Advocating the Use of Informal Conversations as a Qualitative Method at Live Events

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Abstract

Informal conversations have been used in qualitative research for over 100 years. Whilst originally identified as a minor part of ethnographic study, scholarly literature in the 2020s has aimed to promote a greater use of the informal conversation method in qualitative research. In agreement with Swain and King (2022), informal conversations create a greater ease of communication and often produce more naturalistic data than other forms such as interviews. Using experiences from two qualitative studies at a range of multi-purpose arenas in the UK and Europe and English association football stadia, this article explores the use of informal conversations as a research method at live events. It provides strategies and guidance regarding how to successfully implement this method when collecting data; explains how informal conversations can be recorded effectively; and outlines how beneficial they are in producing valid and authentic data. The article also explores the ethical challenges that are faced when conducting informal conversations in live event spaces in terms of ethics, validity, and reliability.

Keywords

informal conversations, qualitative method, interpretive description, events, observational research

Introduction

An underrepresented qualitative method during live in-person data collection is informal conversations. Scholars have highlighted how various researchers have written about the use of informal conversations in ethnography, as part of participant observation (Bernard, 2017; Burgess, 1988; Kawulich, 2005; Merriam, 1998). Swain and King (2022) advocated that these conversations have an application beyond ethnography and can be used in a variety of qualitative methodologies that occur in everyday settings where talking is involved.

Data collection at live events has used a wide variety of methods from a range of disciplines in contemporary research, but this was predominantly via quantitative or secondary research approaches (see Draper et al., 2018; Getz, 2010; Park & Park, 2017). Mair (2012) highlighted that qualitative methodologies were significantly underrepresented in high impact journals, and the event research landscape was lacking studies primarily from a qualitative methodological standpoint. Although the use of qualitative research in event studies has increased in recent years (see for e.g., Bossey, 2020; McGillivary et al., 2018; Platt & Finkel, 2020), an underrepresented qualitative method in events studies is informal conversations.

The aim of this article is to present, via two case studies, how informal conversations, as a valid standalone qualitative method, can obtain natural data from eventgoers at live events. The article begins by unpacking informal conversations as a term and method, before analyzing previous use of informal conversations as a method in contemporary qualitative methodological research. For this article, the first author uses his research to demonstrate the process of how he successfully

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conducted informal conversations at live events in two settings: 1) within multi-purpose arenas hosting live Professional Darts Corporation (PDC) darts events and 2) alongside the second author at live music concerts held in English football stadiums. The article then explores how informal conversations are conducted, and discusses the ethical challenges and limitations related to the method.

Conceptualizing Informal Conversations

To begin, we will briefly conceptualize informal conversations as a qualitative research method. As articulated by Swain and King (2022), initiating a conversation with a person or group of people has been recognized as an integral element of qualitative research for well over 100 years. Informal conversations have been referred to in a number of synonyms as 'informal interviewing', 'natural conversations', or have been equated with 'unstructured' interviews (Bernard, 2017; Gray, 2021; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Some researchers, such as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) and Swain and Spire (2020), contend that these dialogues are still a form of interview, albeit an informal one.

Qualitative research literature in the 2010s established that informal conversations are being used by researchers in numerous fields (see for e.g., Densley, 2013; Korobov, 2018). For example, Kate Thomson highlights their importance in educational studies. However, Thomson's data collection method was actually a range of semi-structured interviews, in which university academics advocated how informal conversations between staff members could improve and enhance their teaching (see Thomson, 2015; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). Thomson (2020) then highlighted the use of informal conversations in the medical field when explaining how informal conversations are important for medical and health professions education, urging reconsiderations for how spaces are created for students and practitioners to learn.

Other social science researchers have also explored the use of conversations in qualitative research. Bernard (2017) explored conversation analysis as a qualitative approach in Anthropology and discussed how to conduct conversations and analyze these within an ethnographic context. Angotti and Senott's (2014) research described the conceptualization and implementation of a research methodology that utilizes insider community members to 'document everyday conversations' with outsider investigators. Forsey (2010) referred to conversations when analyzing participant listening and interviews within ethnography and social research. However, much of the existing literature regarding conversations as a research method focuses on their role as an aspect of participant observation or as an additional tool, rather than as a standalone qualitative method. Studies by Jon Swain and associated scholars (Swain & King, 2022; Swain & Spire, 2020) were the first contemporary studies to advocate that informal conversations can be used as a standalone method, have an application beyond ethnography, and as such, can be used in any

more general qualitative exploration that occurs in natural, every day, settings where talking is involved.

Swain and Spire (2020) argued that the role of informal conversations in qualitative social and educational research methodologies is contested, but also relatively neglected, and then explain how the method has influenced their research approaches and practice. Using an example of a conversation between the scholars and a participant to highlight their nuanced and specific nature, they discuss ethical and methodological issues that emerge from the conversation. Swain and Spire (2020) conclude that informal conversations are opportunities to add 'context' and 'authenticity' to data and argue that informal conversations can unlock otherwise missed opportunities to expand and enrich data. They also analyzed the role of ethical boards and ethical guidelines, and the practical effects and consequences these have for researchers when they use informal conversations during their fieldwork. Although the paper is an excellent exploration of the method, it can be said that Swain and Spire's (2020) use of informal conversation was limited as a singular short narrative, and rather simplistic in terms of the settings where the informal conversation took place. They did highlight the issue with gaining consent in a naturalistic manner during an informal conversation, and how this would be logged.

The aim of Swain and King's (2022) article, primarily, was to promote a greater use of informal conversations in qualitative research. Swain and King (2022, p. 2) highlighted the lack of scholarly research about the informal conversation method, and how they "rarely feature in lists of key words in academic articles, because the majority of researchers tend to rely on data from more structured interviews, which has generally been audio (and sometimes, video) recorded". Whilst highlighting that informal conversations are not a new innovation, Swain and King (2022) argued that informal conversations are a neglected innovation and a method that should become more widely employed, due to their assertions that "conversations create a greater ease of communication and often produce more naturalistic data" (p. 2). Swain & King drew upon their own data collection to demonstrate how they used informal conversations, drawing especially on King's (2020) doctoral research, which was an ethnographic exploration of knife-carrying in the lives of young Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) men on a London housing estate. They subsequently discuss the main advantages and disadvantages of using informal conversations and consider the main differences between informal and more structured recorded conversations, including the status and validity of data produced.

In contemporary sociological literature, only two other studies emphasize informal conversations as an independent, standalone qualitative method: Davis (2022) and Davis and Gibbons (2023). In those articles, Davis identified and stated his use of informal conversations, as one of four singular qualitative ethnographic methods, used in his doctoral study (see Davis, 2020). Where Davis' articles differ to Swain and

associated scholars, is that Swain et al. focuses on the utilization, process and ethical considerations directly linked to the method of informal conversations, whereas Davis stated his use and rationale for using them, without actually explaining the process of using them as a standalone method, and the ethical challenges that were faced when conversing with fans. What we will do, via the subsequent case studies and across the rest of this article, is explain the utilization, process and ethical considerations directly linked to the method of informal conversations in live sports and music event data collection, to provide further validation of the use of informal conversations as a standalone method, in a different field to Swain and associated scholars.

Ultimately, whilst it is evident that a range of scholars have identified and utilized informal conversations as a method within qualitative research, the majority of studies use informal conversations as a minor component of an ethnographic data collection. In agreement with Swain and Spire (2020) and Swain and King (2022), we advocate that conversations have an application beyond ethnography, and can be used in any more general qualitative exploration that occurs in natural, everyday settings where talking is involved. We aim to demonstrate, via our two case studies explaining our processes of collecting data at live sports events and music concerts, that informal conversations is a qualitative method that can be comparable or equivalent to unstructured interviews, critical discourse analyses, and causal process observation, rather than just a minor addition to ethnographic studies.

As stated previously, the purpose of this article is to present how informal conversations are a valid qualitative method and can be used to obtain natural data from attendees at live events. To achieve this, the following sections will discuss how informal conversations were successfully conducted at live events in two settings: 1) within multi-purpose arenas hosting live Professional Darts Corporation (PDC) darts events and 2) at live music concerts held in English football stadiums. The ethical considerations and limitations linked to informal conversation data collection are then discussed.

Case Study 1: Live PDC Darts Events

Linked to the objectives of this article, this first case study explains the process of how Davis (2020) conducted informal conversations at live PDC events in multi-purpose arenas. As briefly stated in the previous section, an eclectic range of qualitative, ethnographic methods (non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and visual methods) were utilized to collect the necessary data for the objectives for the first authors doctoral study, which explored the critical use of prosumer fandom at live PDC darts events across the globe (see Davis, 2020, 2022). Davis examined how darts fans' performances and creation of the atmosphere at live darts events has been the main reason for the rapid global transformation of professional darts in the 21st century. The primary methods used to glean data from the live event spaces were the informal conversations with darts fans within the multi-purpose arenas ($n = 80$); and semi-structured interviews conducted with the PDC (current and former) players, administrators and management ($n = 30$). The collection of data occurred across the 2016, 2017 and 2018 PDC darts seasons (see Davis, 2022).

For this case study, the collection of data with the fans were established as informal conversations in a number of ways: the way in which Davis (2020) approached fans spontaneously in the multi-purpose arena; the casual and free-flowing conversation, which typically lasted on average between 1 – 5 mins; and that only Davis knew the intended topic of conversation as he approached a fan. The timeframe available to conduct a conversation with the fan in the natural PDC darts arena left no practical time to build a relationship – a rapport was created, but with no depth. When analyzing responsive interviewing, the relationship that is created is supposed to last over a sustained period and often outlasts the period of research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This was not possible with the nature of the setting and the need to move amongst the fans to obtain data. There was no way the fan could be treated as a 'partner' rather than a 'subject of research', which is what Rubin and Rubin (2012, p. 38) outline as a key element to the interviewing technique.

By the conclusion of the 2018 PDC darts season, the first author had collected the data necessary where the overall study had reached the point of saturation (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) and no new findings were being revealed at any of the live PDC events attended. However, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the adaptation of the PDC darts events during the primary COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, it could be said that the event schedule or return of fans could have changed following post-COVID lockdowns in 2021/ 2022. Therefore, the first author has since visited some of the premier live PDC events during the 2022 and 2023 PDC darts seasons to confirm the codes/themes/data findings that had been collected during the original 3 seasons still correlated: (see Table 1).

Conducting Informal Conversations at the Live PDC Darts Events

The informal conversations the first author conducted were casual and maintained some flow so that the darts fans did not feel like they were in a formal question-and-answer process. The discourse was framed in a way that the fans could understand the first authors conversations in a multi-purpose venue environment, where other fans were moving into their seating position as the venue numbers grew towards capacity. It was established early in the conversation whether the fan/s had attended an event before; their experiences previously if they had, or what they expected if they had not. This then helped to develop some of the rationale for the fan's

Table 1. The Live PDC Darts Events Which the First Author Attended Between January – December in 2022 and 2023.

Event	Month	Location
PDC Masters	January	Arena MK, Milton Keynes, England
PDC Premier League	February - May (various dates on a weekly basis)	Various arenas across the UK, Dublin (Ireland), Rotterdam (Netherlands) and Berlin (Germany)
World Matchplay and Women's World Matchplay	July	Winter Gardens, Blackpool, England
World Grand Prix	October	Morningside Arena, Leicester, England
Grand Slam of Darts	November	Aldersley Leisure Village, Wolverhampton, England
PDC World Darts Championship	December - January	Alexandra Palace, London, England

attendance; what their expectations were; and how these may have altered over time if they were long-term darts fans. By framing the conversation from the fan's perspective, this allowed the fan to showcase their knowledge of the sport and event, or their understanding of the sport or event if they had watched the sport of professional darts on a traditional or new media format before. This then helped the conversation advance as to why they were attending the live event in person (and various motivations for attendance).

The best time period to speak to the fans was prior to the darts matches starting, or between matches. The main reason that discussion was avoided when a match was in play, was because there are certain moments in a darts match that become very emotive, and the fans responses may have been unclear or unfocused, such as if a lengthy question was asked when the match was at a pivotal moment (for example at the end of a leg, a set, or if a player had a chance to complete a nine-darter). The fan may have responded with half an answer or become distracted (and forget the point of the question asked), meaning a sub-question would have had to be asked - which could have increased the length of the conversation.

The conversations helped to establish the themes in the first authors study that began to emerge regarding the critical role of prosumer fandom in the spectacle of live darts events. When the first author approached PDC darts fans, the fans were unaware of what he was going to say. Although this approach could link to Swain and Spire's (2020) concerns linked to ethics when approaching participants to gain data in terms of consent and providing clear participant information about the study, the first author ensured he gained verbal consent to have a conversation with the fans and explore fans thoughts and perspectives linked to the objectives of his study. We will return to a discussion about ethical considerations later in this article.

There were differing perspectives that the darts fans symbolize and exemplify that the first author was interested in gaining data about. Before speaking to the fans, he had to consider the angle at which the concept was approached. Primarily, it had to be ascertained where the conversations would be conducted. The arena itself was the place chosen, because it was in this area that the fan would portray their true sense of darts fandom, being within the spectacle as the

conversation developed with the fan. With the issues regarding fan typologies (that were critiqued by Dixon, 2016), rather than focusing on a specific type of fan to interview, the first author was open to speaking to any type of fan and moved amongst the arena to speak to a variety of fans, regardless of their (supposed) categorized typology. This kept his position neutral and ensured the sample was consistent. This also helped to avoid bias in searching for fans wearing fancy dress (for example), as the first author required to understand perspectives from all typologies of fans.

Case Study 2: Live Music Concerts at Football Stadiums

This second case study explains the process regarding how the two authors conducted informal conversations at a selection of association football stadiums in England, analyzing the event experience and how football stadiums make alterations to their accessibility provisions for live music concerts. Specifically, the authors explored concertgoers' experiences, and how organizations make live music concerts more accessible to people with disabilities, whilst also exploring the issues clubs face with these adaptations. This was completed this via informal conversations during the collection of data with the concertgoers to provide more thorough meaning to the observations obtained at each stadium. 122 concertgoers took part in these informal conversations: (see Table 2).

The concertgoers were provided with pseudonyms of M (men) 1–49 and W (women) 1 – 73 to ensure anonymity. Similar to the first authors doctoral study (see Davis, 2020), these were informal conversations as opposed to interviews due to the amount of time the conversations took (an average of 1–6 mins), the nature of the discourse and the setting.

Conducting Informal Conversations at the Live Music Events

The best period to speak to the concertgoers was prior to the supporting artists performing, or before the main artist/group came onstage, to ensure that the authors did not detract from the concertgoers watching the artists. Conducting informal

Table 2. Characteristics of the Concertgoer Sample – 122 Attendees.

Characteristics of the Concertgoer Sample	Numbers	Percentage(%)
Male	49	40
Female	73	60
Age	>35 (20)	16
	<35 (102)	84
Attended the stadium for a music event previously	86	70
First time attendees to the stadium	36	30

conversations provided the authors with the chance to conduct opportunistic conversations with concertgoers. Therefore, the authors had to portray some of the understandings and passions of the concertgoer when engaging in the informal conversation process.

Rather than focusing on a specific type of concertgoer to engage with, the authors were open to speaking to any attendee and moved amongst the different areas of the venues. This kept the authors positions neutral and ensured that the sample was consistent with a standard music concert event experience. The authors did not specifically stick to a place in the stadiums: they conducted informal conversations wherever necessary inside and around the stadium grounds. Having the ability to conduct informal conversations with concertgoers in the queues before the stadium doors opened provided a good time to engage, and the authors found that concertgoers were willing to discuss their experiences.

The informal conversations were spontaneous and allowed concertgoers to speak in turn. What was noticeable during the informal conversations (that both authors conducted) was when asking a specific concertgoer a question, sometimes other concertgoers would engage and provide added points or a different perspective which further developed the conversations in a fluid manner. This could have been linked to the nature of the setting, particularly on the ground/pitch level of a stadium, which meant that lots of concertgoers were congregated together. However, both authors ensured that they spoke conversationally to each concertgoer individually to garner various perspectives and to avoid a focus group style discussion. Approaching all types of concertgoers meant a broad sample could be gathered from all characteristics. The discourse was styled in a way that would not detract from any purchase behaviour – the authors avoided approaching concertgoers as they were purchasing food, beverages, or memorabilia, or if they were focused on locating their allocated seat.

As highlighted previously, the timing of the conversations (pre the artists going onstage) meant that the conversation was more about the concertgoers' experiences in the lead up to the live event, and within the surrounding areas. However, it was established early in the conversation whether the concertgoers had attended a live music event before, or a music event by the artist/s; and their experiences previously if they had, or what they expected if they had not. By opening with this type of discourse, concertgoers would be relaxed but enthusiastic about the upcoming live music event, whether waiting for the supporting act or the main act. This meant that any initial barriers were diminished, and concertgoers would be open about their perspectives.

Logging Responses for Informal Conversations

We will now explain how we logged the data we collated during the informal conversations. Most observers will try to develop a system in which they can record their responses (see Harari et al., 2016). It was understood that logging responses would require a pen, paper, or a book/clipboard in a highly active environment, which would have been more obvious to the participants in the event areas and could have heightened their reaction and sense of perspective, thus, their attitude to engage may have changed. Also, we did not audio record the responses from the concertgoers on a dictaphone or smartphone, as we felt this moved towards an interview method, and respondents can provide stilted answers or become nervous when being recorded. During both studies, we logged the data gained into the Notes app of our smartphones in the live event setting.

What did have to be considered was whether the overt or covert approach was used to type the data we gleaned during the conversations. The differing objectives of the two studies led to opposing approaches being used. For the first authors doctoral data collection, the *covert* method was utilized – following the end of each informal conversation, the first author used his smartphone/tablet to make response-based notation in various areas of the venue as an observer, but out of the eye line of the darts fans: those who may have seen his engagement on the smartphone naturally thought he was sending a text or on the internet/social media and did not change their expressiveness towards the first author.

For the music concert data collection, both authors used the *overt* method, letting concertgoers explain their point whilst the respective author noted the key points made on their smartphone during the conversation, which was clarified for validity following the end of the conversation. The difference between the second study (to the first authors study) was primarily due to the objectives centering upon accessibility provisions and the stadium experience as a different venue (music concerts instead of football matches). Therefore, the

concertgoers were very receptive as they understood that their points were being logged as key information for the football club to utilize to improve the stadium experience for future concerts. The overt logging of responses also fostered further conversation between author and concertgoer. In line with Swain and King (2022), informal conversations rely on memory. Therefore, the authors found that the overt method was more reliable for the music concerts as they logged the conversation as it occurred, so it was more closely aligned to being verbatim as opposed to the covert method, where (for the first author) this became more of a summation of the points the darts fans made.

Crucially, the key to informal conversations being utilized in the most appropriate way at live events is the location. Taking participants out of the live event setting to conduct interviews or focus groups can lead to protracted answers, refusal to engage with the researchers, or persons just saying 'anything' to return to the actual event experience. This is particularly apt when fans/concertgoers are in queues or stationed in certain areas such as disabled viewing platforms or hospitality sections. They will converse in these areas in an informal conversational manner, but do not want to be moved from their position. The conversations fostered a deep range of perspectives being provided by participants, whilst also encouraging other fans to add to the conversations, developing more context.

Ethical Considerations When Conducting Informal Conversations at Live Events

Informal conversations are a creative method, in the way that researchers must be adept and tactile in how they approach potential participants, glean and log data, and interpret meanings from participants. Like many creative methods, in close consideration, the research method and ethical issues are separate, but a researcher cannot deny their overlapping nature (Kara, 2015). When researching lived experiences, being ethical means being responsible in exploring others' lived worlds interpretively without imposing any decisive roles (Dahal, 2024). The procedural ethics of conversational qualitative research has been explored in the 21st century by several scholars, notably by Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and the likes of Paoletti (2014), Speer (2014), and Aguinaldo (2022). Advancing this, the ethical considerations of informal conversations has been explored in contemporary scholarly literature in depth by the likes of Swain and Spire (2020) and Davis (2020). However, whilst we have explained our case studies and the process of logging responses, we must also acknowledge some of the methodological challenges that are faced when conducting informal conversations as a qualitative method in live event spaces in terms of ethics, validity, and reliability.

Consent

There are clear challenges in regard to gaining consent when conducting informal conversations at live events. Interviews typically have the benefit of informed consent being agreed before the participant and researcher engage in discussion (Nusbaum et al., 2017) which, as academic scholars, satisfies the relevant guidelines linked to university ethical processes. However, this is not always a possibility with informal conversations as a qualitative method, given the nature of the live event setting. Therefore, gaining full written informed consent from participants could call into question the validity of the research (see Fielding–Lloyd, 2006). Signing a consent form adds an air of formality that may influence the participants thoughts and perspective. Furthermore, the participant may be taken out of their natural sphere to obtain this, and they would subconsciously 'know' they were performing a certain role which could invalidate the research.

Linked to the case studies in this article, it was noted that within the terms and conditions of the tickets for the live PDC darts events and the live music concerts, the fine print details that the recording of persons or perspectives would occur before, during and after an event. For the organizers or event promoters, this content covers the aspect of what it means to participate, and the terms of risks and benefits. Although this was embedded within the ticket transaction, if the fan or concertgoer did not want to participate or speak, we agreed that we would not use their points. Fully understanding when gaining consent can also pose difficulties when there are cultural differences and language barriers, which is common at live events with sportspersons or artists from a multitude of regions and countries. It is the responsibility of the researcher/s to make certain that participants understand their rights, especially the right to not participate or to withdraw from the research at any time (Thorpe, 2014). However, we do understand that there are still challenges with this approach.

Primarily, our data collection was in live events in stadia or venue-based facilities, where ticket transactions are commonplace. This would not occur within non-ticketed events, or event spaces not within stadiums or venues. For example, a fan-zone, typically found at international sports events such as the FIFA World Cup, UEFA European Football Championships or the four tennis majors (Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon, US Open) would be a more challenging place to obtain verbal informal consent. Secondly, the aspect of inebriation at live events must be considered. Alcohol was widely available at all event venues and stadia in both case studies explained earlier in this article. A potential limitation of the first authors research (see Case Study 1) and subsequent research in Case Study 2 was not only the validity and credibility of fans and concertgoers' comments under the influence of alcohol (see Davis, 2022), but actually gaining fans/concertgoers consent from to participate in an academic research study. This is another key ethical challenge that scholars using this method will face. Considerations are needed in terms of the actual time when researchers approach fans or concertgoers at venues. Conducting informal conversations before the event activities start, or prior to the sportspersons or musicians entering the field or stage

respectively, typically meant that the participants were less inebriated than later into the event. The specific time of day should also be considered – participants were more conducive pre-daytime events or earlier in the day (see Davis, 2020).

Thirdly, the aspect of sound/noise had to be considered when gaining consent to conduct informal conversations. We conducted the informal conversations before the event activities started, or before the sportspersons or musicians took to the field or stage respectively, and/or during intervals. This resulted in less noise or interference from musicians, staff, other fans or concertgoers, but we understand the challenges that researchers will face with this, and that location within a live event venue or stadium when conducting informal conversations will be paramount. Added to this, trying to gain consent or conduct an informal conversation close to a speaker or PA system can affect the responses from participants and the researcher's ability to hear and understand what is being said, so this also had to be taken into consideration during the process.

We found that the best way to gain informed consent was verbally as we approached the participant/s. However, in doing this, there can be an alteration in terms of the power dynamics between a researcher and potential participant, as participants mannerisms, language or behavior can change (see Collis & Hussey, 2021) when it is evident to the participant/s that the person/s they thought they were going to informally chat to, is actually a researcher. Ultimately, it is dependent on the objectives of the overall research and the skill of the researcher in how they present their discourse. From our perspective and the objectives of our studies, we framed our research in a way so that the participants understood and felt that their voice was vital in providing feedback or improving repeat or future events.

Confidentiality & Anonymization

Anonymization is a strategy used to maintain privacy and confidentiality: typically, numbers, letters or pseudonyms are used (Stam & Kleiner, 2020). In Case Study 1, as the fans are members of the public, the first author adhered to the ethical practice of anonymity assuring the fan that any notes created would be anonymized (Hennink et al., 2020). The first author avoided obtaining personal information that would make a fan identifiable – the only elements of information collected was age, but in regard to whether they were under or over 35, not a specific age; the persons' identified gender (what they identified themselves as under the Equality Act 2010); and whether the fan was a PDC member, had attended before as a non-member or was a first-time fan (see Davis, 2022). This ensured that the collection of information collated regarding the fans upheld the core ethical principles (anonymity, confidentiality, honesty, data protection, risk of harm, disclosure, and consent) as outlined by Veal (2018).

Whilst in both case studies, we asked for verbal consent to ensure that we could have a conversation with the fan or concertgoer, we also had to ensure we maintained anonymity for these participants. We found that there are two main ways to do this – to state this after gaining consent at the *start* of the conversation, or outline that all discourse will be anonymous at the *end* of the conversation. There are benefits and limitations to both approaches: stating this at the start of the conversation ensures the main elements of consent and confidentiality are covered immediately. However, stating this at the start of the discourse can change participants behavior due to their uncertainty of the nature of the conversation that is about to take place. Therefore, stating the confidential point at the end of the conversation may be preferable. There is also the implied nature of not stating anything about confidentiality/ anonymity – by not asking for a participant's name or any personal details by which a participant can be identifiable, anonymity is maintained. However, in line with various Ethical Board/Committee processes, in respect of the two case studies in this article, we adopted the approach of stating that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained at the *end* of the informal conversation.

When citing Lipson (1994), Corbin and Morse (2003) noted several ethical issues related to qualitative research, which we believe apply to informal conversations. One element was the researcher's responsibility to informants, sponsors, and colleagues (also see Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Researchers have a responsibility to maintain confidentiality and to provide for the personal safety and well-being of participants, namely those intoxicated, subject to any abuse from other fans or concertgoers, or in any immediate danger. This also links to the aspect of exploitation: although this term refers to power and status differences, with many scholars believing that the balance of power tends to be in favor of the researcher (see Thompson, 1995).

Corbin and Morse (2003) argued that all research exploits participants to some extent and that researchers stand to benefit more than individual participants from any given research project. There is reciprocity between researcher and participant, with each gaining something from the experience. In addition, there are benefits to society in the form of professional knowledge development. When conducting the informal conversations for Case Study 2, we found that the concertgoers saw the informal conversations as an opportunity to fully explain their experiences of the event when positioned in their section of the stadium and were very appreciative of the chance to 'have a chat with someone' about their experiences. They perceived this as a better way to get their views across rather than a survey or a post event meeting, interview, or forum, with the general consensus being that they believed the other methods were time consuming post event. Advancing Corbin and Morse's (2003) assertions, it was clear that the benefits of the informal conversations were not undervalued or overlooked by participants, who often consider participating in research as the opportunity to give back indirectly to society, especially at events that occur on a recurring weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annual basis.

Overall, the data collections conducted in both case studies were approached with the highest levels of personal integrity with the research philosophy communicated throughout and care and courtesy shown to all participants (also see Nixon & Davis, 2023; Walliman, 2021). The design was ethical as it was possible to keep all participants anonymized and all participants gave verbal informed consent ahead of their participation, the research could be undertaken within our respective universities ethical framework and had ethics committee approval, and no harm would come to participants from taking part in the study.

Limitations

Alongside the ethical challenges when conducting informal conversations at live events, we also understand there are a number of limitations to this qualitative method, especially in relation to conducting informal conversations at live event spaces. One of the common challenges is that a reader has to make a judgement regarding the author's honesty and the integrity linked to the findings displayed within a journal article. This is no different when conducting informal conversations: the intention, when logging responses following informal conversations, is to capture the key content. It is challenging to represent a word for word viewpoint, particularly as informal conversations are not typically recorded. A clear limitation of informal conversations is that they are not as accurate as data represented from a recorded conversation (see Swain & King, 2022). Similar to interpretive description, the effective use of an informal conversation as a qualitative method depends on a researchers' ability to describe, comprehend, synthesize, theorize, and recontextualize data (also see Pringle-Nelson, 2023; Thorne et al., 2004). Linked to our discourse regarding logging responses, it is vital for researchers that conversations are noted/transcribed as close to the event as possible to minimize this limitation.

Swain and King (2022) explained how informal conversations and the deciphering of these are based upon memory. Via this method, the intention is usually to represent a point of view or line of argument, rather than the exact wording, but there can be a danger that humans have a natural tendency to misremember what has been said (also see Lampinen et al., 1997). In agreement with Swain and King (2022), researchers bring their own expectations and assumptions into conversations and reflexivity is needed to consider their own biases. Interpreting others' lived experience whilst connecting one's own critical reflexivity as a researcher is crucial to mitigate ethical challenges throughout the research (Dahal, 2021). Critical reflexivity when conducting informal conversations should be considered continuously to ensure that a researcher understands that attitudes and actions affect your role as researcher, but also in relation to the way broader social assumptions and context may influence it (see Charmaz, 2017). Reflexivity is an ongoing process that is vital when conducting informal conversations due to the varied nature of each individual conversation.

Another limitation links to researcher bias. Whilst we outlined the links to bias in terms of logging or recording participants responses, this can also link to the interpretation of participants responses when actually asking questions during the informal conversations. As Saunders et al. (2023) highlighted, researchers can also demonstrate bias in the way that they interpret responses. The comments, tone or non-verbal behavior of the researcher/s creates bias in the way participants respond to questions or points within an informal conversation. This is because a researcher typically imposes their own beliefs and frames of reference through probing within the conversations. Saunders et al. outlined a strategy which can help minimize bias: by paying careful attention to how a researcher phrases their questions, so that they do not lead the participant to a particular response.

Another challenge when conducting informal conversations is the difficulty in ensuring validity and reliability. In regard to participant discourse, we understand that validity can be undermined in a number of ways when conducting informal conversations. Firstly, respondents might prefer to give rational responses rather than fuller emotional ones, as we approached them as 'strangers', so they may not provide a true account. Also, participants may not reveal their true thoughts and feelings because they do not coincide with their own self-image, so they simply withhold information. Many participants at live events do not attend solo, so certain participants would concur with other participants, in a similar manner to focus groups, so their true understandings can be withheld or not fully explained. Similarly, participants can provide responses they think the interviewer wants to hear, in an attempt to please them (Holbrook et al., 2003). Researchers must be tactful to converse with each participant to gain their perspectives.

Added to this, there is a challenge of the control of conversational flow – within interviews, a set of questions are posed and through each, the researcher can let the participant answer, but guide them onto the next question to keep a consistent thread. When conducting informal conversations, the causal and open flow of the discourse, with no formal structure and without the disclosing of a specific agenda, means that each informal conversation conducted can provide very varied answers and limit the validity of the data obtained. Researchers need to be adept to limit the flow of the conversation to avoid tangents, and probe within the discussion in a natural manner befitting a typical conversation.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to promote a greater use of informal conversations in qualitative research. The informal conversation method has specific advantages in the live event setting that are beneficial for researchers in the field as opposed to other methods. This article argues that informal conversations can be considered as an effective singular method in live event settings. We presented two case studies as experiences of

conducting informal conversations with fans at live sports events and concertgoers at live music events, explaining the process of how informal conversations can be conducted and the process of how to log data in live event settings. We then discussed the ethical challenges and limitations linked to informal conversations as a method.

In agreement with Swain and King (2022), an important point to make is that we are not suggesting that using informal conversations are a replacement for the interview technique, or any other research method. We believe that, if implemented correctly, informal conversations are an excellent independent standalone method to obtain data at live events, and a method which other scholars could utilize and integrate into their data collection processes.

Further research could explore the use of informal conversations as a qualitative method in other event spaces or analyze the use of informal conversations from an interdisciplinary perspective. Researchers could also expand on the power dynamics between researchers and participants when collecting qualitative data and strategies that can be used to gain valid and authentic information. Future studies could also look to examine and compare similar methods to informal conversations, such as unstructured interviews. This would help researchers understand the nuances between the two methods and analyze the benefits and limitations of each respectively whilst exploring how they can be utilized effectively in different settings.

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