the group but a group"* (SG12). Another said:

> The group confirms that it has grown and evolved, all the participants express themselves freely without any fear, the experiences lived during the Photovoice helped the participants to increase their cultural background by giving each one something more and maturing the ability to share and discussion. (GS23)

Another participant stated, "The positive value is all that is behind the taking of the photo; the Photovoice uses photography as a tool aimed at social change, first of all promoting personal and group empowerment" (P98F).

**Creating a favorable group atmosphere**. Furthermore, the analysis of the textual data, the transcripts (Ronzi et al., 2016) from both the individuals and groups led us to codify some extracts such as the "creating a favorable group atmosphere", which is functional for the creation of an online Photovoice project. The excerpts that we report show the multiple ways this group atmosphere allowed the participants to express themselves freely. Furthermore, the group, by definition, performs a support function, reducing feelings of loneliness, which is even more evident, as we have been able to deduce from the analysis of the transcripts, within an atypical and complex situation, such as that of the pandemic: "I feel a climate of greater understanding, although many of us are, in my opinion, basically shy and unwilling to share something. All opinions were expressed in the knowledge that the group would not judge" (P85F); "my group turned out to be a very useful device as far as solitude is concerned, as it made me understand that I am not alone, rather 'we are all in the same boat'" (P55F). Another participant said:

> Although we have addressed a topic of a certain emotional impact for us, we have managed to break up the most melancholy moments with joking comments, creating a pleasant atmosphere and an atmosphere in which to express oneself freely without feeling judged. (SG6)

**Making circular communication**. The analysis of individual and group reflections leads us to interpret how the online Photovoice approach has offered participants the opportunity to be part of a group within which a circular communication has been established, thanks also to the favorable climate and the roles covered. by each and recognized within the group: "the exchange of communications was balanced, without anyone being excluded or overpowered, the communication network stood in a circle: everyone communicated with

everyone" (SG1); "the communication followed a circular pattern, the number of verbal exchanges was quite high, especially in the discussion and solutions phase" (SG19).

Finally, with regard to the last subtheme identified, active participation, the different members of the groups underlined how they all cooperated to achieve the common final goal: *"there are never moments of silence or stalemate, everyone is committed to contributing in his own way, consequently stimulating the others to participate and cooperate to obtain the desired final result"* (P99F); as stated in the group reflections, "each participant adopted an attitude of interested and active listening to the ideas and opinions of others and facilitated an active discussion by suggesting work ideas in response to the experiences expressed by the group" (SG23).

**Factors to Consider for a Successful Online Photovoice Study**

This category includes those codes that refer to factors that are understood as necessary for the proper functioning of the online Photovoice project, as shown in figure 4. From the transcripts, in fact, it emerged that if the right attention was not given to these factors, they could become an obstacle to the creation of a successful online Photovoice project.

**Figure 4**
*Factors to consider for a successful online Photovoice project*
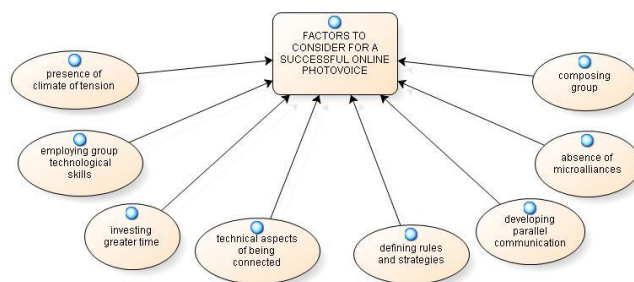


**Presence of climate of tension**. In the creation of the online Photovoice project, analyzing the individual and group transcripts, it is evident that in the initial phase there is the presence of climate of tension. The cause underlined by the various reflections can be traced back to the difficulty of managing a discussion without physical presence. From these transcripts it can be said that the online dimension is perceived across the groups as a difficulty that has repercussions on an emotional level and in the management of the tool. In fact, although the importance of non-verbal communication is recognized, in the online dimension this is hindered, also leading to misunderstandings. However, from the individual reflections, it is possible to deduce how these difficulties are surmountable with the knowledge, mutual comparison and support of those who had more experience fundamental resources for the online group:

> The beginning of the activity was marked by a tense atmosphere, probably the result of the digital communication mode, different from direct communication in person, where possible misunderstandings could arise due to the discrepancy between verbal and nonverbal language due to the network digital communication [….] However, the subsequent comparison of the photos allowed us to feel a direct relationship between the participants despite the lack of physical proximity. (SG5)

In general, the tense atmosphere would seem to have eased after the first introductions, also thanks to a series of jokes posed in a joking way, making everyone feel at ease in the discussion; those who have had more experience in discussions involving confrontation coped better with the situation to try to create a warmer feeling so that everyone could talk. (P12F)

**Employing group technological skills.** An analysis of individual and group transcripts shows how participating in an online Photovoice project could cause difficulties, especially for those who are less inclined to technology. In the activities carried out, the supportive role of the group sometimes emerges both towards those who have less technological skills and for the production of the final outcome in digital format: "the photos were shared online by each person, whoever was in difficulty was helped quickly and promptly by the group" (SG1). Another said,

Positive collaboration between the members of the group, the desire to help people who are less inclined to use it with 'technology (P76F). Those who had excellent PowerPoint knowledge made it available to the group in the construction of the final paper for the group exhibition. (SG3)

**Investing greater time.** Analyzing the transcripts, it emerges that the online Photovoice can lead to investing more time than face-to-face groups to produce the final outcome. This factor must be taken into consideration as it involves a greater effort of the participants: "some of us have voluntarily assumed the burden of carrying out small extra chores outside the time of the group meeting to be made available to all to support the final collective work" (SG3).

**Technical aspects of being connected.** In general, the use of online platforms involves technical aspects that can hinder the functioning of a discussion group. In fact, from the transcriptions there are difficulties related to the type of connection, background noises and technical problems that influence the adaptation of this qualitative online technique as highlighted in these extracts:

The weak and that causes the connection to drop, losing contact with the interlocutor, or the electronic annoyance that connected participants receive if there is a noise near the microphone, are all aspects that highlight a little practicality of the online modus operandi, in person these criticalities would not be experienced. (SG12)

Another group (SG22) stated: "Lack of nonverbal communication due to connection problems of some participants who were able to speak but unable to see them as the connection did not support the video camera." A participant (P22F) said, "There remained the fear that my connection as usual would fail or that the microphone would not work." P90M said, "In fact, certain participants found themselves in the situation of not being able to communicate with others due to drops in connection speed."

It is also difficult to be able to regulate well in shifts, not having all the nonverbal elements available as in person and not being face to face, so it often happens that we talk about it, also due to delayed communication problems. (SG3)

**Definition of rules and strategies.** Some transcripts suggest the importance of the "definition of rules" within an online group. From the extracts that we report, some important examples emerge of how there are specific rules of the online group, such as turning on the video camera. These examples lead us to define how rules especially in an online group are necessary for healthy functioning of the online group and for the respect for the members: "implicit voluntary rules have been established such as keeping the webcam on during the meeting, thus facilitating communication" (SG9); *"*the proposal to turn on the video cameras, to show the face of each participant, made it possible to eliminate the inconveniences and insecurities initially experienced by the members*"* (SG12); *"*I believe that the group work was done very well, we discussed without overwhelming ourselves, freely expressing our opinions and respecting the shifts in order to speak*"* (P44F); "in fact, we decided to write down the possible questions that would arise in such a way that we could ask them at the end of each presentation" (P71F).

In addition to the rules, the strategies are fundamental within an online group. From the extracts we want to bring out as the participants to experience the dimension of presence and sharing of photos around a table, creating an experience that was reflective of the in-person Photovoice process even in the online mode: "the initiative to create a PowerPoint was very useful for allowing sharing within the group and allowing us to feel close and present, as if we were actually all around a table*"* (SG4); "a member of the group collected all the photos in a single file and then offered them to be shared on the screen, obtaining an overview*"* (SG14). However, if on the one hand these strategies are functional, on the other, difficulties arise, for example the sharing of the screen, although it was positive as it recreated the dimension of a shared space, did not allow the participants to see one another and see the photos at the same time, thereby losing many aspects of nonverbal communication: "when there were shared documents, we did not the possibility of seeing all the participants of the group and we were losing useful clues to decode their communications well*"* (SG21).

**Developing parallel communication.** Code "developing parallel communication" refers to those situations reported transversally to groups where alternative ways of communicating to verbal ones were used, such as the use of chat. Moreover, as emerged from excerpts, the use of chat and emoticons allowed the rapid exchange of communications such as hints of sharing or disappointment with what a participant had said instead of an immediate nonverbal communication carried out in person:

> One of the members took part in the discussion more with written messages in chat than orally, creating two parallel communication channels (SG19): the verbal communication exchanges have been reinforced from the use of emoticons to provide immediate further and instant feedback. (SG23)

**Absence of microalliances.** A further factor emerged is the "absence of microalliances" in the context on computer-mediated communication. In fact, what can be deduced from the analysis of the transcripts, is that unlike the face-to-face Group, the absence of non-verbal expressions in the online Group hinders the creation of subgroups:

> When some of us made a joke or spoke it was not possible to notice if other members were exchanging glances with each other to communicate something, communicating with remote tools does not allow you to direct your gaze to a particular person and interact with them. (SG22)

**Composing group.** A salient factor to consider for the good functioning of an online Photovoice is the composition of the group. As emerges from the transcripts, the participants pay a lot of attention to the composition of the group, as this influences the participation in the discussion and the preparation of a final paper. In fact, the participants agreed that the small group favors the widest active participation of all, limited in large groups: *"the limited number of members favours an active participation of all, a greater sense of responsibility with respect to results and the achievement of objective: the members have the desire to collaborate and contribute with their own experiences"* (SG3); *"the fact that we were only four people allowed us to get to know each other a lot. The low number facilitated the discussion and preparation of the final paper"* (P74F). The analyses of participant reflections show how an overly large group can limit individuals' participation and sharing of experiences:

> I found our group too numerous and varied in terms of age and experience. In any case, I believe that I am more comfortable in smaller groups whose members share more aspects of daily life, habits and interests, making it difficult for me to get in touch with those who have different experiences. (P62M)

Finally, P78F said, "The high number can lead certain people not to speak or, in any case, could push those who usually speak to overwhelm the components who, instead, need a push to express themselves."

## Discussion

The goal of the work was to analyse the functional factors and the factors to consider for a successful implementation of online Photovoice research. The analysis of the individual and group reflections can help researchers implement the work on qualitative online methods that is already present in the recent literature on the pandemic but is not, at the moment, particularly detailed. The functional factors highlighted both by the analysis of individual reflective practices and by the transcription of group reflections are remarkable. The online Photovoice approach allowed the participants to establish themselves as a working group during the final stage of the SHOWeD and in preparation of the final paper. The group was more aware of the different but equally important roles within it, which allowed the achievement of the final goal with the preparation of PowerPoint presentations despite the physical distance. The use of the online group format has also emerged in the literature as allowing participants to have a positive experience and to develop social and relational skills within the group itself (Saldanha, 2020). Furthermore, it has been found that within online discussion groups, learning objectives are achieved through discussions, sharing of documents, reflections and artefacts (Agudo-Peregrina et al., 2014; Goggins & Xing, 2016; Kim, Lee, & Wang, 2020; Xie, 2013).

Among the roles that received most consideration by group participants was that of the facilitator, who was perceived as fundamental in the online Photovoice in managing group dynamics and organization. Woodyatt et al. (2016) found that during online focus group discussions, the simultaneous responses from participants necessitated that the facilitator manage multiple responses at the same time; this does not happen in in-person focus groups, where respect for speaking in turns allows the facilitator to manage the discussion more effectively. The literature (Underhill & Olmsted, 2003) has also highlighted how the physical absence of the facilitator limits his/her role in managing group interactions, thereby creating possible deviations from the topic. However, in our case, this aspect did not emerge; in contrast, the facilitator managed to keep the group anchored to the objective and focus of the discussion, which was perhaps also due to the delicate and engaging theme that the participants were

treating. Reisner et al. (2018) underline the importance of the role of facilitator in organizing the discussion during a focus group and for allowing equal participation by all.

An important part of the Photovoice path is the decision-making process in relation to the selection of photos at the group level to be proposed in the final report or for the identification of shared solutions to be proposed to stakeholders. Most of the groups used a normalization process, in which everyone had the opportunity to express their point of view. In relation to this approach, Sillence and Bussey (2017), studying online support groups, found that these are fundamental elements of the decision-making process; in fact, such groups contribute to the sharing of new ideas, provide indirect learning experiences and offer the possibility to reflect and discuss decision-making processes. Furthermore, from the analysis of the data, it emerged that the participants perceived the Photovoice as a tool that promotes individual and group empowerment, prompted by productive discussions and constructive reflections, as underlined by Ciolan and Manasia (2017), who explain how visual methods allow the development of empowerment. Similarly, Rania et al. (2019) highlight how the Photovoice activity of discussion and a search for solutions allows the expression of deep emotions and feelings, thereby creating a condition of active participation in the process of planning and resolution of problems. Tsang (2020) highlights how Photovoice allows participants to implement empowerment by encouraging them to take, interpret and analyse photographs related to their lives and their communities. The development of empowerment both individually and collectively was enabled thanks to a group climate described by the participants as nonjudgmental, which favours collaboration and mutual listening and mitigates feelings of loneliness. Indeed, Woodyatt et al. (2016) argue that creating a more comfortable online environment allows participants to share sensitive information. Communication perceived as circular within the group also contributed to the free expression of thoughts. In contrast to this finding, however, Stewart and Shamdasani (2017) found that virtual groups reduce intimacy, making the participants less inclined to openness and spontaneity. A final strength is represented by active participation in the online Photovoice: the participants believed that everyone cooperated to achieve the common final goal. Woodyatt et al. (2016) assert that online tools allow participants to interact fairly. As expressed in the literature, in fact, the use of online qualitative methodology is particularly suitable for vulnerable groups, such as young people, because it favours their participation by reducing or eliminating some obstacles that are more evident in person, such as shyness, avoidance of eye contact and the inhibition of speech (Dodds & Hess, 2020), and makes use of the younger generation's generally greater familiarity with technology.

Despite the different strengths highlighted, the use of online Photovoice does not lack points of critique. A first issue is linked to the climate of tension in the first part of the SHOWeD, which was caused by a lack of familiarity with the use of the technological tool and by the greater possibility of misunderstandings compared to the in-person dimension, since verbal and nonverbal communications are less understandable online. A further issue is due to the limited technological skills of some participants, which, as found in the literature, can lead to their exclusion (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015); however, thanks to the favourable climate created during the online Photovoice, the most experienced of the group offered support, thus encouraging everyone's participation.

Despite the face-to-face mode, the online mode favoured the spontaneous respect of some rules necessary for the proper functioning of the online group, such as respect for speaking in turns, participation with an active camera and writing down any questions to avoid interrupting individual interventions. In fact, the literature (Woodyatt et al., 2016) reflects those participants in focus groups conducted in person tend to talk more and to interrupt those who spoke compared to those participated online. The participants also tried to live the experience of the online Photovoice as if they were in person, adopting strategies such as sharing the screen

to simulate an in-person context, as though they were around a table, a condition that allowed participants to feel closer and more present. Despite this approach, the limits of being online did not allow a complete sharing of the experience and observation of nonverbal communication, a limitation also found in the literature (Reid & Reid, 2005). However, Jenner and Myers (2019) underline that compared to telephone interviews, the presence of video allows us to better grasp nonverbal messages. The online Photovoice involved a greater expenditure of energy because, as pointed out by the participants, to achieve the final goal – the paper for the presentation to stakeholders – more meetings were needed than those set.

Another critique related to the use of an online Photovoice approach is represented by the type of connection used, which was often weak; this is in line with findings by Jowett (2020). Weak connections sometimes hindered the progress of the work, as has also been found in the literature (Weller, 2017), due to technical problems such as microphone or camera malfunctioning, which did not always allow smooth communication. Some groups resorted to alternative communication tools, such as the use of chat, creating communications parallel to verbal communication that, thanks to the use of emoticons, were nonetheless an effective communication exchange. However, Tutas (2015) highlights how within an online focus group, unlike in face-to-face focus groups, participants have the opportunity to reelaborate their answers, thereby reducing immediacy and, consequently, spontaneity.

Compared to Photovoice in person, the online format does not seem to have favoured the creation of microalliances that are based on nonverbal expressions. Finally, it emerged that it is even more fundamental for the healthy functioning of the online technique that participants be assigned to small groups to allow active participation and sharing of experiences. Indeed, Dodds and Hess (2020) suggest that the ideal group should consist of 4-6 people. Other authors point out (Bloor, 2001; Reisnet et al., 2018) that focus group discussions are generally composed of 6-8 participants, since the role of the facilitator would also become overly complex in greater numbers, reducing its effectiveness.

## Final Thoughts

These results underline how the use of an online Photovoice approach, despite the limitations and difficulties due to the use of online platforms, can be a valid tool for carrying out research, especially in situations such as those we are currently experiencing that require social distancing to protect collectives. It has been previously found that the use of platforms such as Skype, Hangouts and Facetime allows us to overcome the physical, geographical and economic distances inherent in face-to-face interviews (Jenner & Meyers, 2019). However, it is necessary to emphasize that challenges are not lacking, including the need for an efficient connection and a place to conduct SHOWeD Photovoice in peace, as well as mutual availability and attention to nonverbal expressions (Jenner & Meyers, 2019). These conditions are necessary for any methodology adapted to a virtual mode and, above all, for the Photovoice process, which is based on sharing photos to express thoughts and experiences and which, in an online mode, allows young people to meet each other and overcome their isolation (Liegghio & Caragata, 2020). Deakin and Wakefield (2014) underline how online interviews – and, we would add, online Photovoice – can increase the level of participation, especially for those who have little time to dedicate to a process. Therefore, the online mode, even if in need of improvements and insights, is increasingly used and can be considered a further solution that is effective for researchers even in a postpandemic context, in which the problem of distancing will continue to be an element that distinguishes our lives and professionalism as researchers.

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