

Qualitative Research Inquiry to Explore the Corporate Leaders in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 has influenced the business organizations' performance and behavior in numerous ways. Based on the pressing need to respond to this pandemic researchers have to play a significant role in uncovering the possibilities for business organizations to adapt to this uncertain situation. Therefore, it is important to pay attention on the corporate managers' and entrepreneurs' contextualized experiences and their meanings attributed to COVID-19 in order to mitigate failures and to learn to be sustained. This requires qualitative research which can be helpful to capturing the deeper understanding of lived realities of the corporate leaders who are affected by the pandemic. The qualitative researchers can adopt five types of approaches including narrative inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study to uncover these lived experiences of corporate respondents and to make sense of those experiences for the benefit of various stakeholders. Each of these five approaches to qualitative inquiry can be utilized for researching different facets of the corporate leaders at the time of pandemic. The in-person interactions need for qualitative inquiry to look into the corporate leaders' lives is challenged by the social distancing generated by the new normal behavior. However, the evolving nature of the modern technology has ended this challenge with its novel initiatives.

Keywords: *Qualitative inquiry, qualitative research approaches, COVID-19, lived experience, researcher's agility.*

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Introduction

Qualitative research has been instrumental over the last century and it has gained the momentum due to its innate ability to uncover the social reality which is free and independent from the researcher as well as the other stakeholders. Further, the notable growth in qualitative inquiry is also due to the notion that existing quantitative inquiry was not comprehensive enough to capture the dynamic nature of the society and human beings. COVID-19 has made lives of human beings to chaos that no one imagined before and its impact for the business world is enormous from micro level organizations to giant corporates. The pandemic dramatically influenced the corporate behavior and the also it has taken away much of the corporate thinking and attention compared to any other occurrence in the recent past. This unprecedented social and health phenomenon shaped the corporate behavior and all of its initiatives to a greater extend. The new environment created by COVID-19 characterizes complex pressures and demands from various stakeholders and reflect a radical uncertainty for the future of the businesses. In the face of COVID-19, some corporate leaders have realized that their customers are disappearing. Even, some leaders have limited their workforce just to a skeleton crew of essential employees, encountered supply chain disruptions, experienced debt repayment difficulties, and inadequate capital to undertake the operations. Most of these disruptions were unfamiliar in nature for the managers as well as for entrepreneurs. In the meantime, some corporate leaders have changed what they were traditionally undertaking. For example, managers in automobile manufacturing started to shift for making ventilators and fashion designers making face masks. Moreover, some have redefined the activities in their value chains and revisited the distinctive competencies for responding to the outbreak. Hence, some of the accepted behaviors, paradigms and even business models are no longer appropriate for

corporate leaders to respond to this new environment and those even reinforced the corporate leaders to think and act differently. This situation has strongly convinced that the decision making in businesses cannot be restricted to be taken within a vacuum given the current pandemic situation.

The big picture of this impact can be easily captured using quantitative studies. These research are looking into the macro perspective of the pandemic with its influence on the economy and businesses. However, there is a clear necessity of understanding the individual perspectives of managers and entrepreneurs towards the COVID outbreak. As researchers it is needed to understand that the nature of the issues encountered by the business leaders are highly different among each another. This requires a detailed and deeper inquiry in to those issues that cannot be realized through quantitative studies. Therefore, it is important for relevant constituencies to understand the role and the use of qualitative research in this crucial time to open-up the economic activities by addressing the unique problems encountered by the business leaders. Seeing from this background, the aim of this paper is to introduce the five type of qualitative research approaches to look in to issues of corporate leaders during the time of COVID-19.

Rationale for qualitative inquiry at the time of COVID-19

COVID-19 influenced on enormous change in human behavior of billions of people within a short time period. Thus, this pandemic underscores the peoples' closeness and people stay at home to protect everyone. Therefore, people are sacrificing for everyone's well-being and this mindset should be continued within the business organizations since these are meant to be social entities. This has no exception to the market place as well in purchasing goods and services as customers. Particularly, this new human behavior would not be easier to adopt in countries with collective cultures



introduced by Geert Hofstede at the end of the 1970s where the managerial mind set encourages close human interactions.

In understanding this change in human behavior researchers need to be innovative in their methodology to capture the social reality emerged out of COVID-19. Therefore, the inherent features of qualitative research namely fluidity, evolving and dynamic nature in contrast to the structured nature of quantitative research would be more meaningful. Needless to emphasize the importance of statistics, however at this point discovery of novel findings concerning the social reality is a timely effort which requires qualitative research. As pointed by Corbin and Strauss (2008) qualitative research provides the opportunity for the researcher to connect with the respondent at a human level which is paramount at the time of COVID-19 to uncover the novel findings. Mounting evidence up-to-date has also reflected the complexity of phenomena emerged through this pandemic and their meanings cannot be simply taken for granted without deeper exploration. Therefore, the existing theories may require some transformation at the time of COVID-19 and for which qualitative research is required on the ground of being skeptical towards extant explanations. Furthermore, since COVID-19 is being increasingly interpreted and understood as a social phenomenon, it cannot be explored as a single variable and instead it can contain numerous number of variables to be uncovered by the future researchers. Therefore, the exploratory nature of this social phenomenon requires in-depth qualitative inquiry to mine its reality. This requires a continuous exploration into the lives of businesses and its behaviors with a long term focus.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) stressed that qualitative research is undertaken when the researcher needs to explore the inner experience of respondents, to determine how meanings are formed and also to discover a phenomenon rather than test the variables. Since the pandemic has extended beyond a

health and medical issue to a social pandemic which has changed the social order, researchers need to uncover the social responses towards the pandemic using a qualitative method. Particularly, corporate leaders have initiated numerous changes in terms of strategies, systems, structures and values, it becomes significant to capture how the leaders develop meaning and sense of COVID-19 through those changes. The field of epidemiology is dominated by the quantitative research which deals with finding out the number of cases, growth rate of illness, the causes of illness based on hypotheses, and the efficacy of vaccines etc. However, these quantitative research in epidemiology is not adequate to explain the social implications of the disease. From a business management sense, they are not appropriate to explain the new corporate behavior like remote working, the loss of interactions in the workplace, and how the managers and entrepreneurs making sense of what is happening in the business environment. Therefore, qualitative research can be used to make a valuable contribution in the field of business management to understand the effective responses and best practices of corporate leaders.

Qualitative research approaches for COVID-19

There are several approaches for conducting qualitative research. Among these narrative inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study can be identified as commonly used and appropriate for the field of business management. Out of these five, it is important for business organizations and the researchers to select which approach is more suitable for them to research the corporate leaders at the time of COVID-19. Further, it is always better to be aware and familiarize all of these five approaches to select the best prior to embark on the particular study. From the very outset, it is also needed to understand that the choice of someone's research approach needs to depend on the research problem of that study.



So that, someone has to familiarize the kinds and nature of research problems to be considered in the face of COVID-19 prior to select a specific research approach. Accordingly, each of this research approach is explained below by emphasizing how it can be used in the context of business management at the time of COVID-19 to explore the corporate leaders.

Narrative inquiry

This is the approach can be used for studying the stories of individuals in which these stories and can be either lived or told. Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) contended that “Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it” (p. xvi). Accordingly, Elliott (2005) stressed three distinguishing features of narratives. First, narratives are chronological (represents a sequence of events) second, they are meaningful (has something important to understand) and third, they are social (developed for specific audience in the society). Czarniawska (2004) has also contended that “narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 17). Thus, the researcher has to study one or several individuals, collect their stories and experiences in narratives. Thereafter, these stories should be analyzed in a chronological order to retell the story. More importantly, these stories are unique to the respondent and helpful to understand how they see themselves (Cresswell, 2013). In collecting data under narrative approach researchers can mainly rely on interviews but there are some secondary forms of data collection using documents and pictures.

At the time of COVID-19 it is important to look at what kinds of stories to be explored using narrative inquiry. In this case, researchers can listen to the detailed stories

and experiences of top level managers in bigger corporates and entrepreneurs in small scale businesses. These stories can be built up in a chronological manner starting from how they respond from the beginning of COVID-19 outbreak. These stories may incorporate talks about their past, present and even about the future of their organizations as pointed out by Clandinin & Connelly (2000). Further, the outbreak may influence businesses in different ways. For example, hospitals and healthcare providers, manufacturers of sanitizers and face masks are some of the winners in the market place while some other corporates can be losers of the pandemic. Therefore, varied stories are available ranging from bankruptcies to champions to be studied. In the analysis stage, researcher can extract themes which can cut across these stories or construct taxonomies of different types of stories as suggested by Polkinghorne (1995). Further, a thematic analysis can also be used in the analysis as stressed by Riessman (2008) in which the researcher has to recognize the themes told by corporate respondents. The final type of narrative resulted in this situation would include the personal reflections of corporate leaders regarding COVID-19 and its effects on their business organizations. These narratives may also have a specific contextual focus as pointed out by Ollerenshaw & Creswell (2002) since these stories are told by top managers and entrepreneurs during COVID-19 by focusing on their organizations. In this restoring stage where the researcher needs to reorganize the narrative in to a general type of framework requires the formulation of a causal link among the ideas regarding COVID-19. Thus, it may facilitate to understand the complicated picture of this pandemic’s influence on corporate leaders and their businesses.

Phenomenology

Capturing the common meaning of several individuals regarding a phenomenon is the essence of phenomenological research



approach. Therefore, phenomenologists are interested in themes which are common to all the respondents as they experience a particular phenomenon. According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenology is a tool for exploring and describing shared experience or the essence of the experience of all the individuals relating to a phenomena. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) provided the philosophical foundation for phenomenology and he contended that the essence or eidos of phenomena should be understood without scientific assumptions. In this case, researcher's prior knowledge about a phenomenon should be bracketed out to capture the respondent's real experience and Husserl termed it as "epoche". Van Manen (1990) has also explained it later as "grasp of the very nature of the thing" (p. 177).

At the time of COVID-19, managers and entrepreneurs have accumulated numerous novel experience which are worthy of researching for the benefit of all the business organizations. Accordingly, phenomenology where its essence is to capture the common experience of managers and entrepreneurs is much more suitable in this context. The kinds of phenomena which can be studied during the COVID-19 with respect to corporate leaders can be numerous and to name few of these may include leadership challenges, redefining businesses, navigating uncertainty, business transformation, and business imperatives etc. A group of individuals including corporate managers and entrepreneurs who have experienced the particular phenomenon should be selected by having a heterogeneous composition. The data collection can be taken place through interviews, observations and documents under phenomenology. In collecting the data, researcher has to ask two broad types of questions from the respondents (Moustakas, 1994): what have you experienced about the phenomenon (e.g. leadership challenges during COVID-19)? What context influenced your experience of the phenomenon? In analyzing the data by following the transcendental phenomenology the

researcher's influence on the findings should be minimized to uncover the real challenging experience of corporate leaders towards COVID-19. This can be achieved through bracketing (epoche) where the researcher has to set aside his or her experience with COVID-19 to capture the fresh perspectives of respondents. The analysis process has to follow the steps of coding and sorting (formulating categories from the codes) to generate the themes from categories. As per Moustakas (1994), researcher can move into another three types of analyses at the end after formulating the themes which represent the data. First, researcher can develop a description about "what" was experienced by the corporate leaders regarding the phenomena resulted from COVID-19 (textural description). Second, a description can be formulated concerning "How" the phenomenon was experienced by the corporate leaders in the context of COVID-19 (structural description or imaginative variation). Third, the overall essence of the particular phenomena generated by the COVID-19 can be explained by combining both the textural description and structural description. Therefore, the final outcome of the analysis seems much more integrated and holistic in nature to obtain a better understanding of COVID-19 from the perspectives of both managers and entrepreneurs.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for the purpose of building theory from data as a specific methodology. Therefore, it goes beyond the building of a description with regard to a particular process or action. In this case, all the respondents need to experience the particular process or action and the theory will contribute to explain that process or action and even a framework can also be developed for future research. More importantly, this theory is not formulated remotely and it should be well grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A notable contribution to grounded theory was made by



Charmaz (2006) by introducing a constructivist and interpretive perspective which is different from the structured approach developed by Corbin & Strauss (2008).

In grounded theory researcher needs to explain some action or process from the data. At the time of COVID-19 numerous processes undertaken by corporate leaders can be examined namely initiating innovations to face the challenges, transforming the business to become more agile, embracing new ways of working, and accelerating digitalization with digital upskilling etc. Based on the data collected from the managers and entrepreneurs, researcher needs to develop a theory which is an understanding with regard to a process. This particular understanding reflects the theoretical categories or themes which are organized to depict how the theory is functioned. For example, in a study to develop a theory of embracing new ways of working during COVID-19 may show how the organization is embracing remote working, by the top manager's commitment to maintain the momentum of employees, by specific actions and procedures of the management, by creation of team context with employee performance outcomes. Further, researcher needs to do the 'memoing' as a part of developing the theory by collecting the ideas important for developing the particular process which is experienced by the researcher. Under the grounded theory, data collection may not occur at once and instead researcher can go back and forth between the participants to return to the evolving theory in order to fill the gaps (Cresswell, 2013). Therefore, even during this pandemic researcher needs to arrange some new interviews to fill the gaps in the process regarding how it operates. Further, this is important to attain theoretical saturation where the new data is no longer warrant an adjustment to the theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2006).

Data analysis in the grounded theory requires three main steps: initial coding, focused

coding and axial coding. Under the initial coding, with respect to the above example, labels should be assigned to the significant data disclosed by the participants regarding new ways of working initiated by corporate managers during COVID-19. More importantly, the codes needs to be grounded in the data and also remain open for alternative analytic possibilities. Focused coding stage has to pick up the dominant codes (most significant and/or frequent codes) and needs to determine the relationships with other codes. So in the case of embracing new ways of working, remote working can be a dominant code and then it should be connected with relevant codes like corporate leader's commitment and team spirit. Lastly under the axial coding, relationships should be determined between categories and sub categories and specify the properties. Strauss & Corbin (1998) stressed that axial coding can bring back the data which was fractured in the initial coding to form a coherent whole (p. 125). Further, they mentioned that axial coding can be used to make the links between categories with an organizing scheme including conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences. Accordingly, the conditions lead to embrace new ways of working during COVID-19 should be identified by answering the questions like why, where, how come, and when. Thereafter, actions/interactions in embracing new ways of working needs to focus on whom and how questions. Finally, the consequences of embracing new ways of working can be examined by answering to 'what happens' because of the above actions/interactions. The theory uncovered regarding new ways of working by corporate leaders during COVID-19 can be presented as a diagram, as propositions or as a discussion at the end.

Ethnography

Ethnography focuses on groups who are sharing a particular culture and studying shared patterns. Mostly, this cultural group can be relatively small, but typically it can be seen as a large number in the case of a



business organization who interact with each other over time (Managers and employees in the business organization). Harris (1968) contended that ethnographic studies have to explain and interpret the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a group sharing a particular culture. At the time of COVID-19, studying these components of a business organization is paramount in order to understand the effectiveness of shared and learned patterns under the corporate leaders which can have implications for both other business organizations and government policy making. Ethnography as a process, researcher has to undertake extended observations regarding the group frequently through participant observation which facilitates the researcher to immerse the daily lives of corporate leaders during COVID-19. In this case, interviews with the respondents in their natural setting will also be useful to gather more insights. Further, ethnographic researchers can study the meaning of the behavior, language and interactions between corporate leaders and employees within a business organization during this difficult time. Wolcott (2008) stressed that ethnography research does not deal with studying a culture and it can be extended to study the social behaviors of a particular group of people. Therefore, during the COVID-19 it would be important to explore how people in organizations are adopting to the new methods of working initiated by corporate leaders while respecting the social distancing. Further, in ethnographic studies researchers search for patterns in people's mental activities like ideas expressed in language or material activities like behavior of the people observed by the researcher (Fetterman, 2010). Accordingly, researcher can look in to corporate leaders' ideas and their behavior in business organizations at the time of COVID-19. Particularly, ideas can be numerous such as earning income, protecting the jobs of employees, making a service for others in the difficult time and holding a responsibility etc. In understanding these culture-sharing behaviors, it is important to do that for a long enough time period to

uncover the human interactions within the organization in time of COVID-19.

Ethnographic researchers are paying their attention on a particular theory in their studies to have a broader explanation on what they want to find. Accordingly, several theories would be useful in explaining how leaders and employees interact and work at the time of COVID-19 based on observable behavioral patterns. For example, strategic contingency theory can be used to explain how the relationships and the differences of individuals in their skills and capabilities affect the organizational power. Further, stakeholder theory is useful in exploring the nature of relationships and engagements developed by corporate leaders with their stakeholders during the pandemic time period. According to Fetterman (2010) ethnographers have to use multiple sources of data including interviews, observations, symbols and artifacts. However, in the process of data analysis all these different types of data need to be integrated in finding out the themes to address the research questions of the study. Particularly, in this difficult time ethnographic research can be conducted through internet and this is known as 'Netnography' (Kozinets, 2015). In this case, ethnographic research needs to be conducted with respect to different social media groups including face book, what's app and tweeter etc. The hashtag is a tool that can be used to explore different topics to be researched based on how people act digitally inside and outside the organization during COVID-19. This allows the researchers to understand the free social behavior of individuals on the internet. Accordingly, research can be conducted to understand phenomena like remote working, social distancing, managing stress, and consumer behavior during the COVID-19 time which are important for corporate leaders to craft effective strategies in organizations.

Case Study

The proponents of case study research pointed out this as a comprehensive



qualitative methodology and a research strategy (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). This can be used for shedding light or providing an in-depth understanding of a specific and well-defined case or a phenomenon using multiple data sources. These sources of data can include interviews, observations, audio visual materials, and documentary collections. Particularly, researchers need to investigate a real-life contemporary issue with respect to a single or multiple cases. Therefore, the identification of a specific case(s) is required in relation to COVID-19 by following certain parameter like specific place and time. For example, some of the corporate leaders practice the health guidelines strictly and they have been performing well without complete shut downs of operations during the COVID-19. In conducting this kind of a current and real-life study, the case study researcher needs to collect correct information which are not lost due to the time. Stake (1995) contended that case study research should understand a specific problem, issue or concern. During COVID-19 it can be referred to a phenomena like hybrid and remote working, virtual teams, virtual leadership, unemployment, and mental well-being etc. More importantly, the case study researchers have to obtain an in-depth understanding regarding the case. Accordingly, the collection of qualitative data through various sources is needed as a single source is not adequate to acquire an in-depth understanding over the case.

In the stage of data analysis, researcher needs to decide whether a single case has to be analyzed or multiple cases have to be analyzed to develop a comparison between the cases. Moreover, a description regarding the case should be developed. For instance, it can be about how remote working is undertaken by the manager during COVID-19. In addition to that, a set of themes should be generated through the qualitative data analysis which can reflect the salient practices emerged in remote working. Further, a chronological order can also be developed based on the findings particularly from the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic

to illustrate the gradual developments and changes. At the end of the study, researcher can build general lessons learnt from the case(s) as pointed out by Stake (1995) in the name of 'assertions' and Yin (2009) as 'patterns' or 'explanations'. These general lessons can be a good starting point for future research to be undertaken particularly by quantitative researchers.

Agility of the qualitative researcher

In qualitative research, data collection is mainly depended on face-to-face interviews (Opdenakker, 2006) and in-person interviews (Creswell, 2013). However, during this COVID-19 time, both of these data collection techniques are not appropriate due to the need of maintaining the social distance, inability to travel and even lack of research funding. Therefore, the modern technology should be used by the researchers in gathering data from the respondents. This implies that the qualitative researchers require to move forward as technology is advancing. In the case of data analysis, qualitative research community has slowly adopted the Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). Thus, the usage of Nvivo, Atlas ti, and Maxqda are commonplace among the qualitative researchers who have been depended on manual analysis using pencil, pen, note cards, and hard copy of the transcripts. A similar kind of evolution is now required for data gathering as well and COVID-19 has already accelerated the momentum for that. This evolution in data gathering techniques was begun with telephone interviews and then moved in to emails, instant messaging and chat rooms. At the moment, video conferencing has taken a bigger share due to the increasing internet penetration. For instance, it is reported that the Ministry of Small and Medium Business and Enterprise Development (SMBED) in Sri Lanka is planning to explore the impact of COVID-19 on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises' (MSME) using virtual platform (LNW, 2020). This reflects the rapid diffusion of



modern technology in data collection even in a developing country.

Researchers are now in a strong position to reach the respondents in a cost effective manner which was not possible in the past thanks to the video conferencing. At the moment several video conferencing platforms are available for researchers including Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts Meet, and Zoom etc. Some of these platforms like Skype is available on free-of-charge for researchers, but some other platforms like Zoom provides only a free basic program. These video conference platforms offer the access to larger number of respondents, reduce travelling and it involves a low cost. Further, conducting interviews through online is identified as more open and expressive compared to face-to-face interviews (Mabragaña et al., 2013). Also, people were having a kind of reluctance to communicate through online interviews. However, with the increasing spread of social media among the public this reluctance has been lessened and even it can be used for discussing sensitive topics (Sipes, Roberts, & Mullan, 2019) which is certainly required for qualitative interviewing.

However, it is also necessary to understand that interviewing someone through video conferencing needs some extra effort to build up the rapport with the respondents (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). In developing the rapport the communication takes place with the respondents prior to the video conferencing is helpful. In qualitative research from an epistemological perspective, the creation of closer connection between the researcher and the respondent/s is the key since the collection of respondent's multiple perspectives is paramount. The researcher has to discuss his or her views from the views of respondent which requires paying attention to the context, respondent's background and beliefs which indeed requires a closer relationship between the two parties. Therefore, it seems that a combination of video conferencing needs to integrate with other types of communication

tools to capture the reality of the respondent. Further, this kind of an integrated effort enable the researcher to achieve thick description in data collection that is essential in a chaos like COVID-19 to dig into the corporate leaders' multiple perspectives.

In the meantime, researcher needs to keep in mind that he or she should not allow the technology to supersede his or her role in gathering data. Thus, the technology has to be seen as the catalyst to data collection process where the researcher needs to take the upper hand even at this difficult time to capture the essence of corporate leaders' reality. Even the technology based data collection methods are more preferred during the COVID-19, the in-person methods are also unavoidable. Therefore, with the mandatory need for wearing face masks and increasing vaccination, researchers may be in a position to start their data gathering using in-person methods. Moreover, researcher has to work by capitalizing on his or her curiosity towards COVID-19 but with a humanistic focus supported through own creativity and imagination. Qualitative researcher at this difficult time also needs to understand that his or her research work has greater relevance and implications for the scientists, policy makers and public health officials. Therefore, the whole data gathering process needs to be undertaken with utmost integrity backed by great seriousness towards the words as well as for the respondents to be studied. Researcher also needs to take the responsibility to inculcate a sense of absorption towards the whole research process. In doing this, researcher has to be determined to search for the richness of the data, uncover salient findings and more meanings, and develop alternative interpretations to represent the data in a meaningful manner incorporating the interpretivist orientation. Seeing from this perspective, qualitative researcher needs to be creative while being true to the collected data at the time of COVID-19 to make an impact through the research.



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Eranda, B.A.N., KJM, 2021, 10 (02)

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