

Reflections of Conducting Online Interviews During the Pandemic: Benefits, Challenges and Practical Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Collecting data online is nothing new in the qualitative research world and over the last few decades, researchers from a different range of disciplines have been using the Internet as a medium of collecting qualitative data. With the sudden emergence of the pandemic due to Covid-19 at the end of 2019, most researchers have been forced to shift from using the traditional way of collecting qualitative data to using digital tools. The implementation of the first Movement Control Order in Malaysia in mid-March 2020, has also significantly affected the recruitment of participants and data collection in our research. Thus, we were pushed to think of different ways of collecting data without further delaying the research which led to recruiting and interviewing participants online. There are several digital tools available that researchers could utilise in interviewing participants virtually, e.g., Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. Researchers can also use social media and instant messaging applications to recruit participants by disseminating posters or details of their research. In this study, 33 participants were interviewed; 17 interviews were conducted online, using Microsoft Teams and Zoom, while the rest were interviewed over the phone. The online interview sessions were conducted from June 2020 to March 2022. When conducting the research, we found that by using the internet we could reach more people from all over Malaysia that fitted our sampling frame, and interviews could be done at any time and any place. However, there were some challenges that we faced such as issues around technology, getting the right timing to conduct interviews, developing rapport, and missing out on non-verbal cues and eye contact. Hence, careful planning is needed before conducting online interviews to ensure these challenges are kept to a minimum. Conducting interviews online is a suitable alternative to use during this pandemic, but areas around accessibility, inclusion, and equality should also be considered as not everyone has equal access to digital tools. Qualitative researchers who are using online methods also must be engaged in deeper self-reflection and reflexivity in ensuring the suitability of using the internet for collecting qualitative data and interacting with participants.

Keywords: qualitative research, interview, digital tools, online, internet

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INTRODUCTION

The digital world

Using technology and collecting data online is nothing new in the qualitative research world and for the last ten years or so, researchers from a different range of disciplines have been using the internet as a medium of conducting interviews, focus groups, observations and document analysis (Silverman, 2018). Researchers have also been using various digital tools to help in their research processes, for example, using data analysis software

for analysing data, citation management software to aid in literature review and now, more communication tools such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet are used to interact with participants (Paulus, Jackson, & Davidson, 2017). Researchers can also use digital spaces like social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as a data source where there are a vast number of data available online waiting to be explored (Paulus et al., 2017).

With the sudden emergence of the pandemic due to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) or famously known as Covid-19 at the end of 2019, most researchers have been forced to shift from using the traditional way of collecting qualitative data to using digital tools. With the restriction in movement and social distancing rules, we were not able to interact with people face-to-face and rely heavily on technology to communicate with others. In doing research, it was no longer a choice and we had to embrace it.

A study which explored the perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants on using Zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection found that there were relatively not many differences in conducting research online in terms of participant satisfaction and data quality (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019). Another research study looking into the exploration of data equivalence between online and in-person interviews with adolescents found that even though online interviews took longer to complete and produced fewer words, the data quality was not affected by the mode of data collection (Shapka, Domene, Khan, & Yang, 2016). Hence, conducting online interviews could potentially be a useful alternative to face-to-face interviews.

Online interviews

Interviews, including face-to-face interviews and focus groups, are one of the major form of data collection in qualitative research which are designed to obtain rich and meaningful understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, opinions, feeling and knowledge (Rosenthal, 2016). Face-to-face interaction between researchers and participants has always been viewed as a "gold standard" in collecting interview data because the non-verbal communication could add to the thicker description and interpretations of the data compared to verbal data only (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). With the technological changes and growth of the internet, online interviews have been used by qualitative researchers due to some of challenges faced when conducting face-to-face interview such as time and financial constraints, geographical dispersion as well as physical mobility boundaries of participants (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014).

There are two main types of online interviews which are asynchronous and synchronous online interviews (Jowett et al., 2011). Asynchronous online interviews or non-real-time interviews can be conducted without having the researcher and the participant using the internet at the same time, and the most commonly used methods are emails, bulletin boards and discussion groups (Janghorban et al., 2014). Synchronous online interviews or real-time interviews on the other hand can be conducted when both the researcher and participant are using the internet simultaneously and are engaging on the conversation through videoconferencing, text-based chat rooms or instant messaging applications (Janghorban et al., 2014). Some of the advantages of conducting online interviews include accessibility, convenience and are potentially ideal for sensitive topics (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, there are some limitations when conducting interviews online such as less accessibility for some groups, for example, to potential participants who have no access to internet or electronic devices such as smartphones or computers, those who cannot afford data, the limitation of the researcher to respond to participant and also risk of data infringement. Hence, careful planning is required before deciding to conduct interviews virtually.

METHODOLOGY & METHODS

Background of the research

The aim of our research is to explore both patients' and pharmacists' perspectives on diabetes knowledge and empowerment to self-care where face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were planned to be conducted to gather both patients' and pharmacists' perspectives. This research targeted patients newly diagnosed with type 2 diabetes up to 5 years and pre-diabetes patients, as well as pharmacists who were working in hospitals, public clinics or community pharmacies. But due to the pandemic, face-to-face interactions were not able to be conducted and hence, the aim of this article is to highlight the benefits of online interview, the challenges experienced when conducting our research online and the practical solutions that can be taken to overcome the challenges faced. It was originally planned to recruit the patient participants from two public clinics but due to the restriction imposed by the Government of Malaysia through the Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020, we were not able to recruit patients from the clinics and most of the initial patient participants were recruited online through sharing of recruitment poster on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter as well as through text messages using instant messaging application. Even after the MCO was lifted and Malaysia was on the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), the researcher was only allowed to recruit participants

from the public clinics and not allowed to conduct face-to-face interviews in the clinics. As for the pharmacist participants, they were also recruited through online postings and snowball sampling.

In our research, the online interviews were done synchronously using videoconferencing. 33 participants (22 patients and 11 pharmacists) were recruited and interviewed, and 17 participants (7 patients and 10 pharmacists) were interviewed online, using Microsoft Teams and Zoom (16 via Microsoft Teams and 1 via Zoom), while the rest were interviewed over the telephone. The online interview sessions were conducted from June 2020 till March 2022.

Recruitment

The setting up online interviews can take more time compared to face-to-face interviews. In this research, the first interview was conducted two months after the first MCO was announced in March 2020 because the researcher was not allowed into the public clinics to recruit participants in-person and posters detailing the research for the purpose of recruitment were prepared for both patient and pharmacist participants. The posters were shared on groups associated with the sampling criteria of participants on Facebook and approval was required by administrator of the groups before they can be posted on their pages. Poster were also shared on other social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter as well as through instant messaging application, WhatsApp. Interested participants were requested to fill their contact details on Microsoft Form, and they were then contacted via email or text messages to check if they fit the sampling criteria.

Ethical considerations

Participant information sheets and consent forms were sent to the participants well in advance via email or WhatsApp. The details of the research and consent form were explained to all participants either through email or WhatsApp messages, and participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions before participating in the research. Ethical issues were considered as the same in the face-to-face and online interviews. Recording of the interviews could pose some ethical issues if an unauthorised person has access to the recordings hence, participants were informed of the intended recording of the interview and agreements were sought before the interview started. All the information collected from the participants and the recording of interviews were kept strictly confidential and stored in database which is password protected.

This article is not intended to be used as a sole guideline in collecting qualitative research data through online interviews. It is a reflection from the researcher's experience having to shift the direction of the research by recruiting participants and conducting interviews online.

Online interviews VS face-to-face interviews

A well conducted qualitative interview may generate rich and in-depth data regardless which method of interview was used. Therefore, it is important to consider the strengths and limitations when comparing interview methods when designing our research. Face-to-face interviews are considered to be synchronised in time and space and makes it superior in this aspect because the conversation between the researcher and participant occurred in real time and in the same space (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Other advantages of face-to-face interviews compared to online interviews include direct interaction between the researcher and participants and no delays due to technical problems, rich and detailed data are able to be capture and body language, facial expressions and other non-verbal cues are obvious to the researcher and could add value to the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021).

Nonetheless, face-to-face interviews can be time consuming for the researcher in terms of organising, conducting and transcribing the interview as well as for the participant where the interview could take longer compared to online interviews. Lack of anonymity in face-to-face interviews could also hinder the participation of some participants and some people might not feel comfortable discussing sensitive information in-person (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Online interviews VS telephone interviews

Like online interviews, telephone interviews shared some common advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of conducting telephone interviews include reduced cost, less technology dependent, increased access to geographically disparate participants and allow more anonymity and privacy (Novick, 2008). Some of the reported disadvantages of telephone interviews which are fairly similar to online interviews are lack of telephone coverage, absence of visual cues and the potential for distraction of participants by activities in their environment (Novick, 2008). When conducting the interviews via the telephone, I found that participants were mostly not in a quiet environment during the interview compared to those interviewed online. There were a number of occasions where

interviews were interrupted by the noise from the surroundings, for example, the noise from passing by motorcycles as well as passers-by.

In this research, there were absentees (5 participants). One was recruited online while the rest were recruited face-to-face from public clinics and they were scheduled to be interviewed via telephone calls. All of the other participants who were recruited and interviewed online attended the interview sessions on time. This is probably because they were more motivated to participate in the research compared to the ones who were recruited from the public clinics. This could possibly be because they felt that they were obligated to participate in the research when I spoke to them in the clinics. Nevertheless, in research conducted by Deakin and Wakefield (2014), they found that those engaging in a Skype interview were more likely to not show up than those arranged to meet face-to-face. They emphasised that the aspect of familiarity is important, because 46% of interviewees were known to the researcher and 100% attended the interview, and this suggested that the familiarity of the interviewer to the participant helped in maintaining the appointment of the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

In terms of the duration of interview, I found that the length of both interviews conducted online, and telephone were fairly similar, lasting around 40 minutes. It is said that non face-to-face interviews are usually shorter and therefore, fewer rich data were obtained because the responses were much more concise even though elaboration was encouraged (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Yet, little evidence is presented for this claim as reported by McCoyd and Kerson where their telephone interviews typically lasted for 1.5 to 2 hours (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

When conducting interviews via telephone, determining audio recording techniques is crucial and needs to be prepared well in advance (Burke & Miller, 2001). Unlike online interviews where the recording can be done using recording function available on the online platforms without using a different equipment or device, a different equipment needs to be used to record telephone interviews. In this research, the speakerphone and tape-recording method was used where the researcher's phone was put on loudspeaker and the conversation was recorded using a tape recorder.

DISCUSSION

Benefits of online interviews

Online interviews used to be viewed as a "poor" substitute for face-to-face interviews due to number of reasons, but now they are increasingly viewed as a different type of method of interviewing and regarded as an extension of the traditional method rather than replacing it (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The use of online platforms in this research is not to replicate face-to-face interview but act as an alternative method to interview participants during the pandemic.

The main benefit of conducting online interviews is that the barriers around geographical distance and time and cost involved in travelling to meet participants are overcome (Jowett et al., 2011). When using the internet to conduct research, we could involve more people outside of our reach as well as people with physical disabilities and mobility issues. As for this research, we were able to recruit participants from all over Malaysia including from East Malaysia, that fitted our sampling frame, this would not have been possible for face-to-face interviews. Doing the interviews online could also increase the participation of people who have concerns about anonymity and people who would normally not participate if it is done face-to-face due to shyness or lack of confidence (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Online interviews offer flexibility as they could be done at any time and in the comfort of participants own homes or at a location of their choice and thus, they are convenient to both the participants and researchers. With online interviews, this research was able to continue without further delay because we were able to recruit and interview participants online even though Malaysia was on lockdown. Face-to-face interviewing requires travelling to the site of research and meeting the participants but with online interviews the cost of travelling were greatly reduced because all the data collection processes can be done virtually. Apart from that, it helps in minimising the ecological and carbon footprints because researchers are not travelling around (Reñosa et al., 2021).

Challenges of online interviews and practical solutions

Despite all the benefits, using technology posed a number of risks and consequences and there were challenges faced when conducting the online interviews. It is important to take note of these challenges in order to retain the same level of data quality as to face-to-face interviews. Some of the challenges faced in this research include technological issues, getting the right timing to conduct the interviews, developing rapport and missing non-verbal cues and eye contact.

Technological issues

The two main issues faced around technology in this research and also reported from other researchers were around participant's level of technological competence and having problem accessing to high-speed internet. During the first MCO imposed by the government, almost all interactions had to be done online. Everyone needed to adapt to the new normal and were trying to familiarise themselves on how to use digital communication tools available such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. When we decided to do online interviews, I had to look into different online platforms to use which is easily accessible to the participants and user friendly. After a few dry runs, I decided to use Microsoft Teams because of the different features that it has such as video or audio recording function, no time limit, live transcription and data encryption. As for the participants, they were not required to install the application as can access to the meeting link on the internet browser.

Even though I managed to find the right platform to use, not all participants were competent to using Microsoft Teams. There was one participant who had no experience of using Microsoft Teams but was very keen to participate in this research, so I had to explain to him through instant messaging application, WhatsApp, on how to access and use Microsoft Teams. While some participants did not have access to smartphones or electronic devices, and they had to be interviewed on the telephone. Therefore, it is important for researchers to be flexible and offer other means of communication to use so that the research is not only limited to people who are digitally literate.

Not having access to high-speed internet or internet connection disruption was another common issue around technology. Hence, there were a few occasions where loss of internet connection occurred during the interview session and affected the flow of the interview. In one of the interviews, the internet connection was really bad that the interview had to be stopped and resumed via a telephone call. While in another instance, there were a few internet disruptions throughout the interview, and affected the transcription process. The transcribed interview was then emailed to the participant for checking. In another interview, there was a problem with Microsoft Teams and the participant could not hear me clearly and time was wasted for both myself and participant as I tried to rectify the problem. In the end, we decided to switch to Zoom and restarted the interview from there. With a number of interruptions throughout some of the interviews, some of the important information might be lost and it could also affect the thoughts of the participant as well as the flow of the conversation and consequently affecting the richness and depth of the data.

Another factor that could affect the internet connection was whether Microsoft Teams was used with video or without video. There were two occasions when switching on the video affected the sound quality and the conversation have to be stopped because the video froze, or the participant was unable to hear me.

Therefore, it is apparent that when deciding to conduct online interviews, we need to use digital communication tools that most people are familiar with and simplify the interaction so that the flow of the interview is not affected. We also need to consider people who are not digitally literate and those who have no access to electronic devices, and to offer an alternative mode of communication to use which is via telephone call. In this research, for participants who were not able to be interviewed via Microsoft Teams, they were interviewed via telephone calls. As loss of internet connection is inevitable sometimes, the need to inform participants beforehand on alternative mode of communication to use so that in the case of a very bad internet connection problem during the interview session, participant is aware that telephone interview will be conducted instead in order to not waste both the participant's and researcher's time.

The right timing

Getting the right timing which suited both the participant and researcher can also be difficult when arranging the interview time. As most participants recruited were working so there was a need to agree on the mutually convenient times. Due to the lockdown, most people were at home and factors around whether the participant has children or taking care of an elderly need to be considered as we need to ensure that the interview was done at the comfort of the participant and the participant is able to speak freely and truthfully without any interruptions. All these factors need to be taken into account because it could affect the participant's concentration and data gathering during the interview. Researchers also need to ensure that their surroundings are quiet and suitable to conduct the interview to make sure that the audio recording is clear, and the transcription process is not affected. Thus, most of the interviews were conducted on weekends and in the evening. Reminders were also sent to participants via WhatsApp messages one to two days before the interview and a few hours before the session starts on the day of the interview.

Rapport development and missing non-verbal cues

The necessity of rapport building, open and honest conversation between the researchers and participants are crucial in qualitative research in order to gain rich and meaningful data (Reñosa et al., 2021). As internet communication can be viewed as an impersonal and detached form of social communication thus there are concerns on how rapport is developed with the participants when conducting online interviews because of the lack of visual cues and eye contact. The participants in this research were given the choice to use video or just voice and most of the participants preferred no video and therefore, these interviews were closely resembled to telephone interview. The problem with interviewing people online is that researchers are not able to see the facial expressions and gestures of the participants which could support the interpretation of what the participants are actually saying and the understanding of meaning (Bold, 2012). With no direct observation of emotion and other visual cues, it can be difficult to interpret delays in responding (Braun & Clarke, 2013). There were some instances where I have mistakenly interpreted the delays in responding to participants have stopped talking and as I was about to speak, the participants continued their conversation. Also, online rapport can be an issue when interviewing individuals who are more reserved or less responsive and hence more prompting is needed during the interview to encourage the participant to talk (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

To ensure rapport is developed, researchers could break the ice in a creative way, for example, by asking easy and soft opening questions to warm up the interactions and not jumping straight into the interview questions. I personally found that exchanging WhatsApp messages with the participants prior to the interview helped in developing the connection with them. I communicated with all my participants through WhatsApp messages prior to the interview sessions to gather information about their condition and explained about the research. They were also given the chance to ask anything about the research before the interview.

Another important part in developing rapport in any interview, regardless of face-to-face or online, is to ensure that you are listening to the participants and are interested in what they have to say (Jowett et al., 2011). Though it is quite difficult to express your attentiveness online through non-verbal communications such as nodding or eye contact, unless the video is on, you could express it through verbal cues, for example, “mhm”, use a different tone of voice or repeat certain words or phrases for emphasis. This is to signal to the participants that we are actually listening to what they have to say. Rapport development is possible online but it may take more time compared to in-person interview and therefore, researchers need to have effective training in place to ensure they are sufficiently skilled and prepared to take time to engage in effective rapport development (Shapka et al., 2016).

Table 1 shown below summarises the advantages and disadvantages of conducting online interviews.

Table 1: The advantages and disadvantages of online interviews

Advantages	Disadvantages
Cost effective	Technological requirement and literacy
Time effective	Suitability of the interview time
Flexibility in terms of interview time	Poor internet connections
Accessibility and not limited by geography	Less accessible to some groups
Possibility to see body language and facial expression if video is on	Missing non-verbal cues and eye contact
Convenient in terms of location of interview	Disturbances or noises from the surrounding
Do not require different equipment for recording	Ensure all electronic devices (sound and microphone) are working
Rapport development is possible through exchanging of text messages	Rapport development takes time
Anonymity is possible	Risk to security of data
Participants have the choice for audio or video interview	Reduce sound quality when video is switched on

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, conducting interviews online was a suitable alternative to use during this pandemic. However, setting up online interviews takes careful planning to facilitate how we approached and integrate technology into the research processes. It took me around two months after the announcement of the first MCO by the government of Malaysia before I interviewed the first participant. As conducting online interviews were something new to me, detailed planning was done before starting the interviews, for example, choosing the right online platform to use

which were user friendly, making sure all the devices used for the interview and the recording of the interview were working perfectly as well as making sure that participants understood about the research and the method used for the interview by sending the participant information sheet in advance. Areas around accessibility, inclusion, and equality should also be considered as not everyone has equal access to digital tools and data which limits the participation of these groups of people. There may be challenges in reaching participants with poor internet access or who do not have access to electronic devices, hence inventive strategies to improve enrolment are required (Reñosa et al., 2021). In this research, participants who have no access to electronic devices such as smartphones or computers, and the internet were interviewed through telephone calls.

Currently, there is no clear consensus or guidelines on how an online interview should be conducted. Hence, the research designs and processes have to be treated the same way as face-to-face interviews in terms of ethical guidelines and data quality. Getting ethical approval from the research ethics committee needs to be done the same way as getting approval for face-to-face interviews and how the audio and video recordings are kept must also be included to ensure data confidentiality is maintained. Qualitative researchers who are using online methods also must be engaged in deeper self-reflection and reflexivity in ensuring the suitability of using the internet for collecting qualitative data and interacting with participants (Jowett et al., 2011). Having a good rapport with the participants influenced the kind of data produced and, in this research, I found that exchanging WhatsApp text messages with the participant before the interview helps in developing rapport with the participants. Even though there were several challenges faced when conducting online interviews in our research, in my view, I find that it is a highly beneficial method to use during the pandemic.

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