Chapter 17
Methodological Considerations of Qualitative Email Interviews

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ABSTRACT
Qualitative email interviews are becoming more commonplace in social science and business research. A synthesis of all known literature on email interviews is presented here, specifically focusing on the advantages and disadvantages of online interviewing. Advantages include low cost, automatic transcription, and minimal barriers to participation. Disadvantages include a significant written effort on behalf of respondent and lack of sensory and emotional cues. The conceptual themes, developed as a literature review and reflection of the author’s own research experiences, should be considered by researchers engaged in online qualitative data collection. Ethical considerations of this method and future recommendations are also presented in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION
A recent email exchange between a participant and me as researcher ended with the participant writing, “I enjoyed participating in my first interview online! Thanks for this opportunity. I was glad to share my experiences at my own pace.” This expression of gratitude and excitement from one of my participants in a research study encouraged me to write this chapter on email interviews as a literature review for others considering this qualitative data collection method in their own research. I have synthesized all of the known literature on email interviews, specifically focusing on the advantages and disadvantages and ending with ethical issues and recommendations. Email interviews have the potential to serve as one option of data collection for researchers of social science and business. They are to be considered one of many options for data collection. Technology is frequently used to communicate between friends, colleagues, co-workers, and family members; therefore, qualitative email interviews could be considered just as credible as traditional interviewing formats for contemporary research projects.
Methodological Considerations of Qualitative Email Interviews

For several years, quantitative Internet surveys have been popular. We often receive email messages with a link to a questionnaire or are asked to complete a survey via a message at the bottom of a shopping receipt. These types of brief surveys are typically quantitative and elicit only one interaction between the researcher and respondent. In contrast, in-depth interviews conducted via email are generally semi-structured in nature and are conducted over multiple email messages (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Meho, 2006; Young, Persichitte, & Tharp, 1998). Email interviews usually consist of the interviewer sending a list of carefully considered questions to a participant; the participant then types the answers and returns the completed interview – all via email. Interview questions can be sent as an attachment or embedded within the message. After answers are received, the interviewer will generally follow up with probing questions to clarify or elaborate on points made in the original set of responses. Another option is for the online interviewer to email just one question at a time around a specific topic and then allow the nature of the responses to lead the questions in a more organic back-and-forth exchange. Per a literature review and my own experiences, email interview exchanges can continue weeks or even months. For example, Karchmer (2001) reported 25-30 email exchanges with each of her 13 participants for a study on teaching.

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 Face-to-Face (FTF) interviews as the “gold standard” of data collection, whereas the email interviews have a perceived inferiority (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). This chapter does not negate the importance nor the utility of the FTF method; rather, it specifies the pros and cons of using a method other than FTF as a new option for qualitative researchers. Researchers are challenged with the task of embracing technology while retaining or improving quality (Meho, 2006).

Ultimately, the research questions and focus of the study should lend itself to the methodological design. The purpose of this chapter is simply to offer a perspective on one medium available for qualitative data collection.

ADVANTAGES OF EMAIL INTERVIEWS

One of the main benefits of email interviews is the potential for rapid response. More than a decade ago, Ducheneaut and Bellotti (2001) suggested that email was more a habit than an application. Their study indicated that many people used email throughout the day and email inboxes were “on” the entire time while people were at their desks. This statement is even more accurate today, as many individuals are perpetually connected to their email accounts through their smart-phones and find it readily accessible everywhere.

Nearly half (46%) of American adults are smart-phone owners as of February 2012. Remarkably, smart-phone owners are now more prevalent within the overall American population than owners of more basic mobile phones (Smith, 2012). Nearly every major demographic group—men and women, younger and middle-aged adults, urban and rural residents, the wealthy and individuals with lower SES—all experienced a notable uptick in smart-phone use over the last year; these data suggest that individuals will be even more connected to their email accounts than previously assumed. Presumably, desk-based workers would be more easily able to answer lengthy, written interview questions, but at least researchers are able to gain access via email through smart phones, tablets, and other Internet-ready devices.

Outside of the U.S., mobile phone and mobile Internet users are hugely on the rise as well. According to recent data from mobiThinking, China and India each have nearly one billion mobile phone subscribers. Additionally, “China has more than 400 million mobile Internet us-