Chapter 6

Video-Conferencing Interviews in Qualitative Research

Kimberly Nehls
University of Nevada – Las Vegas, USA

Brandy D. Smith
University of Nevada – Las Vegas, USA

Holly A. Schneider
University of Nevada – Las Vegas, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter synthesizes the literature on real-time, synchronous, video interviews as a qualitative data collection method. The authors specifically focus on the advantages and disadvantages of this method in social science research and offer conceptual themes, practical techniques, and recommendations for using video-interviews. The growing popularity of computer-mediated communication indicates that a wider audience will be willing and able to participate in research using this method; therefore, online video-conferencing could be considered a viable option for qualitative data collection.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Video-conferencing has been popular for at least a decade as a means of communicating via distance using technology. Adobe Connect, Apple’s Face-Time, Wimba, Google Chat, and Skype are just some of the many options available for face-to-face communication in real time through technology. In recent years, Skype has exploded as an avenue for job interviews (e.g., Winzenburg, 2011). Now video-conferencing is gaining traction in qualitative research for video-conferencing interviews.

The purpose of this book chapter is to synthesize the literature on real-time, synchronous, video interviews, specifically focusing on the advantages and disadvantages of this method in social science research. Conceptual themes, techniques, and recommendations for this method will also be explored. This chapter was developed as a literature review and a reflection of the authors’ own research experiences using this medium in their own studies. Skype interviews can and should be considered by both scholars and practitioners engaged in qualitative research as a viable option for
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data collection. Video-conferencing environments allow real-time communication with both audio and video (Mann & Stewart, 2000). This is much like a traditional interview, except the researcher and participant are simply in different locations.

Interviews are used in almost all forms of qualitative research, but surprisingly little has been written about interviews conducted via new technological resources. Many researchers still refer to in-person, face-to-face (FTF), interviews as the “gold standard” of data collection, whereas interviews via technology have a perceived inferiority (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). This chapter does not negate the importance or the utility of the FTF in-person method; rather, it delineates the pros and cons of a new option for qualitative researchers. Because computer-mediated communication is so commonplace, it simply makes sense to explore online data collection methods for contemporary research. Similar to Deakin and Wakefield (2013), we believe “the online interview should be treated as a viable option to the researcher rather than just as an alternative or secondary choice when face-to-face interviews cannot be achieved” (p. 3).

Video-conference interviews take place synchronously, with the participant and interviewer using a computer, tablet, or other device to communicate at the same time. Many free video-conferencing options are widely available. Skype, FaceTime, vox.io, and Veribu are several complimentary examples. In our research projects, we chose Skype because it is the most commonly used desktop video-conference application (Weinmann, Thomas, Brilmayer, Heinrich, & Radon, 2012). We also used Skype for all of our video-conferencing interviews because of ease of the technology. The name Skype comes from Sky-peer-to-peer, meaning that friends are connected “in the sky” via computers rather than in-person. Skype reported 663 million users worldwide at the end of 2010, up from 474 million just one year earlier (“Skype grows FY revenues,” 2011). Therefore, the video-conferencing technology is widespread and growing. At peak times, there are as many as 30 million Skype users online at one time!

Skype interviews allow the interviewer to ask questions and interviewee respond online just like in a FTF setting. The structure of the interview depends upon the study; the exchange can last as long as needed. On average, our Skype interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. Most of our participants were at work or home when they were being interviewed online. For the purpose of this chapter, we are also referring to one-on-one online interviews, where there was one interviewer and one participant. We recognize that there are many variations that can take place, with several participants in an online focus group setting or even multiple interviewers with multiple interviewees. However, for simplicity and because of the way we organized our online research, we are primarily approaching this chapter from the perspective of using one interviewer and one participant in an online format.

We believe this topic is an important one for discussion in qualitative and mixed-methods research for several reasons. First of all, there are very few studies that use video-conferencing interviews as a primary research method. If video-conferencing interviews are utilized, they are typically mentioned as a back-up or alternative option when more traditional methods of face-to-face or phone interviews cannot be realized. Secondly, none of the articles we found described how and when to use video-conferencing techniques such as Skype. This chapter will offer specific procedures as well as logistical considerations for researchers. Lastly, the growing popularity of video-conferencing options means that a wider audience will be amenable and able to participate in research using this method. For these reasons, we deem this chapter a timely contribution.