

Walking Into Their Lives: Applying the Go-Along Method to Explore Refugee Health

International Journal of Qualitative Methods

Volume 23: 1–8

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DOI: 10.1177/16094069241308543

journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq

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Abstract

The go-along method is a way of interviewing people in situ. Combining participant observation and interviewing, the method capitalizes on the advantages of both approaches. This places study participants in context and allows researchers to elicit the interpretations, practices, and experiences of those participants within the contexts. Based on a refugee maternal health study that involved the go-along method in the United States, we reflect on the specific research questions that this approach can help answer, the advantages and limitations of employing this methodological approach and delineate the process of conducting the go-along. The go-along method has numerous benefits in studying refugee health. It can assist in identifying the needs and challenges of people with limited language skills or low educational levels, as well as providing a more nuanced understanding of life skills and language proficiency. It can aid in the observation of interactions between study participants and people around them and provide more detailed information based on spatial cues. It can assist researchers in observing how services are delivered on the ground. More importantly, it can facilitate researchers' vicarious experiences for those who may struggle in their lives. In doing so, it can facilitate contextualized understanding of refugee and their experiences. Although this method has several limitations, such as being more time-consuming and labor-intensive compared to traditional sit-down interviews and being susceptible to external conditions, the go-along method has significant potential for exploring the health of refugees.

Keywords

go-along interview, go-along method, immigrant health, refugee health, mobile method, in situ method, walking interview, docent interview

The go-along interview method, also known as walking interviews (Botfield et al., 2019; Lenette & Gardner, 2021), is an active way of interviewing people in situ (Kusenbach, 2003). By integrating participant observation and interviewing, this approach capitalizes on the advantages of both methods, offering a comprehensive understanding of an individual's connections with themselves, others, and their environment. Researchers accompany study participants into their environments, observing and asking questions based on spatial cues (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003). This approach situates participants within their context, enabling researchers to elicit participants' interpretations, practices, and experiences within those specific settings. It allows researchers to witness the environments of study participants, offering insights into their daily routines and patterns. Consequently, it aids researchers in observing the lived experiences of

participants in a contextually nuanced manner, encompassing aspects such as social networks and community resources (Green & Thorogood, 2018). Go-along interviews can generate rich information by leveraging environmental cues.

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These cues can trigger participants to share additional information and past experiences that may not surface in a traditional sit-down interview, which often relies on participants' memories and verbal expressions (Garcia et al., 2012; Kusenbach, 2003; Porta et al., 2017). In addition, the go-along approach could lead to more collaborative and flexible interviews, offering study participants a sense of empowerment and control (Bartlett et al., 2023; Porta et al., 2017). For example, unlike traditional studies where a researcher maintains more control over the research process, the go-along approach enables participants to select the route and take the lead during the process (Bartlett et al., 2023; Sun & Zhu, 2024).

The go-along interview approach has its roots in different disciplines such as ethnography, anthropology, geography, and phenomenology (Hand et al., 2021; King & Woodroffe, 2017; Kusenbach, 2003). In the early stages, a group of sociologists utilized this approach to study mobility among marginalized populations, such as homeless men and sex workers, while some ethnographers employed it for their phenomenological fieldwork (King & Woodroffe, 2017). Since then, the go-along method has been employed across various disciplines to explore a wide range of research topics. It has been used in landscape and urban planning to explore and comprehend how residents experience and perceive their daily environments and surroundings (Bergeron et al., 2014). Its potential has also been investigated in the field of occupational science to elicit the meaning of work for study participants as well as the challenges they face in their roles (Hand et al., 2021). It was also used to explore lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth's perceptions of community resources and support (Porta et al., 2017). Carpiano investigated the benefits of the approach for researching health in the context of neighborhoods, providing practical guidance on the approach (Carpiano, 2009). The go-along method has been widely used in health research to elicit participants' perceptions of health resources, as well as to better understand children's physical activity and young adult smoking behaviors (Garcia et al., 2012; Glenn et al., 2020; Pawlowski et al., 2016). Overall, the go-along approach is ideal for exploring participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the subjects of study in various environments, as well as their behaviors in those settings.

Despite the application of the go-along method in multiple disciplines and topics, its potential to investigate refugee health remains underexplored. While some studies have explored the notions of hosts and hosting resettlement among refugee women (Gardner et al., 2022) and the concept of home in the context of forced migration with refugee women (Lenette & Gardner, 2021), to our knowledge, few studies have employed the go-along method to explore health-related issues among refugee populations from a methodological point of view. As a result, there is a dearth of literature on its potential in investigating refugee health. Refugees are forced to navigate unfamiliar terrain, often on their own, after being separated from their familiar surroundings.

The go-along method can enhance our understanding of how refugees navigate these unfamiliar surroundings, their perceptions and interactions within the new environment, and the challenges they encounter on this challenging journey.

This paper is based on a qualitative study that utilized the go-along method to explore the factors affecting maternal healthcare access and utilization among Muslim refugee women resettled in the United States (Yeo et al., 2022). Following sit-down interviews, refugee women were asked whether they were interested in participating in go-along interviews. Once the potential participants agreed to participate, they were asked about their daily schedule and environmental settings that refugee women usually visit and go-along interviews were scheduled. Different locations, such as Walmart, Arabic grocery stores, and clinics, were visited. It involved both walk-along and ride-along depending on the situations, contexts, and preferences of the participants. The first author, together with an interpreter fluent in Arabic or Dari depending on the participants' language, accompanied six refugee women, and the participants were compensated for their time. All go-along interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim except one that was conducted in a clinic. For this interview, a follow-up interview was carried out right after the medical appointment. When the women had to travel, the first author and the interpreter drove to the participant's house and rode their car or used public transportation together to get to the place. Each participant was asked to serve as a tour guide and explain the location and surroundings. They were also questioned about their daily routines, life patterns, and how the accompanied activities fit into their daily lives. Following each interview, all observations were carefully documented, with separate notes made for what was observed and reflection. The research findings on refugee maternal health will be published elsewhere. This methodological paper discusses the implementation of the go-along method, the advantages and limitations of employing this approach in investigating the health of refugee populations and provides practical guidance for future researchers.

How are Go-Along Interviews Conducted?

This section outlines the procedures involved in the go-along method. Although the structure and procedure may differ based on the research questions and the nature of the information researchers seek to elicit, the go-along interview generally follows the outlined steps (Table 1).

Identify the Theoretical Perspectives, Research Questions, and Themes to Explore and Determine whether the Go-Along Interview is the Best Approach to Address Them

Researchers need to determine whether the go-along interview is the best approach to elicit the information and answer the research questions. The go-along method is most useful for

Table 1. The steps of go-along interviews and practical guidance.

1. Identify the theoretical perspectives, research questions, and themes to explore and determine whether the go-along interview is the best approach to address them.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the feasibility of conducting the go-along, considering factors such as accessibility to participants and locations, the establishment of rapport necessary for participants to feel comfortable sharing their own environment, and the time and resources available to researchers. • The situations in which the go-along method may be appropriate are as follows. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Researchers aim to explore participants' knowledge, values, experiences, interpretations, and spatial and social practices within their environment, as well as how they navigate or interact with social and physical surroundings. ◦ Study participants might face challenges in articulating their needs and difficulties due to factors such as age, cognitive impairment resulting in memory loss, and limited knowledge and unfamiliarity with the topic. ◦ It is necessary to observe the genuine behaviors and practices of participants within their context or to understand how services are delivered on the ground. ◦ There is a need to assess participants' actual skills and proficiency levels rather than relying solely on self-reported information. ◦ This approach could be preferable for certain participants who have busy schedules and find it challenging to arrange a conventional sit-down interview, as researchers can join the participants at their preferred meeting location. 	
2. Determine selection criteria, recruit study participants, and plan logistics.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving a study participant or community partner with insight into the participants' needs and circumstances can be advantageous for defining selection criteria, devising recruitment strategies, and accommodating participant needs. • Determine who will participate in the go-along interview and decide on the locations and timing of visits. • Select the appropriate sampling method, such as maximum variation or stratified purposeful sampling. • Decide whether the go-along will involve riding along, walking along, or both. • Consider any necessary accommodations for diverse participant needs, such as interpreters or voice recorders. • Assess if any additional requirements are needed for Institutional Review Board approval, especially if the visit involves a clinic setting which may require extra approval from the clinic. 	
3. Prepare an interview guide if necessary.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The guide could be open-ended or semi-structured depending on the research questions. • If study participants find it difficult to assume the role of 'a tour guide,' it might be beneficial to prepare some questions to start with. • Utilize the environmental cues for impromptu questioning. 	
4. Conduct the go-along interview.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It could be advantageous to inquire about participants' backgrounds and patterns of their lives before beginning the journey to place the scene within a broader context. • Conducting a go-along interview presents greater challenges compared to a sit-down interview, as researchers must simultaneously observe environmental cues while engaging in conversation with the participant. Having a notebook or similar tool to document these environmental cues can be beneficial, preventing important information from being missed during the conversation. • Be mindful of demonstrative pronouns like "this" and "that," and take notes as needed. 	
5. Document observations and reflections right after the go-along.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thoroughly record details about the setting (including date, day, time of day, and context), observations, participant interactions, nonverbal behaviors, and any other pertinent factors immediately following the interview. 	
6. Analyze and report the results.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the following details to enhance transparency and aid readers in comprehending the context: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The rationale for using the go-along and selecting the venues and participants ◦ Positionality of researchers and the level of rapport prior to the go-along ◦ Whether the go-along method is exclusively used for data collection or integrated with other approaches ◦ Whether it involved a walk-along, ride-along, or a combination of both ◦ Any individuals who accompany the go-along, such as an interpreter ◦ If an interpreter is used, consider how their involvement might have influenced data collection and analysis. ◦ How the go-along inform the study results ◦ How privacy and confidentiality are maintained throughout the research process 	

investigating study participants' knowledge, values, experiences, interpretations, and spatial and social practices within the environment and exploring how study participants navigate or interact with social and physical environments. Additionally, the go-along method can be appropriate in situations where study participants encounter difficulty

articulating their needs and challenges due to factors such as age, cognitive impairment leading to memory loss, and limited knowledge or unfamiliarity with the subject matter. This method allows for the observation of authentic behaviors and practices within participants' natural contexts, providing insights into service delivery on the ground. Moreover, it

enables the assessment of participants' actual skills and proficiency levels rather than relying solely on self-reported information. This approach may particularly suit participants with busy schedules who struggle to arrange traditional sit-down interviews, as researchers can meet them at their preferred locations. At this stage, it is critical to assess the feasibility of conducting a go-along, considering factors such as accessibility to participants and locations, the establishment of rapport necessary for participants to feel comfortable sharing their environments, and the availability of time and resources for researchers.

Determine Selection Criteria, Recruit Study Participants, and Plan Logistics

The structures of the go-along can vary. It could be a walk-along in which a researcher accompanies a participant on foot, a ride-along in which a researcher follows a participant using transportation such as public transportation, a car, or a bike, or it could be a mixture of both (Kusenbach, 2003). Involving a study participant in the planning process can be beneficial, especially when determining the sampling strategies and sites to visit and identifying the needs of the populations. Depending on the research questions, various qualitative sampling techniques may be used, such as maximum variation or stratified purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). In our research, refugee women were engaged to explore their daily routine, encompassing activities such as grocery shopping, childcare, household chores, family outings, and clinic visits. Subsequently, a maximum variation sampling approach was utilized to comprehend the diverse facets of the lives of refugee women residing in a host country. Various locations, including a grocery store, an Arabic grocery store, a park, a clinic, and a community center, were visited alongside the study participants. In addition, necessary accommodations, such as the provision of interpreters, are crucial for conducting interviews with participants with limited language proficiency. Researchers also need to check whether additional requirements are needed for Institutional Review Board approval, especially if the visit involves a clinic setting, which may require extra approval from the clinic. Additionally, while it may depend on the specific research question, researchers should consider whether their study is inclusive by accounting for participants' diverse backgrounds and integrating their needs into the design of the go-along approach. Again, engaging participants who can offer insights into different needs and perspectives and finding ways to incorporate and accommodate those needs can be highly beneficial.

Prepare an Interview Guide if Necessary

Some argue that using a pre-determined guide is too systematic or pre-determined for the go-along method. The degree of structure, however, can be tailored based on the specific research question, ranging from open-ended to semi-structured (Carpiano, 2009). For instance, employing an interview guide could prove beneficial if the go-along interview aims to uncover insights into service

utilization and barriers concerning a specific service. On the other hand, if the research questions are more exploratory, researchers might choose a go-along interview without pre-established questions or themes. The characteristics of the study participants can also influence the level of structure. In the usual go-along approach, participants commonly take on the role of guides. However, in our research, some Muslim refugee women faced challenges in expressing their emotions and difficulties, even with assistance from an interpreter. This reluctance may stem from cultural norms that prioritize gratitude over discussing challenges, even during tough times, and a lack of comfort and experience in freely expressing their thoughts. Consequently, it may be advantageous to formulate specific questions for those who have difficulty in providing detailed responses. Nonetheless, the strength of the go-along approach lies in its ability to employ impromptu questioning to leverage spatial cues that were not previously considered.

Conduct the Go-Along Interview

Typically, participants engaged in the go-along are asked to take on the role of a tour guide, sharing insights into their daily routines or any aspects they choose to disclose about their surroundings. Researchers walk alongside study participants, posing follow-up questions based on physical cues or information provided. It proves beneficial to inquire about the participants' typical week or day before beginning the journey to place the observed events within a broader context. Various factors such as age, gender, social interactions and their nature, verbal and facial expressions, physical behaviors or gestures, personal space, social contexts, and the presence of physical objects are all noteworthy, as they can offer valuable information to enhance a more nuanced comprehension of the contexts and situations (Mack et al., 2005). Conducting a go-along interview presents greater challenges compared to a sit-down interview, as researchers must simultaneously observe environmental cues while engaging in conversation with the participant. Having a notebook or similar tool to document these environmental cues can be beneficial, preventing important information from being missed during the conversation. Paying close attention to demonstrative pronouns is crucial during the go-along, as it can be frustrating to later discover ambiguity in phrases like "this" or "that" later when reviewing recordings. Following Carpiano's suggestion (Carpiano, 2009), it is advisable to make immediate notes or verbalize clarifications in a voice recorder during the go-along to ensure clarity in subsequent analysis.

Document Observations and Reflections Right after the Go-Along

Depending on the research questions, theoretical framework, and disciplinary tradition, researchers may adhere to different conventions for recording information. Regardless of the convention, it is critical to document contextual data

immediately following each go-along while memories are still fresh. Fieldnotes should carefully capture details about the setting, observations, participant interactions, nonverbal behaviors, and other relevant factors. Including the date, day, time of day, and context in these notes proves helpful, as the same location may exhibit different moods, traffic patterns, and social interactions depending on the day and time (Mackay et al., 2018). For instance, a university campus may have a distinct atmosphere during the semester compared to school breaks. If new themes emerge during the go-along that could warrant further exploration in subsequent sessions, these can be recorded and addressed in subsequent interviews. These fieldnotes contribute nuance to the analysis by complementing recorded data (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). One thing to note is that what is recorded in a voice recorder represents only a fraction of the rich information gleaned from the go-along. Nonverbal cues, such as the facial expressions of participants or those interacting with them, remain unrecorded in a voice recorder but may hold critical significance. Therefore, careful consideration is required to capture those crucial but elusive aspects of the go-along and incorporate them into the findings.

Analyze and Report the Results

The analysis and reporting of the results from the go-along may differ depending on the theoretical framework, research questions, and whether the approach served as the exclusive means of data collection method or complemented other methods addressing broader research questions. Regardless, having an analysis plan from the outset can be beneficial. The plan could include what will be captured in a voice recorder and fieldnotes, as well as how they will be analyzed and incorporated into the results. It is advisable to present the contextual background of the go-along. This can include the rationale for selecting venues and participants and clarification on whether the go-along served as the sole method for data collection or was combined with other approaches. Additionally, details on the format, whether it was a walk-along, ride-along, or a combination of both, and any additional individuals accompanying the go-along, such as an interpreter, could be included in the report. Providing the following details can help enhance transparency and aid readers in comprehending the context:

- o The rationale for using the go-along and selecting the venues and participants
- o Positionality of researchers and the level of rapport prior to the go-along
- o Whether the go-along method is exclusively used for data collection or integrated with other approaches
- o Whether it involved a walk-along, ride-along, or a combination of both
- o Any individuals who accompany the go-along, such as an interpreter

- o If an interpreter is used, consider how their involvement might have influenced data collection and analysis.
- o How the go-along inform the study results
- o How privacy and confidentiality are maintained throughout the research process

What are the Benefits of Go-Along Interviews for Exploring Refugee Health?

This section will focus on the benefits of utilizing the go-along method when exploring refugee health based on our refugee maternal health study that employed this approach.

Helps Identify the Needs and Challenges of Those Who May Find it Challenging to Articulate Their Needs

Many interviewed refugee women in the study had limited formal education and proficiency in English. Additionally, they were not familiar with the country and environment and had limited knowledge of the resources and their entitlement to these resources and services. Consequently, expressing their needs and challenges during sit-down interviews proved challenging. Exploring various locations, such as a pharmacy within a grocery store and a community center, highlights the diverse difficulties frequently faced by refugee women when navigating in a new country. For instance, one woman encountered difficulty when her daughter's prescribed medication was unavailable at the pharmacy. Furthermore, another refugee woman who visited a community center was unaware of the services and resources she was excluded from due to a language barrier. Despite the community center providing a range of services such as parenting classes and assistance with food stamp applications, all materials were exclusively in English or Spanish. As the materials were not available in her language and she was not aware of what was available to her, she was unable to express her limited access to these resources as a challenge in a sit-down interview. Consequently, the go-along exposed challenges that the study participants were not even cognizant of.

Provides Rich Information Based on Spatial Cues

Aligned with existing literature, the go-along provides rich information and insights derived from environmental cues. It has the potential to offer a nuanced understanding of participants' socioeconomic status, such as residential areas, available resources, access to these resources, and shopping patterns. This approach enables researchers to delve into household nutritional knowledge and practices, shedding light on affordability, food choices and preferences, and market availability.

In our refugee maternal health study, go-along interviews not only unveiled the life patterns of refugee women in a host country but also prompted them to elaborate on their

challenges through spatial cues along the journey, such as an infant formula. When one participant saw formula at a Walmart, she claimed that her WIC card, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, was no longer valid. The conversation that followed her comment revealed that one of the challenges that refugees face in the United States is the renewal of their social programs. Even though refugees are eligible for various social programs in the country, it can be difficult for them to provide the necessary documentation to maintain the benefits. To keep their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, also known as Food Stamps, they must complete and send the long and complex application form in English. She said that the notice to renew the benefits would frequently arrive by mail in English. It appeared to be a daunting task for those who were illiterate even in their native language. They frequently discovered that their card was no longer functional at places such as Walmart as the reminder mail to prove their eligibility sat alongside other unread papers in their mailbox.

Another interviewed woman was looking for swimming suits for her children in a store. The first author asked her if the kids were going to learn to swim, and she said her family was planning to go to San Diego. She then said she travels every year during the summer, and the last time she went to Texas, where her relatives live. It demonstrated that they had some financial stability to travel to different states each summer despite being on food stamps. These two incidents implied that refugee women on food stamps might have very different experiences and circumstances despite appearing similar on a standardized survey. These subtle differences could be revealed by spatial cues such as baby formula and swimming suits in stores while walking with them.

Provides a Nuanced Understanding of Life Skills and Language Proficiency

The go-along method provided insights into participants' capabilities and language proficiency in their daily lives. For instance, one refugee woman, despite claiming not to speak English, could respond to the question of a receptionist asking her child's name at a clinic. Another woman effectively used a self-checkout device at a grocery store, demonstrating her practical life skills, while a different woman struggled to comprehend the term "date of birth" at a pharmacy. Despite similar self-reported language proficiency on a survey, there were variations in functional language use and life skills. The study highlights the importance of tailored interventions based on functional capacities rather than relying exclusively on self-reports, emphasizing the go-along's potential in assessing life skills and adaptation to a new environment.

Helps Observe How Services are Provided on the Ground

In the United States, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act mandates healthcare providers that receive federal funding to offer free

interpretation services to patients with limited English proficiency. While accompanying a refugee woman to one of her children's doctor appointments, the go-along method helped observe services being delivered firsthand and then inquire about their level of satisfaction and potential areas for improvement based on the detailed information elicited from the observation. Although study participants can elaborate on particular programs and services they receive, the amount of information they provide may vary depending on their education and knowledge levels, and they may choose not to mention anything they deem unimportant. Thus, the go-along provides an opportunity for a researcher to observe the process in action and ask pertinent questions based on the observations.

In our study, the interaction between the refugee woman and the health care providers at the visited clinic was facilitated by a phone interpreter, and it went better than expected, though it took longer due to the time spent on the interpretation. Nevertheless, access to community resources other than those mandated to provide interpretation services appeared to be a challenge for refugee women. Community centers were neither required nor equipped to provide interpretation services in languages other than English or Spanish. One refugee woman went to receive a pregnancy test at a community center, but she did not understand the results until the interpreter who was part of this study explained them to her. The go-along interview revealed a gap in access to community services that was not apparent during the sit-down interviews.

Facilitates the Vicarious Experiences for Researchers

Stiegler underscores the significance of sensory and nonverbal data that elude recording devices (Stiegler, 2020). The true value of the go-along method lies in the vicarious emotions that are inaccessible during a conventional sit-down interview, providing researchers with glimpses into the daily lives of participants and allowing the researchers to resonate with their experiences. By traveling alongside study participants, the first author of the study navigated public transportation with a refugee woman and her three children, including a stroller, on a sweltering day. They also stood together in line at a grocery store, attempting to use an expired WIC card. Engaging in these diverse experiences allowed researchers to connect with the emotions and challenges commonly encountered by refugee women, including feelings of embarrassment and frustration.

What are the Limitations?

Despite the benefits of the go-along method, there are several limitations. The go-along method can be more time-consuming and labor-intensive compared to a traditional sit-down interview. Researchers may need to walk a considerable distance, and the process usually takes longer than a

typical sit-down interview. Due to its nature, it is more vulnerable to external conditions such as extreme weather events that may make outdoor interviews challenging or impossible (Carpiano, 2009). The method may also exclude people who are unable to walk due to a disability or injury, and some spaces may not be accessible due to security concerns (Hand et al., 2021; Mackay et al., 2018). However, the inability to access certain areas due to safety concerns or extreme weather conditions can still offer valuable insights, as it may reflect critical information relevant to the research focus, depending on the specific research question. Additionally, for certain research subjects that could carry stigma or are considered taboo, participants might feel hesitant to share personal experiences in their environment due to concerns regarding confidentiality and privacy.

Conclusion

The go-along method offers numerous advantages when investigating healthcare for refugees, the populations that are frequently marginalized and underserved. It can help identify the needs and challenges of people with limited language proficiency, knowledge, or familiarity with a subject and provide a more nuanced understanding of life skills and language proficiency. It can aid in observing human interaction and provide more detailed information based on spatial cues. It can assist researchers in observing how services are delivered on the ground. More importantly, it can facilitate researchers' vicarious experiences for those who may struggle to communicate their needs and challenges. Unlike traditional interviews that rely on participants' memory of different topics, the go-along interviews benefit from the environmental cues, meaningfully involving marginalized and underserved groups in the foci of inquiry. Consequently, this approach has the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the needs of the most marginalized and underserved groups of society.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was supported in part by NIH T32 CA078447 and the GPSC ReaP grant from the University of Arizona.

Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

The Human Subjects Protection Program at the University of Arizona reviewed and approved the study (IRB 2104716241). Prior to participating in the study, all participants provided informed consent. Depending on the literacy level of the study participants, consent was either written or oral.

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