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A research note: Videoconferencing interviews

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Abstract

This research note aimed to highlight the reflections of the researcher while conducting videoconferencing interviews as a part of his doctoral research project. The researcher drew some inferences based on recent literature and two videoconferencing interviews conducted with the doctoral students via Zoom. It was a crucial experience to deal with the recruitment of research participants, building rapport/understanding, especially with the female participant, exchanging nonverbal cues between researcher and participants, considering socio-cultural aspects of the participants, writing the interview summaries and getting them reviewed by the participants. Moreover, technological aspects were also considered important like having a PC, laptop or android of good condition with consistent internet connectivity, appropriate software (Zoom) and recording of the interviews, backup of the recordings, making sure electricity and other equipment essential for videoconferencing interviews was available. Besides, reviewing the order of questions and time for the research interviews is also important for videoconferencing interviews. The researcher believes that it might be possible to increase the trustworthiness of the videoconferencing interviews by considering all these aspects.

Keywords

Videoconferencing interview; building rapport; nonverbal cues; Zoom software; socio-cultural aspect.

Introduction

Research interviewing is a widely used mode of data collection, especially in qualitative research. There are two major ways of conducting research interviews: face-to-face and online. Researchers may believe face-to-face interviews are a reliable mode of interview due to personal and physical interaction between researcher and participants. While nobody can deny the prominence and usability of face-to-face interviews, with the advancement of communication technologies over the last decade, researchers are exploring ways to overcome the limitations of financial and time constraints, geographical dispersion and lack of physical mobility in their research endeavours. There are definitely some common challenges faced by researchers when conducting virtual or videoconferencing interviews but these challenges can be ameliorated and may even be overcome if researchers carefully consider how they might address these. At this moment of changing human interaction patterns, online and/or



videoconferencing interviews can be considered a viable mode of data collection rather than a second choice, especially when face-to-face interviews are not possible. To date, however, comparatively few researchers have highlighted the significance, their experiences of and the prerequisites to conducting effective online interviews.

Online synchronous interviews are more appreciated in qualitative research because of the possibilities for in-depth conversations between researcher and participant on prescribed research questions. Moreover, researchers have given importance to online videoconferencing interviews because of the capacity to see each other during an interview. It has been considered reliable for many formal and informal communication purposes. Researchers are still at developing stages of exploring the viability of videoconferencing interviews in qualitative research and the effective use of advanced communication technologies for this purpose.

Therefore, this research paper mainly covers two sections. The first section includes the theoretical background on videoconferencing interviews, and the second section includes my personal reflection on conducting the videoconferencing interviews with the participants.

Background to videoconferencing interviews

According to Internet World Stats (2020), there are currently 4.57 billion active users of the internet around the world. This has had a prominent impact on people's social interactions, as they use internet communication technologies to explore and share their everyday life realities with others. As the internet has expanded globally, this has become an opportunity for social science and education researchers to use it as a research tool to explore human interactions and experiences (James & Busher, 2012), although online interviewing is still an area of focus for development (Archibald et al., 2019). Two uses of online interviewing have been discussed in literature—synchronous (real-time conversation through phone or videoconference) and asynchronous (conversation through email or other messages at different times) (James & Busher, 2012; Sullivan, 2012). Synchronous interviews are thought to be more reliable, which is why some researchers have made efforts to explain the significance and experiences of videoconferencing for these interviews (Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Nehls et al., 2015).

Over the last two decades, Skype has been used widely to conduct videoconferencing interviews (Hanna, 2012; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Weller, 2015). Recently, Zoom software has extended its usability with a number of features, such as simultaneous recording, accessibility (e.g., cell phone, tablet, computer), economically affordable and user-friendliness (Archibald et al., 2019; Daniels et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020; Lobe et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2018), and its use is increasing.

Researcher and participant experiences of videoconferencing interviews

Researchers have described positive experiences with conducting videoconferencing interviews for data collection (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). It is generally agreed that the first aspect in the interview process is the recruitment of appropriate participants because researchers need to ensure the selected participants are agreeable to online interviews and that they have access to the internet and the required software. The next important aspect is the building of rapport. Building rapport with participants can be challenging because researchers do not have access to face-to-face interaction with participants, and so they need to find alternative ways to build rapport as part of building productive relationships (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Weller, 2015). They need to plan to spend extra time to gain trust and develop a friendly conversation style with their interviewees (Archibald et al., 2019). Deakin and Wakefield (2014) found sending a number of emails to their participants was an effective way of building rapport prior to the interview. In these emails, they sought to exchange information about the research and to develop a connection with their participants so that their participants would provide the required information with confidence and trustworthiness. When the interview takes place, greetings and conclusions are important

as they are another way to increase respect and understanding between the researcher and participant/s (Weller, 2017).

Likewise, participants have reported positive experiences from participating in videoconferencing interviews (Archibald et al., 2019; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). Participants seeing each other and the researcher during videoconferencing made the participants feel more connected to the researcher/s (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). The ability to see the researcher's face, expressions and nonverbal gestures helped participants to feel that the researcher was carefully listening to and understanding them. Participants felt a connection when they saw this nonverbal feedback from the researcher.

Participants and researchers both experienced flexibility in being able to schedule online interviews after their domestic and professional responsibilities. Researchers and participants reported that videoconferencing interviews are a reliable tool for data collection and do need to be viewed as a second choice when face-to-face interviews are not possible (Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

Challenges and ethical considerations

A number of challenges in videoconferencing interviews have been reported (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Nehls et al., 2015; Weller, 2015). These include reliable internet connections and the availability of appropriate videoconferencing software, which needs to be a consideration as soon as researchers start thinking about such interviews (Weller, 2017). Technical and logistical issues (electricity, computer, internet, camera, microphones) can be a major challenge for both researchers and participants (Weller, 2015). To ameliorate the possibility of technical issues, researchers can test if systems are working by videoconferencing with a friend or colleague before conducting the actual interview (Seitz, 2016). Additionally, the absence of nonverbal cues and gestures can limit communication. Researchers can use clear facial expressions, body gestures and a reasonable tone to help participants feel at ease so that they are willing and able to provide the required information (Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Seitz, 2016).

Ethical considerations can also be challenging because participants' identity needs to be verified virtually. Researchers may face challenges when prospective participants, despite agreeing to participate in interviews, do not attend the interview. Sometimes participants may not correctly understand the implications of informed consent and using internet cloud storage may put participants' information and privacy at risk (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; James & Busher, 2012; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Researchers can use social media accounts, like Facebook and Twitter, to verify participants' identity using name and location (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Participants' identity can also be ensured through their email IDs because email addresses contain full or some part of their name, locality and organisation. Participants might be asked for pre-read informed consent to ensure they are aware of the confidentiality and privacy risks from online interviews (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Moreover, online verbal consent may be gained through writing a short-scripted passage for the participants (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

Personal reflection of the researcher

I am a doctoral student in New Zealand, aiming to explore the academic identity development of doctoral students in the field of Education in Pakistan. In the current situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was impossible to go back and conduct face-to-face interviews. Therefore, I changed my plans and conducted online videoconferencing interviews with doctoral students in one university in Pakistan. Before conducting the online interviews, I conducted an extensive review of the literature on online videoconferencing interviewing to ensure the trustworthiness of my data collection processes. An overview of the literature is provided above. What follows are my reflections based on two recently conducted videoconferencing interviews, one with a male and one with a female participant. I am aiming to conduct two interviews of each of a total of eight participants.

The very first concern for me was to recruit participants who met the requirements of my research questions. Initially, I faced challenges in gaining consent to conduct the study because the university officials were away due to the pandemic. I sent an email to the relevant Dean to gain consent to conduct the study, but I did not receive a reply for three weeks. I then contacted an office assistant in the Dean's office who helped me to make contact with him. Therefore, I directly asked him to reply to my request for consent to conduct my research study. Once this was given, I asked for access to a list of doctoral students who were possible participants. I contacted the students on the list by email. A number of doctoral students replied with informal consent to be a participant. I then selected eight as possible participants using the criteria from my research design. I thanked all those who offered to participate and began interacting with the selected participants via email in order to build rapport and establish their availability for the interviews. I found it somewhat challenging to keep contact with all the possible participants at the same time to fix schedules, as there was a possibility of mixing schedules and losing track of participants' correspondence. To manage this, I set up a log book for the selected participants which detailed their names, schedule of meetings, and specific days to send them emails in order to keep in contact. I reviewed the log book regularly, including before fixing the interview schedule with each of the participants.

The scheduling of interviews was also a concern for me and the participants due to living in different time zones. Both interviews were conducted at night time in New Zealand and evening in Pakistan because that was convenient for the participants in Pakistan. I was afraid that my fatigue could cause a problem during the interview. Nevertheless, I managed the interviews well and conducted the interview actively as I had planned.

As noted above, the availability and use of appropriate technology and software can be a challenge in videoconferencing interviews. I used Zoom to conduct the video interviews as it was user friendly and easily available for my participants and me. I had a good experience when using this software because it had good audio and video quality that gave me some help in understanding the nonverbal cues of the participants. Moreover, this software had the feature of video recording. One participant was interested in giving the interview on the phone via WhatsApp, but I shared a download link of Zoom and requested her to use Zoom software because I wanted to record the interview which is not possible on WhatsApp. The participant agreed to this because she had already used Zoom for meetings with her research supervisor.

While I requested participants to ensure they had reliable internet connections, some participants still had internet connectivity issues which disrupted the interviews on a few occasions. For instance, during one interview, the participant went offline due to a power outage and came online after ten minutes. In addition, there were some issues with lag in sound and video, and indistinct sound from the participant's side.

Many researchers have talked about the accessibility and flexibility of online interviews with such interviews being less expensive and more time efficient than in-person interviews. Similarly, in my case, participants were willing to be interviewed once they were free from their professional and domestic responsibilities. It was easy for the participants to find a quiet space for the online interviews, something that could have been difficult in face-to-face interviews. The participants were relaxed and able to provide information without any distractions while sitting in their homes. However, one of the participants experienced some disruptions from his children during the interview. One of the aspects I realised was that participants with family members around found it hard to maintain attention during the interviews. Also, participants' fatigue resulted from day-long professional and domestic responsibilities affected the interview time, as the participants wanted to wind up interviews as soon as possible.

Although literature has reported possibilities for the observation of nonverbal cues during video interviews, I was unable to clearly observe situational factors and the body language and other nonverbal cues of my participants. It was difficult to make eye contact and read the emotions and body language of the participants over the screen as easily as we can do in face-to-face interviews. Nevertheless, I tried to use facial expressions to indicate attention and to affirm their commentary through sounds like 'hmm' and 'yeah'. I hoped these would help to make the participants feel comfortable so they would be prepared and able to provide me with the maximum information. I believe this practice helped me in gaining rich data from the participants.

Building rapport with the participants through online interaction was challenging for me compared to face-to-face interactions. Although research had already identified this as an issue, I was not satisfied by making contact and exchanging information with participants through emails. I believe, the participants could not gain much understanding about my goals and the interview objectives by interacting merely through emails.

Social and cultural aspects were very important during the videoconferencing interviews. These included using the language participants preferred to conduct the interviews. I quickly realised that the participants preferred to and gave me rich data when using the national/commonly spoken language (Urdu). Besides this, one of the challenges was interviewing a female participant. Having a background from Pakistan, I could anticipate that some people have rigidly bound social norms and traditions whereby talking across genders does not often happen. Due to such social norms, female doctoral students might be hesitant to participate and share their experiences. Therefore, I was conscious of ethical and social protocols while interviewing the female participant. I was afraid that hesitancy in asking questions and vice versa would risk the reliability of the data and lead to incomplete information. I also considered that the recording of the interview with a female participant needed to be handled carefully. Due to some social and religious obligations, some women do not want their video or pictures to be shared publicly. I had to convince the participant that this interview recording would be viewed only by me, that no harm would come to anyone, and I would use the data only for my research. Moreover, being a male researcher, I was more comfortable during the interview with my male participant. Similarly, the male participant appeared relaxed and comfortable while providing me with information.

The length of the interview was also important in the videoconferencing interviews. I was expecting a one-hour interview, but the interviews extended to almost two hours. I had planned to let the participant respond to an open question in the first part of the interview, and in the second part, I would ask specific questions based on my theoretical framework. However, I felt that the participants were exhausted and would not be able to provide in-depth answers to the crucial questions from the second part. After the first interview, I thought I should have taken a break for five minutes between the parts, but at the same time, I was worried about the disruption in the interview momentum. Moreover, I considered whether I could have reviewed the order of the interview questions to have the important questions asked in the start of the second part of the interview before the participants began feeling tired.

Providing the participants with a summary of their interview was an interesting experience for me. Participants were amazed and appreciative to receive a summary of their interview. They thought it was good to have something to read about their own experiences, and they felt some ownership of the research after reviewing the summary of their interviews. One participant reacted as “*Oh it looks like my biography*” and another participant said “*really appreciated*”. According to my research design, I have to conduct two interviews of each participant; the practice of providing a summary to the participants helped me in two ways. First, it helped me in highlighting the main points and discussing these with my supervisor. Second, it helped the participants to review their responses and be prepared for the second interview, which would help me in getting rich information from the participants.

Concluding thoughts

It is a common observation that online interviewing is easy and time efficient. Based on my experiences, I believe videoconferencing interviews can be reliable and trustworthy if researchers follow appropriate guidelines and manage various aspects associated with such interviews. Conducting videoconferencing interviews was a crucial experience for me, especially when engaging participants from a developing country where the use of technology for research purposes is not common, and the technology is not always readily available. I had some idea about the challenges from my analysis of the literature, but some experiences were new and offered a contribution in this field.

As Deakin and Wakefield (2014) propose, there is value in researchers sending a number of emails to participants to exchange the information and build rapport before the formal interview; I experienced that researchers might not have enough time to engage participants effectively in building rapport using

emails, nor may participants have time. Therefore, recruitment of participants and building rapport in videoconferencing interviews remains a challenging and crucial aspect of the interview process as discussed by Archibald et al. (2019), Deakin and Wakefield (2014) and Weller (2015). Moreover, the emails may not be enough to ensure participants are clear about the research objectives. One suggestion is that researchers include the objectives of the research in interview protocol and explain carefully the objectives at the start of the formal interview, giving participants an opportunity to ask questions. Furthermore, software and technical issues in online interviews have been highlighted in the literature (Archibald et al., 2019; Seitz, 2016; Weller, 2015, 2017). I found Zoom to be a reliable software with advanced features of video recording and screen sharing that supports the researcher and participants together to have a good interaction. However, other aspects, like electricity, internet connectivity and essential equipment, also play an important role in conducting videoconferencing interviews. In addition, Lo Iacono et al. (2016) and Seitz (2016) attribute the importance of using nonverbal cues during online interviews, but I think it is difficult to make any substantial inferences based on nonverbal cues because we cannot be completely sure about them. Although researchers and participants have the option of seeing each other in videoconferencing interviews, we are still limited in observing the situational factors, facial expressions and body gestures of each other.

Interestingly, the social and cultural background aspect of participants has not been discussed in the literature on videoconferencing research interviews where these include the use of a national/common language and interviewing participants in contexts with particular expectations of and/or limitations to social interaction. As I experienced, female participants may have some concerns over video recording and talking openly with a male researcher due to some ethical and social protocols. Moreover, I also noted the duration of interviews needs careful consideration as does the ordering of questions to ensure rich data is generated on key matters before participants become tired. During the interviews I conducted, the participants could not provide rich information to the questions in the second part of the interview.

The way forward

Despite some limitations, videoconferencing interviews provide an effective way of gathering the important information of the participants' feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Researchers need to recruit the participants who are willing and capable of providing the information which could fulfil the objective of the research. It is quite important for the researchers to realise the social and cultural background of the participants. It would help the researchers to use appropriate language for gathering rich data and understanding the social protocols, especially for interviewing the female participants. Researchers should clearly define the objectives of the research to the participants before the formal interview and give them surety to protect their identity and the information they would provide. Although a researcher cannot completely observe the nonverbal cues from the participant side, researchers can use their body language and facial expressions to make the participants feel comfortable and relaxed to provide maximum information. These practices are also useful in building rapport with the participants. In addition, researchers have to manage technical and logistical requirements and make sure the appropriate software has advanced features of recording and screen share for videoconferencing interviews. Furthermore, researchers can carefully review the order of the interview questions, and important questions should be listed first. The researcher can guess if there is a possibility of exhaustion due to long interviews; a short break between the interviews can be taken without disturbing the momentum of the interview.

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