

# **Online Interviews During a Pandemic: Benefits, Limitations, Strategies and the Impact on Early Career Researchers**

## **Abstract**

In response to COVID-19, many universities and research institutions around the world suspended face-to-face interactions in preference for online research. Online data collection presents notable challenges for conducting qualitative interviews. This article discusses some key benefits and limitations to conducting interviews online compared to traditional face-to-face approaches. There is a need for up-to-date methodological guidance on conducting online interviews and balanced comparison between online and face-to-face methods. Moving research online in response to the pandemic is likely to have impacted the experiences of students and early career researchers, which may influence the direction of future qualitative research.

## **Introduction**

Qualitative research enables the in-depth exploration of people's lived experiences and perspectives. The most common form of data collection in qualitative research is one-to-one interviews (Jamshed, 2014). Conducting one-to-one interviews, alongside additional quantitative and qualitative methods, provides a vital research contribution necessary for understanding the wider societal and health-related consequences of the pandemic (Newman et al., 2021; Teti et al., 2020). However, COVID-19 has forced many researchers to adapt their research designs to align with social distancing and other pandemic-related challenges. In response to the initial outbreak, many universities and research institutions took the decision to suspend face-to-face research, resulting in scores of researchers opting for the use of online virtual communication tools as an alternative (Sah et al., 2020). Due to the unpredictability and

pervasiveness of the spread of COVID-19, many qualitative researchers intending to conduct one-to-one interviews have chosen to utilise online audio-visual platforms (such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, WebEx and Google Meet) as a replacement for more traditional face-to-face interviews (Lobe et al., 2020; Pocock et al., 2021).

Though the use of virtual communication tools for conducting research is by no means new, the soaring popularity of tele-conferencing platforms for facilitating remote working and learning during the pandemic has encouraged the increased use of such tools for research (Newman et al., 2021; Sah et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2020). However, it is important to consider what has been lost and gained by moving qualitative research online. As the effects of the pandemic continue to impact research and education, it is also important to consider the influence that moving online may have had on students' and early career researchers' experiences and understanding of qualitative research methods.

### **The benefits of online interviews**

Conducting interviews online has a number of advantages when compared to more traditional face-to-face methods (Dodds & Hess, 2020). Online interviews can provide added convenience for the participant by allowing them to participate from the comfort of their home or place of work (Sah et al., 2020; Varma et al., 2021). By avoiding the need to travel, online interviews are less time consuming for participants. Interviews can also be arranged to accommodate a participant's technological preferences by using digital tools and platforms already familiar to the individual. There are also substantial logistical advantages for researchers, such as being able to conduct interviews from their chosen venue, paperless scheduling and information exchange, and not requiring physical health and safety procedures to be considered for interacting with participants on site. Multiple online virtual communication tools also offer

real-time transcription capabilities meaning that researchers are provided with a high-quality draft transcript upon completion of the interview (Lobe et al., 2020).

Online interviews allow researchers to contact participants that would otherwise be hard to reach due to geographical or access-related limitations, thus increasing the ability to capture a range of perspectives and experiences (Sah et al., 2020; Varma et al., 2021). Attending interviews online may also help to address potential power imbalances between researcher and participant. Traditional face-to-face interviews are typically conducted in a setting, format and style familiar to the researcher and unfamiliar to the participant. Accessing an interview from home using a personal device may provide the participant with a sense of familiarity and comfort. This may help to enhance feelings of control when providing ongoing consent to participate in the interview. Online participation offers the opportunity to simply exit a call if a participant feels uncomfortable, compared to potentially awkward face-to-face interactions with a researcher in the event that a participant chooses to terminate an interview early (Newman et al., 2021).

Some research suggests that the added freedom of online participation may result in individuals providing less inhibited responses when discussing sensitive topics compared to face-to-face interactions (Williams et al., 2012). Though online interviews are suggested to provide a viable and advantageous alternative to in-person communication, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, these benefits should be balanced against a number of potential limitations when conducting qualitative interview research online.

### **The limitations of online interviews**

A key limitation of conducting interview research online is that it may be less conducive to facilitating rapport between researcher and participant (Varma et al., 2021). Developing a certain affinity between researcher and participant can help to provide a comfortable

environment and is necessary for eliciting in-depth participant responses. As the interviewer is the instrument of data collection, an online setting may inhibit the fostering of trust and proximity, thus restricting the research findings (Salmons, 2012; Varma et al., 2021). This lack of proximity may also make it harder for the researcher to pick up on non-verbal cues which could hinder their ability to successfully steer the discussion and could influence data collection (Tremblay et al., 2021). An interaction limited to a computer screen and audio may miss more subtle or nuanced responses which can be key to fully understanding a participant's perspective or experience (Varma et al., 2021). Crucially, the distance created between interviewer and interviewee, could impede the researcher from being able to effectively detect signs of distress that would ordinarily be recognised during a face-to-face interaction, creating the potential for unintended harm or discomfort.

Online interviews present a number of challenges concerning privacy and confidentiality (Varma et al., 2021). It has been suggested that digital platforms may provide a false sense of privacy, resulting in individuals lowering their guard where they would have otherwise been more security conscious in a face-to-face setting (Newman et al., 2021). When clicking on an interview link, participants may automatically sign in to a personal account and unintentionally reveal their username or other identifying information to the researcher. A participant's physical background during a video call may also provide potentially identifying information concerning their location or environment. However, multiple online platforms offer a potential solution by using blurred or virtual backgrounds to avoid revealing details of one's personal space (Lobe et al., 2020). The possibility for unanticipated interruptions, such as a family member walking in during an interview, also adds to the risk of unintended disclosures of private information. Researchers themselves should also be mindful of any identifying information associated with their background and digital interactions with

participants, which may include ensuring that their usernames and IP address are masked (Newman et al., 2021).

Finally, a significant challenge when adopting an online approach to conducting interview research is how to mitigate the effects of the digital divide. The digital divide represents the gap between those who have full access to digital technologies (such as the internet, smartphones and computers) and those who do not. This digital divide is affected most by factors such as age, disability and socioeconomic status. For example, according to the Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2021 survey, over one-third of UK benefit claimants have very low digital engagement (Lloyds Bank, 2021b). The data indicate that millions of people across the UK struggle to engage with online services required to access support (Lloyds Bank, 2021a, 2021b). This digital divide may lead to selection biases in research by placing access restrictions on marginalised pockets of society (Toscos et al., 2019). The digital barriers imposed by online research could lead to a lack of representation of certain voices in society, thus bringing into question the generalisability of the findings.

### **Future strategies for conducting online interviews**

Conducting interview research should not be considered a riskier or less valid research approach in comparison to traditional face-to-face interactions. However, it should be acknowledged that online and face-to-face interactions are not the same, and that each bring their own advantages and disadvantages (Newman et al., 2021). For example, Salmons (2012) previously provided comprehensive guidance for conducting online interviews. This included highlighting the need for an in-depth consideration of the researcher's motivation for conducting the research, appropriate sampling and recruitment strategies, guidance on interview style, appropriate selection of digital tools, and full consideration of potential ethical issues. A number of researchers have sought to provide updated guidance in response to the

increasing popularity of online interview research during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dodds & Hess, 2020; Newman et al., 2021; Pocock et al., 2021; Sah et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2020; Tremblay et al., 2021; Varma et al., 2021). However, given the ever-evolving digital landscape, there is a need for researchers to reach a consensus and to cultivate guides of best practice for safely and effectively conducting online interview research, both during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. As digital powerhouses continue to modify the terms and capabilities of their online communication platforms, collaboration between researchers and software designers is encouraged to produce tools that provide successful means of data collection.

### **The impact on students and early career researchers**

The move to online data collection during the pandemic may have had a particular impact on students and early career researchers intending to conduct interview research. Many post-graduate and doctoral research projects with set deadlines may have required researchers to pivot to online methods, due to their inability to ‘wait out’ the restrictions of the pandemic (Sah et al., 2020). This is likely to have required significant effort on the part of junior researchers to adaptively redesign their projects. The restrictions placed on face-to-face data collection may also have lasting effects on budding qualitative researchers who ‘cut their teeth’ during the pandemic. The inevitable imbalance in researcher experiences between face-to-face interactions and online interviews is likely to produce a bias towards digital methods. Researchers may be unable to draw meaningful comparisons between online and face-to-face interview techniques due to a lack of experience. A ‘new normal’ for conducting qualitative interview research may therefore be dictated, not by a balanced consideration of methodological strengths, but by an imbalance in experience and access to alternative methods. This highlights the need for students and early career researchers interested in qualitative research to invest time in developing their experience and understanding of face-to-face

research methods in the wake of the pandemic. This may help researchers to make appropriate decisions when designing their research and ensure that future research practices are best suited to the aims and objectives of the study.

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