

The Use of Videoconferencing for Qualitative Interviewing: Opportunities, Challenges, and Considerations

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Interviewing is a useful method to collect qualitative research data about phenomena that cannot be directly observed. Traditionally, in-person interviews have been perceived as the gold standard because they represent a natural encounter where the interviewer communicates and builds rapport with participants while observing their body language and the environment. In previous years, there has been a debate about the use of the telephone to conduct interviews for qualitative research (Novick, 2008). Telephone interviewing was perceived as a more accepted approach for structured quantitative data collection due to its limited potential to connect with participants, stimulate a natural conversation, and observe nonverbal cues. More recently, with advancements in communication technology and due to the wide availability of the Internet, videoconferencing is gaining increased attention as an alternative to traditional modes of interviews for qualitative research. Videoconferencing as a communication technology allows for a real-time, online synchronous conversation to occur, with the ability to send and receive audiovisual information (Salmons, 2012). Compared with other online methods for qualitative data collection (i.e., email interviews, online forums, and instant messaging), videoconferencing more closely resembles the in-person qualitative interview (Tuttas, 2015).

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Other researchers have presented the benefits and drawbacks associated with the use of videoconferencing for qualitative interviewing (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009; Seitz, 2016). Although videoconferencing for qualitative data collection is not without obstacles and drawbacks, it serves as a viable alternative to in-person interviews. In the following sections, I will summarize the benefits of videoconferencing as a mode for qualitative interviews, as well as the challenges researchers face when using this technology. Then, I will discuss my own experience using videoconferencing to interview home health nurses and offer some suggestions that may be helpful in your qualitative data collection.

Opportunities

Videoconferencing for qualitative interviewing is gaining increased attention among researchers due to its logistical convenience and practical advantages. It reduces the geographical constraints associated with in-person interviews and offers researchers greater opportunities to reach geographically dispersed participants. Interviewers and participants meeting over a web-based platform for qualitative interviews avoid the time and expenses associated with travel. Moreover, videoconferencing offers scheduling flexibility and provides participants with more options to fit the interview in their busy work schedules and personal lives. Last, participants are more relaxed because they are interviewed in a comfortable and familiar environment of their choice. In addition to these advantages, researchers have access to the participant's visual cues through their screen, and videoconferencing facilitates the collection of verbal and non-verbal data. Therefore, videoconferencing preserves many of the features available in the in-person interview, with an added flexibility and convenience for both researchers and participants.

Challenges

Despite the numerous opportunities associated with the use of videoconferencing, this mode of qualitative interviewing is not suitable for all research topics and all participants. Although interviewers are able to provide support and express compassion through nonverbal facial expression or tone of voice over a video call, physical proximity is sometimes needed to comfort the participant if the study is focused on a highly sensitive topic. In addition, videoconferencing restricts the researcher's ability to assess the participant's environment, which often provides rich contextual data to situate

the interview during the data analysis phase. Researchers also cannot observe a full range of body language and nonverbal communication because the participant's image is often displayed from the waist up. Besides limiting the breadth of data collected, researchers using videoconferencing may underrepresent participants who do not have access to the technology or may not feel comfortable using it. Last, researchers may face technical or Internet connection problems that would affect the clarity of the voice and image, as well as the quality of the interview and audio-recorded file. Depending on the extent of the connection problem, interviewers and participants may be distracted and focused on fixing the problem, rather than on the original purpose of the interview.

Exemplar Case

In a recent qualitative descriptive study about nursing visit intensity in home health, nurses were recruited from three home health agencies located in three Mid-Atlantic States (Irani, Hirschman, Cacchione, & Bowles, 2018). Nurses were interviewed in-person or via Zoom, a web-based videoconferencing tool. To overcome challenges in recruitment and data collection, nurses from two of the participating agencies were offered the option to complete the interview via Zoom videoconference. This option allowed nurses to change interview times and dates at the last minute (given their dynamic and unpredictable work schedules), without inconveniencing the researcher traveling long distances to conduct the interviews. Participants interviewed over Zoom were asked to choose a quiet, private room for the video call to avoid any distraction and keep all information confidential.

Ten nurses (out of 26 total participants) were interviewed via Zoom. At the end of the video interview, participants were asked about their experience with the process. All nurses interviewed via Zoom had positive experiences due to its convenience, flexibility, and ease of use. Participants felt comfortable in their own space and did not need to allocate travel time to meet the interviewer. Some participants agreed to enter the study because they were able to complete data collection remotely. Participants also described the practicality of accessing the video call by clicking on a web link, without the need to install the application or create an account. Compared with telephone interviews, participants described videoconferencing as a more personable approach, where both interviewers and interviewees can assess each other's level of engagement in the discussion. Participants perceived web-based video interviews as a better alternative to in-person interviews, and one participant commented, "Here we are, facing one another."

The average length of interviews was 43 and 49 min for in-person and web-based video interviews, respectively, and findings were comparable across the two interview modes. Videoconferencing enabled the researcher to see and interact with participants in real time while preserving the flexibility of timing and surmounting issues of geographic distance. Nevertheless, nurses participating in this study were savvy computer users and may have been able to troubleshoot technical issues on their own. Therefore, they all were very satisfied with the technology and did not mention any drawbacks or technical difficulty. Moreover, this mode of qualitative interviewing was particularly relevant to the study because the researchers were interested in understanding work processes without addressing sensitive topics that require a high level of interpersonal connection with the interviewer.

Considerations

Researchers decide on the appropriateness of web-based video interviews in light of their research topic and the technological literacy of their potential participants. Researchers need to consider the type of data sought and whether contextual data are essential to the study. Moreover, based on the topic of interest and the sensitivity of the questions asked, the importance of physical proximity should be evaluated. Finally, researchers should assess whether their potential participants have access to the technology needed to complete the videoconference and are able to use it. Following are practical recommendations for researchers using videoconferencing to collect qualitative data:

- Identify videoconferencing tools available to you (potentially through your institution) and create a pros and cons table to guide your final choice. You can compare the features of each tool: for example, the audio and/or video recording capacity, screen sharing capacity, device needed to connect with participants, and whether or not participants are required to create an account.
- Confirm with your local institutional review board that these videoconferencing tools can be used for qualitative data collection purposes. You can also inquire about special considerations related to recording the interview, as well as obtaining informed consent if participants will never be met in-person.
- Familiarize yourself with the selected tool and be comfortable with its menu and features to avoid distracting your participant during the interview and easily troubleshoot any technical problem.

- Assess the participant's comfort level with the tool. You can choose to have a video conversation with them prior to the formal interview to collect demographic information and perhaps review the informed consent.
- If you decide not to use the recording option integrated in the tool or in the device, make sure to set up your own recording system and test it before the interview to confirm the quality of the recording.
- On the day of the interview (or the day before), send a reminder email to the participant with the required information about how to join the videoconference and ask them to choose a private space to be comfortable in the interview and freely share their experiences.
- Dress up the same way as if you were meeting the participant in-person (even if they may show up in their workout clothes, you still need to maintain professionalism).
- Choose a private, contained space with adequate lighting and a neutral background.
- Check your camera, microphone, and device (e.g., laptop, smartphone, tablet computer) in advance to avoid any technological problems or delays from your end.
- During the interview, keep the camera at your eye level. When you are communicating with your participant, look up toward the camera rather than at your image on the screen to maintain "eye contact" with your participant.
- Do not open any other applications or documents on your device. Your participant expects you to be fully present during the interview.

Conclusion

The widespread availability and advancement of communication technology has significant implications on the practice of researchers and the evolution of the modes of qualitative interviewing. While the use of videoconferencing in qualitative research is not expected to replace traditional methods of interviewing, it can be considered a feasible, potentially cost- and time-saving tool beneficial in specific situations. Further research is needed to first compare the data generated from videoconferencing and other established modes of qualitative interviewing and then identify best situations and practices for using videoconferencing in qualitative research.

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