Journal of Qualitative Research in Tourism, Vol. 5 No. 1, 2024, pp. 50–56

Conducting online interviews with hard-to-reach hospitality industry participants

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Face-to-face interviews have long been a cornerstone of qualitative research methods, yet they can face hindrances, such as long geographical distances and budget limitations for travel to research sites. An alternative solution is the use of online interview techniques. Although studies have discussed issues related to conducting online interviews, challenges in interviewing hard-to-reach participants are still unexplored. In the context of this article, these participants are difficult to reach because they lack the technology required to conduct online interviews and/or their contact information is unavailable. Additionally, there are also issues associated with conducting online interviews that make researchers doubt its ability to produce high-quality data. Based on fieldwork experiences, this research note discusses challenges that occurred during a series of online interviews with hard-to-reach participants in the hospitality industry. This study highlights that even though issues can occur, rich and meaningful data can still be generated from online interviews.

Keywords: *online interview, fieldwork, research, hard-to-reach participant, hospitality, research assistant*

1 INTRODUCTION

Studies have discussed how to collect qualitative data using online interview techniques with easily reachable (i.e., tech savvy and connected to the internet) participants (e.g., Gratton, Fox and Elder, 2020; Hanna, 2012; Ndhlovu, 2020). Another remote data collection technique discussed in previous studies (Andriotis, 2021; Schiek and Ullrich, 2017) is asynchronous online communication, utilizing platforms such as email, blogs, webpage comments, or forums. Such a method provides cost-effective and time-saving benefits, allowing interviewees to express themselves through written responses, yet this method lacks spontaneity and nonverbal cues (Andriotis, 2021).

Currently, there is an absence of studies discussing how to conduct online interviews with hard-to-reach participants. In the study on which this article is based, hard-to-reach participants refer to people who do not own the technology required to enable online interviews, do not possess the skills needed to use such equipment, and/or also lack online contact details. This article provides new insights into conducting

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interviews remotely with this type of participant, discussing issues that can occur and how to overcome these.

The online interview technique is considered as a way to overcome financial, geographical, and physical mobility barriers associated with conducting face-to-face interviews (Hanna, 2012; Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour, 2014; Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). Yet, researchers often feel reluctant to conduct interviews online because of the perception of reduced data quality from issues involving audio clarity and/or the perceived inability to build connections with participants (Favilla and Pita, 2020; Seitz, 2016). However, when face-to-face interviews become impractical due to the aforementioned issues, in many cases, online interviews become the only viable option for researchers to continue collecting interview data. Thus, this article addresses issues concerning the quality of data generated through online interviews.

2 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The study on which this article is based aimed to understand the empowerment process of survival entrepreneurs in the hospitality sector. Participants in this study were street food vendors in Bandung city, Indonesia. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first author, who is based in New Zealand, could not travel to Bandung to conduct field interviews as had originally been planned. It should be noted that the research location could not be conducted within New Zealand because street food vendors in developing countries, such as Indonesia, have distinct characteristics that align with the research; thus, changing the research focus entirely was not viable. Additionally, the fieldwork could not be delayed until the COVID-19 pandemic was over as it was part of a PhD thesis which has specific time boundaries. Consequently, to ensure the completion of the study in a timely manner, the decision was made to undertake online interviews.

Due to the hard-to-reach nature of the participants, this study employed a fieldwork assistant based in Bandung city. The fieldwork assistant undertook the interviewee recruitment process and set up technological devices and the internet connection for the online interviews between the first author and the participants. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom meeting video calls. Online interviews were conducted from October 2020 to January 2021, involving 25 participants. While the initial impetus for employing this technique was the COVID-19 pandemic, the insights presented in this research note remain pertinent in the post-pandemic era.

3 ISSUES IN CONDUCTING ONLINE INTERVIEWS

3.1 Time difference

The first issue to be considered in conducting an online interview is the time difference between the participant and the researcher. For this study, the time difference between New Zealand and Indonesia was 6 hours. This issue was exacerbated by street food vendors having long business hours. The first interview was conducted at 03:00 New Zealand Standard Time (NZST) because the participant finished working at 21:00 Western Indonesian Time (WIB). Another interview was conducted at 00:30 WIB, equating to 06:30 NZST. This was because the street food vendor only had time to be interviewed after their business finished operating at midnight. This issue may not apply in situations where participants engage in a more consistent work schedule, such as a standard nine-to-five job.

Conducting an interview late at night/early in the morning can potentially affect data quality, especially if the participant loses his focus due to feeling worn out. Ideally, to avoid this issue, a better schedule should be made. However, this may not be possible when the vendors' availability is not as flexible as the researchers' availability. In this case, the researcher needs to maintain a positive spirit during the interview while continuously monitoring the condition of the participant. If the participant looks exhausted, it is better to rearrange the interview for another time. Nevertheless, in this study, the participant was still able to maintain his focus, thus the interview could continue to the end.

The time disparity presents a considerable challenge when conducting synchronous online interviews with specific hard-to-reach participants, notably street food vendors, given their fluctuating work hours. Frequently, due to the vendors' busy schedules and limited accessibility, negotiating interview timings proves unfeasible. Consequently, researchers must adapt by accommodating the participants' schedules, thereby enhancing participant engagement opportunities. An alternative is to adopt asynchronous interviews but that demands extended access to information technology (IT) resources for the participants and knowledge of how to use them. Something that would be impractical in the case of hard-to-research participants like those identified in the study on which this research note is based.

3.2 Poor audio quality

The issue of the audio quality in conducting online interviews relates to dropped calls, delays, pauses, inaudible segments, and background noise (Ndhlovu, 2020; Seitz, 2016). This study encountered all these issues. One of the causes was the poor internet connection available in Bandung. Although this study used one of the premium internet operators with 4G network speed, unstable connection issues still occurred. Consequently, there were some delays and pauses in some interviews.

Current guidelines (cf. Ndhlovu, 2020) suggest that online interviews should be done in places with a stable internet connection. However, street food vendors operate informally on the street, and to invite every participant to a place where there was a stable internet connection was impractical. As such, the most viable option was to bring technological devices to the interview places proposed by participants. Moreover, it is imperative to give the participants the autonomy to choose the interview location, which puts them in a comfortable and convenient situation (Herzog, 2012), consequently helping to enhance their trust. Most participants in this study chose the interview location based on their preferences.

This strategy is highly significant as street food vendors are rarely interviewed for academic research, and many do not understand how to operate video conferencing software. Thus, allowing them to choose the interview location and significant aid from the research assistant to set up all the necessary devices and connections helps to greatly reduce potential anxiety experienced by participants, which is both the ethically correct thing to do and helps to increase the likelihood of people participating in the study and the quality of the data they provide.

To ensure the highest quality audio was captured, this study recorded every interview using two separate devices. Specifically, the audio was recorded through the Zoom meeting application and also using a conventional voice recorder placed near the participant. This ensured that whenever there was a delay, pause, or inaudible segment in the Zoom call, the conventional voice recorder still captured the conversation clearly. In the data analysis process, both audio files could be used. However, it was

found that the audio files generated from the conventional voice recorder were more reliable because they captured the participants' voices more clearly, albeit the volume of the interviewer was slightly lower. When the interviewer's questions could not be heard, then the Zoom audio files were utilized as an alternative. Hence, researchers in similar circumstances similar to this study should utilize two recording devices, namely Zoom meetings and conventional voice recorders, to ensure the preservation of audio interview quality. The need to consider this reminds us of the importance of critically engaging with technology rather than becoming slavishly devoted to it.

Participants can be affected by poor audio quality as well, hampering their ability to understand what the interviewer is asking and respond appropriately. This may be a result of the quality of the internet connection and the utilization of low-end laptops or cell phones which produce low volume and/or sound quality. This problem can be exacerbated if interviews are conducted near a crowded street. One solution is to provide high-end technological devices at the research location, but if this is not possible, Gray et al. (2020) suggest that participants can wear a headset with a microphone as opposed to listening via the computer speaker. When there was too much noise (e.g., crowded street or rain) in the interview locations, this study used a headset to ensure participants could hear the interviewer's voice clearly. However, it created another problem, with only participants' voices being recorded on the voice recorder. Hence, the role of audio files recorded from the Zoom meeting application was essential. It should be noted that bringing a portable speaker can be a solution, but in this study, installing a portable speaker with a relatively high volume could have attracted attention from other people which may have disrupted the interview. This reflected the difficulty of locating a quiet location for these interviews given the nature of the lives and work of the interviewees.

All adaptations implemented to mitigate the encountered audio challenges facilitated a smoother interview process, particularly from the participants' perspective. Thus, researchers aiming to study participants with characteristics akin to this study can anticipate potential issues and implement the adaptations established herein to optimize interview fluidity and audio clarity, thereby enhancing data quality. The contextual factors pertaining to interview location backgrounds and technological availability in developing nations, including internet speed and device capabilities, significantly impact the quality of online interviews and therefore need careful consideration.

4 GENERATING RICH AND MEANINGFUL INTERVIEW DATA

The duration of interviews has been used as a coarse measure of the quality of data generated (Lune and Berg, 2017). In this study, the length of the interviews ranged from 16 to 90 minutes. On average, the interviews lasted about 38 minutes. According to Rowley (2012), face-to-face interviews with 12 participants should be 30 minutes on average, and for 6–8 participants, they should last around 1 hour on average. Thus, the length of the interviews in this study conforms to the guidelines for face-to-face interviews.

Regarding the issue of building good rapport, there were doubts about conducting online interviews, which could reduce openness on the part of participants resulting in less detailed data (Favilla and Pita, 2020; Seitz, 2016). This concern increases especially when the interview topic is related to personal matters (Seitz, 2016). In this study, despite requiring participants to answer several personal questions (e.g., their daily operational problems, future aspirations, or experiences), they still talked openly about their experiences, opinions, and feelings. For instance, one participant openly shared experiences of being disempowered by her ex-husband to open businesses, and

how her current partner encouraged her to pursue her dream. Many of the participants were comfortable telling their stories and/or even unpleasant experiences. This openness of participants during online interviews has been found in other studies as well (Dodds and Hess, 2020; Torrentira and Moises, 2020).

In conducting an online interview, it can be difficult to read body language and nonverbal cues (Dodds and Hess, 2020; Seitz, 2016). This was one weakness that was difficult to overcome during the interviews for this study. However, there was a moment when a participant, being asked about her daily problems, answered with a quivering voice and was close to tears. To uphold ethical research standards, the researcher stopped asking questions related to the specific topic to avoid emotional harm to the participant. Similar cases could be observed, for example, from how financially successful vendors felt proud when sharing their success stories, or how resentful feelings arose from participants when discussing the unfavourable treatment street food vendors usually receive. Thus, although not all nonverbal communication cues may be easy to observe, the researcher can still closely monitor the participant's vocal tones and facial expressions through online interviews (Seitz, 2016).

Based on the evidence provided in this section, conducting online interviews with hard-to-reach participants, especially street food vendors, could be carried out without compromising the quality of the data obtained. Additionally, this method is effective in building rapport and trust. This was undoubtedly facilitated by the crucial role of the research assistant in the research location who needed to communicate effectively with potential participants. The research assistant played a significant role in building trust and a sense of connection even before the interviews took place. He provided comfort to the participants, thus facilitating smooth interviews and yielding rich data. It should be noted that when the interviews commenced, the assistant in this study maintained a distance of a few meters or were in separate rooms to ensure participant comfort. However, towards the end of the interviews, this assistant often inquired about the participants' feelings or experiences regarding the interviews. This feedback was frequently used by the researcher and the research assistant to enhance participant comfort during subsequent interviews. In this way, the research assistant was an active participant in facilitating the interviews and ensuring the quality and comfort of the participants. At the same time, the assistant was not actively involved in the interviews himself or herself. Whether he could/should be is open for discussion. Any answer is at least partially dependent on the skill sets of the assistant, recognizing that setting up online interviews and conducting them require two different skills. Also, collecting data through both the assistant and researcher during the interviews could have adversely affected the power dynamics of the interview, placing the participants in a disadvantaged position. In seeking to protect the welfare of the interviewees this is another reason for not having the assistant playing an active role in data collection during the interviews.

As noted above, the presence of the assistant was designed to be unobtrusive so as not to impact the data collected while still enabling his presence just in case his IT skills were required during the interview. While his presence could impact the participants, it is important to recognize how, through an explanation of the role of the assistant, such concerns can be mitigated.

5 CONCLUSION

Scholars have argued that online interviews should not completely replace face-to-face interviews (Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). The flow of conversations is

perceived to be better in a face-to-face interview (Dodds and Hess, 2020). However, given the relatively high cost of face-to-face interviews and advances in communication technology, researchers have the option to adapt and utilize new technology to continue producing high-quality research in a timely manner (Favilla and Pita, 2020). Conducting online interviews has its own challenges, yet it can be effectively utilized as demonstrated in this article. Overall, the online interview is a viable technique that can generate the rich data needed for successful qualitative studies.

The advancement of technology in the future, such as better internet connectivity, audio recording, high-resolution video, virtual reality, and 360 cameras, may help to solve most of the technical challenges in performing online interviews. As this develops, researchers need to consider whether a desire for face-to-face communication is truly superior to online communication or whether such a view is simply related to a reticence to change. This may be a generational issue, with younger cohorts who have grown up 'online' potentially more likely to view online interviews (as researchers and interviewees) positively, perhaps even more positively than face-to-face interviews (Gray et al., 2020; Shapka et al., 2016).

This research note does not seek to diminish the significance of the face-to-face interview technique. In many instances, face-to-face interviews continue to offer advantages due to the human desire for physical, over virtual, contact, as neatly demonstrated by the enforced social distancing during much of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, face-to-face interviews offer a sense of spontaneity that can be difficult to replicate. Face-to-face interviews also enable conversations to unfold without potential issues such as those discussed in this article (e.g., time differences and audio issues). However, when face-to-face interviews cannot be conducted, it is proposed that online interviews, particularly synchronous ones, can serve as a viable alternative. Drawing upon the findings highlighted in this article, in scenarios where participants are considered hard to reach, it is recommended that researchers incorporate a strategy to employ assistant(s) with strong networks to potential participants and effective communication skills. Moreover, researchers and their assistants should take proactive steps to address potential audio, video, and connectivity issues, which may vary depending on the context, particularly in relation to internet infrastructure and the availability of technological devices in the research location.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that most of the border restrictions imposed during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which compelled qualitative researchers to rely on online communication, have now been lifted. However, we observe that the pandemic served as a catalyst, hastening the global adoption of online communication software. Consequently, there is hope that the utilization of online communication for qualitative research will become increasingly prominent. At the same time, it is important that researchers continue to remember the hard-to-reach segments of the population. This research note is based on one such population, but there are others. The lessons learned through this study can help to ensure that even if we transition to online interviewing, it is not at the expense of silencing the voices of those without access to or a willingness to engage with the necessary tools.

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