

# Reflections of Conducting Online Interviews: Benefits, Challenges and Practical Solutions

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## ABSTRACT

Collecting data online is nothing new in the qualitative research world and researchers from different range of disciplines have been using the Internet in the last ten years as a medium of conducting interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. With the sudden emergence of the pandemic due to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) 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 (MCO) 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. Currently, there are several digital tools available that researchers can utilize in interviewing participants virtually, e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. Some online platforms, like Microsoft Teams, even have functions to help researchers to record the conversation and transcribe at the same time. Apart from that, researchers can also use social media and instant messaging applications to recruit participants by disseminating posters or details of their research. In this study, eighteen (18) participants were interviewed; five (5) interviews were conducted online, using Microsoft Teams, while the rest were interviewed over the phone. The online interview sessions were conducted from June 2020 till April 2021. 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. The interviews could be done at any time and any place which suited the participants without both the interviewers and the respondents having to leave their houses. However, there are some challenges that we faced when conducting these online interviews. Issues around technology such as Internet connection and participant's level of technological competence, getting the right timing to do the interviews, developing rapport with participants as well as missing out on non-verbal cues and eye contact are some of the things that need to be thought about when interviewing participants online. Careful planning is needed before conducting these online interviews to ensure these issues are kept to a minimum. For example, we would need to use digital tools that participants are familiar with and let the participants know if there is a disruption of the Internet connection. We would also need to come up with an alternative mode of communication, confirming and reminding participants of the date and time of the interview via instant messaging applications, having small talk before starting the interview, and listening attentively when participants are talking. Conducting interviews online is a suitable alternative to use during this pandemic. However, 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